Polished, primitive, or sophisticated

What videogame graphics can tell us about colonial and postcolonial aesthetics.

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Abstract

In the past decade, the topic of (de)colonialism and videogames has received increasing attention from a growing number of scholars. From the beginning, many videogames involved colonial themes such as the conquering of foreign worlds, the extraction of resources, and the exploitation of enemy characters. Besides these direct colonial and imperial representations, numerous videogames also contain racist and sexist stereotypes with colonial roots. This thesis contributes to postcolonial games research by exploring colonial bias and colonial values in videogames from a visual lens. Whereas other studies often focus on colonial narratives and interaction in videogames, this thesis takes videogame graphics as a starting point. It applies concepts from aesthetic and decolonial literature to investigate specific cases of videogame graphics and scholarly evaluations of these graphics. The thesis argues that the colonial dichotomy of 'superior' Western people versus 'inferior' non-Western 'others' impacts the aesthetic evaluation of videogame graphics. Seemingly unproblematic adjectives such as 'authentic' and 'sophisticated' may signal underlying assumptions that link back to a colonial appreciation for modernness and Westernness. Next to aesthetic evaluations, the colonial tension between the 'West' and the 'non-West' affects the visual style of videogame graphics. Based on Jacques Derrida's (1998) concept of the 'monolingualism of the other', the thesis argues that 'mainstream style' videogame graphics are monolingual in a similar way to the monolingualism of many European languages in the (post)colonial world. Like these European languages, mainstream style videogame graphics signal a 'superior' technological Western culture and dominate other visual styles that appear less technological. The thesis applies Frantz Fanon's (2001) notion of 'violence' to propose a solution to the monolingualism of mainstream videogame graphics; game designers can appropriate mainstream style elements or introduce new visual languages to disrupt or 'violate' the dominance of mainstream style visuals.

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While studying PSTS, I also worked at Creative Media and Game Technologies (CMGT) at Saxion University for applied sciences. Discussing several of the ideas in this thesis with my game-enthusiast colleagues at CMGT was great, and I am thankful that they welcomed and accepted me. I am not an avid gamer (or at least, I haven't been one for years). I have, however, always been fascinated by videogame graphics. Although I do not frequently play games, I feel entitled to write about them, as I like to consider myself part of the gaming community at CMGT. I specifically thank my colleagues Yvens Rebouças Serpa, Iain Douglas, and Max Klostermann for their endless feedback on my ideas and Mirjam van Tilburg for her support and dedication in trying to make my schedules at Saxion and the University of Twente match.

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Introduction

From the beginning, many videogames involved colonial themes such as the conquering of foreign worlds, the extraction of resources, and the exploitation of enemy characters. Often, these games utilised and celebrated colonial storylines instead of criticising them (Mukherjee & Hammar, 2018). Besides direct colonial and imperial representations, videogames may contain racist or sexist stereotypes with colonial roots. Hanli Geyser and Pippa Tshabalala (2011) provide an example of such stereotypes in their discussion of the zombies in *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009), the fifth game in a series that revolves around fighting zombies. This particular version plays in what the game franchise's website calls an 'undisclosed African country' (*Capcom*, n.d.). In this specific instalment of the game, zombies are lifeless fantasy creatures based on a stereotypical image of enslaved African people (Geyser & Tshabalala, 2011). Fortunately, increasing numbers of videogames challenge these problematic ideas by questioning colonial narratives and exploitative interactions. *Thunderbird Strike* (LaPensée, 2017), a videogame designed by Elizabeth LaPensée, is an example of such a game that received significant scholarly attention (Brazelton, 2019; Kinder, 2021; Miner, 2022; Nacher & Jankowski, 2021).

The attention for *Thunderbird Strike* seems to fit a larger trend. In the past decade, a growing number of academic works started to investigate videogames from a postcolonial perspective (see, for instance: Euteneuer, 2018; Hutchinson, 2016; Mukherjee, 2017; Penix-Tadsen, 2019). Scholars who research colonialism in games do so from a specific angle; often, they take one specific game element, such as the game's narrative or interaction, as a lens to identify colonialism in a game. Narratives and interactions are fitting perspectives for such tasks, as recurring storylines of building empires and conquering of 'enemy' or 'empty' lands lead to similar colonial interactions. In this thesis, however, I aim to contribute to discussions on colonialism in videogames by offering a different lens. Instead of using interactions or narratives as a starting point, I research how graphics can help explore coloniality in videogames.

Like narratives and interaction, visuals form a fundamental element of videogames. And, like narratives and interactions, graphics can also portray explicitly colonial imagery. However, images can also be a lot more subtle. This is not to say that interaction and narratives do not offer subtle perspectives[1]. Yet, it can be difficult to pinpoint why various actors like or dislike a specific image or value a piece of art. In this thesis, I examine the covert values and opinions that may reside in art evaluation in relation to colonial norms to explore potential colonial bias in game imagery. Therefore,

[1] An example is Joshua Miner's (2022) discussion of *Thunderbird Strike* that shows a nuanced view on coloniality in games from the perspective of interaction.

videogame graphics are the starting point of this research. The thesis' main research question is: What can videogame graphics tell us about colonial and postcolonial aesthetics? I research this question by applying aesthetic concepts from literature in the philosophy of arts and videogames aesthetics and concepts from decolonial studies to investigate specific cases of videogame graphics and scholarly evaluations of these graphics. Sometimes, these fields overlap, as several disciplines are involved with decolonisation.

The thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter discusses basic concepts. It presents several definitions of videogames and outlines how the fundamental elements of narrative, interaction, and imagery fit into videogame anatomy. Besides exploring videogame ontology, Chapter 1 places videogames in a broader societal context; I argue that videogames are not autonomous objects but function in close relation to the world outside of the screen. The chapter concludes with a description of colonialism and examples of (de)colonialism in videogames. After establishing this basic ground, Chapter 2 zooms out and looks at colonialism in the arts from a wider perspective. In this chapter, I explore the language that videogame theorists use to describe game graphics, and I contrast their vocabulary with specific terms in discussions of 'primitive' art. In this section, I draw on Kwame Anthony Appiah's (1991) notion of the 'neotraditional'. Appiah (1991) establishes this concept based on his analysis of 'Perspectives: Angles on African Art', an exhibition of African artworks organised by the Center for African Art in New York in 1987. From the comparison between discussions of game art and African art, I distinguish three labels that may help discuss and discover colonial values in artworks. The adjectives' sophisticated', 'authentic', and 'traditional' frequently appear in evaluations of videogame graphics and 'primitive' art and seem to rank Western values above other, supposedly non-Western values attributed to the people of the Global Majority.

Whereas Chapter 2 examines written texts, Chapter 3 explores visual languages. The labels I selected in Chapter 2, 'sophisticated', 'authentic', and 'traditional', seem to relate to different visual styles. Scholars often describe images in mainstream or bigger-budget videogames as 'sophisticated' or 'high-end'. These images share a specific visual style that emphasises the technological origin of the graphics. The graphics of 'independent games' - games often produced by individuals or small teams with less money to spend - are frequently characterised as 'authentic'. Based on Jacques Derrida's (1998) notion of the 'monolingualism of the other', I compare the visual style of mainstream games with the dominance of many European languages in (post)colonial societies. Based on Frantz Fanon's (2001) notion of 'violence', I argue that non-Western game designers may reclaim digital ground in various ways. They can appropriate mainstream style elements or introduce new visual languages to disrupt or 'violate' the dominance of mainstream style visuals.

I illustrate these various visual styles with three case study examples. Whereas I base my main theoretical concepts on the work of Derrida and Fanon, Western-educated scholars who bring decolonial voices from North Africa and the Caribbean, the three examples are videogames produced in North America. Among other reasons, I selected these games because significant information was available about the development of their visuals in both popular and academic sources. With this selection, I do not want to suggest that videogames like these only exist in the US and Canada; people worldwide play and create videogames (Penix-Tadsen, 2019). However, discourse around videogames often seems focused on Anglophone works (Chakraborti et al., 2015), which may explain the substantial availability of information about the US and Canadian games in my selection. Just as videogame development happens globally, decolonial scholars operate from different parts of the world. In Chapter 3, I focus on Derrida and Fanon; however, several decolonial scholars from the Americas informed other aspects of this thesis (for example, Lewis & Fragnito, 2010; Lugones, 2010; Quijano, 1993; Vázquez, 2021). Although the French/Algerian/Martinican context of Derrida and Fanon differs from the US/Canadian context of the videogame examples, the colonialism that affects both places is similar in many ways.

In the conclusion following these three chapters, I return to my initial research question. I share my findings on what videogame graphics reveal about colonial and postcolonial aesthetics and present several suggestions for further future research. However, before continuing to the first chapter, I have a final introductory topic to address: this thesis contains potentially problematic terminology that concerns non-Western people. Categories such as 'people of colour', 'native' or 'indigenous' people and the abbreviation 'BAME' that stands for 'Black, Asian, and minority ethnic' all conceptualise non-Western people as precisely that: non-Western, different from the Western norm or simply as 'others'. To acknowledge the coloniality in these terms, I adopt the concept of the 'Global Majority'. According to Rosemary Campbell-Stephens (2021), 'Global Majority' more accurately describes the "approximately eighty-five per cent of the world's population…who identify as Black, African, Asian, Brown, Arab and mixed heritage, are indigenous to the global south, and/or have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities' "(p. 7). Unlike many other terms, 'Global Majority' does not present these groups as 'minorities'. Still, I also use 'non-Western' and the adjective 'Indigenous'. The label 'non-Western' seems unavoidable as the thesis addresses the West's minoritisation of others. I use the adjective 'Indigenous' in sections that describe scholars or game designers who identify as Indigenous persons and to refer to First Nations and Aboriginal Peoples. I also use 'Indigenous' as an adjective to refer to the lands of the native inhabitants of places colonised (or formerly colonised) by European nations. However, of course, all places know or knew Indigenous Peoples. Vázquez (2021), for example, stresses how colonialism also erased many Indigenous European cultures. Indigenous

with a capitalised 'I' seems most appropriate as the people I write about use this name themselves, and, according to Gregory Younging, it is a common choice for many Indigenous Peoples (2018).

Chapter 1: videogames as 'digital colonial spaces'

1.1 Introduction

The concept of 'colonial videogames' is complicated. It involves ideas of what a videogame is or can be, and it questions the meaning of colonialism in the context of the digital realm. To account for several of these complexities, this chapter first explores certain underlying concepts by answering the following questions: What is a videogame? How do games connect to the real world? What is colonialism? And what does the literature tell us about colonialism in videogames?

Videogames are popular among large groups of players, developers, critics, publishers and educators worldwide (Penix-Tadsen, 2019). With all these different actors involved, it may come as no surprise that no single videogame explanation represents the experience of all users. Still, in section 1.2, I explore possible videogame definitions. I discuss some of the controversies that are going on in scholarly work on videogame ontology, and I settle on an explanation that works for the purpose of this paper: the videogame as defined by its functioning in a specific context. The idea of videogames existing in a particular context leads to section 1.3, which discusses how games relate to the real world; as players and developers travel between the real world and game universes, their norms and values, including potential colonial assumptions, ride along. In section 1.4, I first discuss colonialism in general and then provide examples of videogames as 'digital colonial spaces'. In the final section, I discuss literature on videogames and (de)colonialism. I analyse various authors' approaches to studying colonialism in games and connect them to core game elements such as narratives and interaction. Inspired by these approaches, I design an approach based on imagery that I employ in Chapters 2 and 3, where I explore what videogame graphics can tell us about colonial and postcolonial aesthetics.

1.2 What is a videogame?

A videogame is an electronic artefact that requires user interaction, commonly referred to as play. For this reason, videogame users are known as 'players', although many also call themselves 'gamers'. Videogame theorists use different vocabularies when describing and discussing videogames. In this essay, I stick to the term 'videogames' instead of the also frequently used 'video games' and 'computer games'. With my choice for 'videogames', I follow Brock Rough (2018), who prefers 'videogame' over alternative names because the term is not easily split into components. Whereas the combination' video game' may imply that videogames 'are both games and video' (Rough, 2018, p. 26), the compound 'videogame' suggests a new category that needs to be defined on its own.

Videogames can be categorized into various genres, for example, adventure games, role-playing games, shooters, and platform games (Qaffas, 2020). These categories may help describe a specific game but cannot solve the question of what makes a videogame a videogame. In the past decades, several scholars within the philosophy of the arts started to address this issue and contributed various answers. They often present components like *narratives*, *interaction*, and *video* as fundamental videogame elements in their explanations. In this context, narratives provide the storyline or background story of the game, video refers to graphics, animations and audio, and interaction follows from game rules and game mechanics[2]. Multiple researchers favour these components differently. Some conceive videogames to be primarily games (which they connect to interaction); others consider them principally narratives. This controversy is known as the ludology[3] versus narrative debate (Juul, 2011; Mukherjee & Hammar, 2018; Ryan, 2006). One potential answer to the discussion is the definition Grant Tavinor (2009) proposes:

> "X is a videogame if it is an artefact in a visual digital medium, is intended as an object of entertainment, and is intended to provide such entertainment through the employment of one or both of the following modes of engagement: rule and objective gameplay or interactive fiction" *(Tavinor, 2009a, p. 27)*.

This explanation unites the competing standpoints of the ludology versus narrative camps. I see the elements' interactive fiction', 'rule and objective gameplay', and 'a visual digital medium' as synonymous with the categories I mentioned earlier: narratives, interaction and video. Next to these components, Tavinor brings in 'intended entertainment' as a new element. Importantly, in this context, entertainment does not equal fun. Games entertain players; a successful game keeps its players occupied. Many videogames provide entertainment by offering fun. Fun, however, cannot be a fundamental videogame feature. Not all gamers play for fun, and different players value different types of fun. In section 1.5, I will return to the 'core videogame elements' addressed above when I discuss how these elements help identify colonialities in videogames. Important for this thesis, none of the definitions above mention technology as a core element. However, in the following chapters, I will argue that technology plays a fundamental role in various types of colonial bias in videogames. In section 3.2.2, I return to the question of technology in videogames by discussing Anna Anthropy's (2012) overall rejection of the term 'videogame', which she replaces with 'digital games'. Anthropy's

[2] Game mechanics enable various types of interaction. A mechanic can be a specific action or movement (e.g. jumping, crawling, flying), but mechanics also include rules and goals. In this way, mechanics control how users can play, or interact with the game.

[3] Ludology is the study of games and game culture. In the ludology versus narratology debate, narratologists see games as stories that happen to be interactive, whereas ludologists see this interaction as a defining videogame feature. For ludologists games are games because they revolve around interaction and play.

dismissed 'videogames' as a stand-alone category and makes 'digital games' a digital subset in the broader category of 'games'.

Whereas some scholars define videogames by dissecting them into core components, others look for videogame definitions in the relationship between videogames and their societal contexts. Gonzalo Frasca states, "… the game is not simply what is inside its rules and physicality: it is the negotiation that happens between two worlds" (2019, p.viii). In a similar vein, Brock Rough (2018, p. 25) claims that videogames can be videogames without being games or without containing video, narrative or fiction. Rough argues for wider interpretations besides these obvious components and invites us to consider "those elements that go beyond an object's intrinsic properties and include candidates like social construction, history, and intentions" (Rough, 2018, p. 24). Like the definitions above, Brock, too, seems to take technology for granted; he does not mention it as a fundamental videogame element. Although Rough and Frasca make the question more complex, their takes on the problem are helpful. In trying to define videogames not solely by their 'rules and physicality' but also by their functioning in a specific context, videogames can be defined in unexpected ways.

1.3 How do games connect to the real world?

Videogames have a tangled relationship with the real world. Users immerse themselves in the videogame's virtual environment while, at the same time, they originate from and stay part of the real world. Users navigate videogame environments based on real-world knowledge and experience, and game designers relate to this prior knowledge by offering consistent game worlds that consider the user's expectations. The laws of physics, for example, generally align with how things work in the real world: gravity makes items fall, and if they bounce back, objects will move in a way that can be expected.

Videogame universes generally do not interact with the real world directly. Single-player videogames are determined solipsistic worlds where users interact with computer-controlled elements only; in a way, the player is alone in these worlds. The boundaries between the game world and the real world are less defined in so-called multi-player videogames where gamers play against other human users who are also emerged in the game world. When seeing the game world as separate, a player's in-game actions may not affect their offscreen reality. However, as players exist in both worlds simultaneously and as game worlds rely on and exist in the context of the real world, I argue that videogames cannot be seen as fully autonomous objects separate from the real world. The embeddedness of videogames in the real world is relevant to this thesis as colonial concepts in the real world affect videogame players and the videogame industry. Real-world concepts permeate game environments where players interact with them. Game makers intentionally and unintentionally

design norms and values from the real world into their games. They embed societal and cultural concepts in all game elements: narratives, interactions, and video. In-game values can be positive and constructive, but they can also be harmful. As players cross the boundaries between the game universe and the real world, problematic ideas travel with them and potentially spread via videogame experiences.

The following example about vegan players in *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011) demonstrates how this value exchange between the virtual world and real life could work. *Minecraft* is a so-called sandbox game; it features a randomly generated open world for players to explore and enjoy. There is no steering narrative in *Minecraft*; the game encourages players to explore its world and survive by gathering resources, crafting items, and building settlements. In *Minecraft survival mode*[4], the player-character stays alive by making a safe place to live. Besides shelter, the player-character needs food and other resources to stay healthy and secure. At first sight, this all sounds reasonable. Players must be creative and look after their character. However, when looking closer, *Minecraft* has fixed, normative ideas about certain elements in this self-care. Players may or may not recognise these in-game values as similar to offscreen values. One of *Minecraft*'*s* norms involves food; survival in *Minecraft* requires animal sacrifices. Player-characters must eat meat to stay healthy and fill their stomachs; they need leather and wool to make protective clothing and rely on squid ink to craft maps to navigate the world. Animal products are deeply embedded in the game's design and are essential for survival. Many players will not think twice, as this is how things work in *Minecraft*. However, several vegan players looked for ways to adhere to veganism in *Minecraft*[5]. These players problematise the in-game relationship between humans and animals, which is hardly different from how many people relate to animals in real life.

1.4 What is colonialism?

So far, I have argued that game worlds reside in the real world and interact with the real world via the players and designers that move between worlds. I also brought up that game worlds provide options for exchanging norms and ideas between worlds. In some cases, those norms and ideas are harmful. Destructive values particularly surface when videogames take place in 'colonial digital spaces': virtual universes that contain problematic normative views on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class that can be linked back to colonial thoughts and beliefs in the real world.

[4] Minecraft has two main modes for play: In 'Survival mode' players must secure their survival in a world with potential dangers. In 'Creative mode' player-characters cannot die, this mode it encourages players to be 'creative' and focus on building and exploring.

[5] See for instance: https://www.thegamer.com/minecraft-vegan-run-playthrough/and https://www.curseforge.com/minecraft/mc-mods/the-vegan-option.

A common interpretation of colonialism explains the term as foreign invaders' occupation of Indigenous territory, which applies to physical spaces such as land, water, and the cultural and spiritual realm (Laenui, 2016; Osterhammel, 1997). Colonising intruders operate from a conviction of superiority (Osterhammel, 1997), rendering the cultural life that was already there non-existent or inferior (Laenui, 2016). Colonialism achieves its end because of the strong power imbalance between the colonising attackers and the colonised communities. The colonising forces need the superiority belief mentioned above to justify violent acts on colonised people, native culture, and Indigenous lands. Barbara Arneil (2024) presents 'modern colonialism' as an ideology. She characterises the colonising forces active between the seventeenth and mid-twentieth century as brutal powers that aimed "to segregate and 'improve' 'backward' people(s) from within and 'improve' 'waste' lands, overseen by colonial authorities living among and/or in close proximity to the colonized" (Arneil, 2024, p. 148). Colonising European nations and settler-colonial states with European roots present themselves as morally better, more developed, and superior to the peoples in overseas territories. However, from the perspective of the colonised other, colonialism achieves none of its ideological promises. Colonialism is "…neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease…" (Césaire, 2000, p.32). Instead, Aimé Césaire (2000) calls colonisation "thingification" (p. 42). The aim for 'improvement' in the colonialist ideology results from greed. Césaire reveals colonialist ways of thinking in numbers and production units as obscuring colonised people's reality and suppressed culture (2000, p.42).

The colonial ideal of improving 'backwards' people and 'idle' land resurfaces in game spaces. It materialises in concepts such as the colonisation of 'empty' land and the fighting of 'uncivilized' and 'wild' creatures. Bennett Brazelton's (2020) discussion of *Minecraft* demonstrates such 'improvements'. Brazelton reveals *Minecraft's Survival Mode* as a place where a Western-style default character explores an endless land presumed empty. In this land, the player can build architectural structures as they please and 'mine' resources from the land for free. The native inhabitants of the land are not human; the player must kill and defeat these 'wild' monsters. In this light, *Minecraft* no longer looks like an innocent game where players merely try to survive and make a living in a harsh but abundant environment. Instead, the game appears to be a settler colonial story where a Western character invades a foreign land, extracts its resources and brutally attacks its Indigenous Peoples.

Whereas some games utilise colonial norms, other games explicitly question those norms. This questioning may characterise such games as 'decolonial'. The terms 'decolonial' and 'postcolonial' are sometimes used interchangeably to indicate the rejection and the 'undoing' of colonialism. In other instances, 'postcolonial' literally refers to the time after the colonial occupation of a particular place. Several decolonial scholars who critically discuss colonialism (for example, Lugones, 2010; Vázquez,

2021) differentiate between colonialism and *coloniality*, a concept introduced by Aníbal Quijano (1993). Lewis Gordon describes Quijano's coloniality as a 'form of epistemic colonialism' (2020, p. 6), which I interpret as an invisible layer of colonial norms and ideas spread through societies. In this layer, modern Western beliefs have been normalised to an extent where they are no longer seen or recognised. These beliefs are colonial because they preceded colonialism and brought it into existence. Next to this, these beliefs suppress and erase 'non-modern' Indigenous practices, customs that are not necessarily precolonial but exist parallel to modern or postmodern practices (Lugones, 2010, p. 743). Because of its invisibility, coloniality continued to exist after the occupation of colonised lands ended. The notion of coloniality helps to spot colonial thinking in postcolonial societies. However, Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) urge those who call for decolonising colonialities in postcolonial places to consider the ongoing colonialism of settler-colonial countries. Fighting colonialism and coloniality under the same name of 'decolonialism' may obscure active settler-colonialism. Tuck and Wang warn that decolonisation "is not a metaphor" (2012, p.1).

1.5 What does the literature tell us about colonialism in videogames?

The complexities of decolonial and postcolonial terminology do not keep scholars in game studies and game aesthetics from discussing colonialism in videogames. An increasing number of researchers analyse videogames that contain colonial norms and ideas, and some present the medium as a means to explore ways of decolonisation. Various authors situate the colonial bias in videogames in familiar locations; colonialism and coloniality emerge in videogame narratives, interactions, and audio-visual content.

In 'Casual Empire: Video Games as Neocolonial Praxis', Sabine Harrer (2018) discusses narratives and interactions that (re)create historical or fantasy empires. Harrer argues that colonial storylines in videogames are specifically problematic because of the entertainment value of reliving colonial practices in a virtual environment. I argued before that entertainment should not be conflated with fun. However, many videogames are seen as objects of entertainment that offer fun. When fun is the main goal, players and critics may ignore in-game racism and neo-colonialism and regard the colonialism in a game's narrative, images and interactions as secondary, detachable (Harrer, 2018, p. 3). In this way, Harrer brings entertainment to the fore as a category that provides a lens through which to look at colonialism in games.

Besides Bennet Brazelton's reading of *Minecraft,* discussed in the section above, various authors analysed other games from decolonial perspectives. One popular videogame in this context is *Thunderbird* Strike (discussed among others by Attebery, 2020; Kinder, 2021; Miner, 2022; Nacher & Jankowski, 2021). In contrast to *Minecraft,* which invites players to colonize its game universe,

Thunderbird Strike tells a story from an Indigenous standpoint. The game's designer and artist, Elizabeth LaPensée, is Irish, Anishinaabe, and Métis. She uses games to share, spread, and protect her Indigenous community's culture. In *Thunderbird Strike,* the player is a giant thunderbird flying over a land invaded by pipelines and oil refineries. The thunderbird is prevalent in many North American Indigenous stories and legends. In the game, the thunderbird charges electricity from the clouds, and the player can choose between releasing this electricity to destroy oil infrastructure or restoring dead animals in the soil. According to Joshua Miner (2022), *Thunderbird Strike* offers ways to decolonise via the game's interactions. The game's interactions align with the ethics and culture of the Anishinaabe community and establish a different relationship between the player-character and the game environment. For example, Miner discusses how LaPensée expanded the playable field by including the sky and the soil. In contrast to many other videogames, Thunderbird Strike's actionable space has not been extended to allow for more resource extraction but to reveal and preserve Anishinaabe relations between living creatures and their environment (Miner, 2022, p. 5).

Harrer and Miner discuss colonialism and potential decolonization via *entertainment* and *interaction*. Although no agreement exists on whether any of the suggested 'core videogame elements' (narratives, interaction, video, and potentially entertainment) form a necessary condition for all videogames, the categories are prevalent enough to study a broad range of videogames. Harrer and Miner's approaches seem effective in analysing direct colonial references and identifying colonialities deeper embedded in the game's moral structure. Inspired by Miner, Harrer, and others who operate from the perspective of colonial *narratives*, I looked for discussions of *video* and video elements such as graphics, animations, and audio in Elizabeth LaPensée's much-discussed *Thunderbird Strike*. Although some briefly mentioned the graphics, 'Thunderbird Strike: Survivance in/of an Indie Indigenous Game', a paper by LaPensée (2018), was the only article in my sample (I analysed: Kinder, 2021; LaPensée, 2018; Miner, 2022; Nacher & Jankowski, 2021) that discussed the game's graphics in-depth and mentioned its audio. LaPensée made the visuals for *Thunderbird Strike* (see Figure 1) in a typical Anishinaabe Woodlands style (LaPensée, 2018, p.29). She hand-drew eighty backgrounds for the game sprites and used "modified photos of lands, waters, copper, birch bark, mining equipment, and oil" (LaPensée, 2018, p. 29) for the textures in these images. LaPensée found inspiration in the land surrounding her. The images were inspired by and created with knowledge from this specific area and Anishinaabe stories and customs. Besides applying the legends and experiences of her community, LaPensée included adaptations of the work of other Indigenous artists in her game.

In the context of (de)colonialism, the visual style of *Thunderbird Strike* seems important. The style differs from many videogames and other media products that employ a 'mainstream visual style'. For example, *Thunderbird* Strike's style contrasts with the style of *Rabbit Chase* (LaPensée et al., 2022),

a comic book authored by LaPensée and illustrated by another Anishinaabe artist, KC Oster. On their website, Oster states that their "artistic goal is to create characters and stories that indigenous youth can relate to with modern mainstream media and style" (Oster, n.d.). However, in *Thunderbird Strike*, LaPensée also uses modern media, and although ancient practices inspire her style, she creates the images today in response to current events. Important to this thesis, Oster seems to address a supposed contrast between Indigenous culture and 'modern mainstream media', a contrast which seems absent in *Thunderbird Strike*. I will return to this presumed divide between indigeneity and modernity in the following chapters.

Figure 1 Screenshot of Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017).

Based on the potential importance of visual styles in telling Indigenous stories and the effectivity of Harrer's and Miner's applications of (core) videogame elements as a lens to study colonialism in videogames, I propose studying colonialism from the perspective of *video*. In this thesis, I will conduct such research by taking videogame graphics as a starting point and asking a broad and open question: What can videogame graphics tell us about colonial and postcolonial aesthetics? With

this question, I will limit myself to studying videogames from a visual lens. In the interests of space, I will not consider audio, or at least not prominently.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored definitions and explanations for videogames, colonialism and 'colonial videogames'. I presented videogames as objects that exist in-between worlds, as artefacts that carry and negotiate real-world norms and values. Some of these norms and values may contain colonial ideas. Colonialism in games manifests in stories and interactions that link back to the colonial ideology of cultivating 'backward' people and 'waste' land. Fortunately, growing numbers of researchers and game developers are studying and criticizing colonialism in games. In the chapter's final section, I identified several 'core' videogame elements as valuable lenses for postcolonial game studies. Researchers apply videogame fundaments, such as *narratives* and *interaction*, as perspectives to locate and recognise colonialism and coloniality in games. Many game theorists consider *video* a crucial element besides narratives and interaction in videogame ontology. However, video - at least in discussions of *Thunderbird Strike* - seems less applied as a lens to look at colonialism in games. Still, video may also offer helpful entries in postcolonial game research. Inspired by Harrer's and Miner's applications of entertainment and interaction in their discussions of (de)colonialism in games, I look at colonialism in games via a visual perspective in this thesis. This chapter established and explained my approach; I will apply these ideas in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Authenticity & sophistication – colonial values in videogame graphics

2.1 Introduction

Although it was once acceptable to label non-Western art as 'primitive', such terminology has fallen out of grace today. The word 'primitive' dismisses 'non-Western art' and 'non-Western' people as 'others' and supports racist attitudes no longer in line with publicly accepted norms.

In 'Primitivism reconsidered', Jonathan Hay (2017) discusses how the term 'primitive' entered the European arts discourse as an unproblematic adjective to describe 15th and 16th-century artwork in the early 1800s. At that time, 'primitive' was understood as 'original' or 'primary' and used to characterize the 15th and 16th-century 'precursors of High Renaissance art' (Hay, 2017, p. 63). However, in the early 1900s, 'primitive' changed meaning. Affected by Western colonial ideas about non-Western cultures, 'primitive' signalled "an underdeveloped and thus inferior state" (Hayum, 2014, p. 15). In this light, some critics started to worry about the appropriateness of the term when applied to European art (Hay, 2017, p. 63). Around the same time, exhibitions of artworks from colonized cultures gained popularity in several European museums. In its new meaning of inferiority, 'primitive' became a label to describe these non-Western artworks (Hay, 2017, p. 63).

The exhibition '"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern', organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) in 1984, seems central in discussions about 'primitive art'. This show caused much criticism because it presented non-Western artworks as a mere inspiration for modern Western art (Errington, 1994; Hay, 2017). In this way, the show confirmed the colonial bias in the words' primitive art'. In the following decades, the label 'primitive' received increasingly more critique. In the introduction of 'Primitive art in civilized places', Sally Price (2002) provides several examples of art critics and scholars who feel uneasy about the label 'primitive'. These people refer to the term as 'unfortunate' or 'out of fashion', yet they keep using it and try to defend its legitimacy (Price, 1989, p. 1). Today, MoMA states on their website that the term 'primitive' "with its derogatory connotations, fell out of favor" (*Primitive Art | MoMA*, n.d.) by the late 20th century. However, the disappearance of the term 'primitive' in Western art discourse does not necessarily mean the sentiments and beliefs that once fostered it have vanished, too. In his discussion of 'Perspectives: Angles on African Art', an exhibition organized by the Center for African Art in New York in 1987, Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991) points to other terms used to discuss and categorize African art, such as 'traditional' and 'authentic'. Although 'traditional' and 'authentic' are

unproblematic descriptive terms in several other situations[6], in Appiah's discussion of 'Perspectives: Angles on African Art', these words convey ideas that are essentially colonial.

Research on 'dogwhistles' (Drainville & Saul, 2020; J. Saul, 2018; Witten, 2023), coded messages that carry a second meaning for a secluded audience, suggests that next to intentional dogwhistles, concealed messages can be used and spread unintentionally. Words like 'traditional' and 'authentic' seem to possess qualities similar to these unintended dogwhistles: they are unproblematic in some situations yet have a second layer of potentially disturbing meanings in other contexts. In a similar vein, scholars in videogame aesthetics use the word 'sophisticated' to describe videogame graphics. In this chapter, I present the label 'sophisticated' in descriptions of videogame graphics as a term that emphasizes values such as 'Westernness' and 'modernness'. In the context of non-Western art, 'authentic' often signals the opposite; it accentuates 'non-Westernness' and 'pre-modernness'. These values are not discussed in the open but are merely implied.

In this chapter, based on the opposing meanings of the labels 'authentic' and 'sophistication' and the similarities between their secondary implied meanings and covert dogwhistles, I argue that 'authenticity' and 'sophistication' may both contribute to colonial biases and the dominance of Western aesthetic ideals in videogame graphics. The chapter has four sections. I first introduce the concept of 'primitivism' in the arts. I then analyze the terms 'traditional' and 'authentic'. Next comes the section about dogwhistles, which finally leads to the discussion of 'sophistication' in videogame graphics.

2.2 'Primitivism' in art

'Primitivist art' became a colonial concept in the nineteenth century. ''The European nations that sailed the oceans to colonise foreign places and extract people and resources for trade claimed entitlement to do so as they considered themselves 'civilised', whereas they saw the Indigenous people in the colonised lands as 'savages'. It is this contrast between the 'sophisticated' Self and the 'primitive' Other that lies at the heart of colonialism and forms the crux of the notion of primitivist art.

Ruud Welten (2015) defines primitivism[7] in the arts as a "late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western art movement that is inspired by non-Western peoples and their art forms" (p. 2). In

[6] For example, in section 3.5.2, I discuss the art of *Never Alone* (Upper One Games, 2014b), a videogame commisioned and cocreated by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), a nonprofit organisation in service of Indigenous peoples in southcentral Alaska. CITC representatives unproblematically refer to their own cultural history as traditional, when they speak of traditional stories and traditional sculpture.

[7] It may be necessary to differentiate between 'primitivist art' and 'primitive art'. The latter is no longer an accepted term, but for a long time it was used to define artwork made by non-Western peoples. In contrast, 'primitivist art', classifies artworks by Western artists inspired by non-Western art and societies (Staszak, 2004, p. 354).

this period, several European artists travelled to the colonies to find inspiration in distant lands. Prominent examples are Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Maurice de Vlaminck, who drew inspiration from African cultures in the early twentieth century (Staszak, 2004, p. 354). Besides non-Western art, these artists were also heavily inspired by Paul Gauguin, the French painter who travelled to the Pacific in the late nineteen hundreds. Gauguin became famous for his romanticised paintings of Indigenous Tahitian people, pictures that present the beauty of the 'pure' and 'simple' life of the non-West. Gauguin and his art play a central role in several works that discuss 'primitive art' in relation to colonialism (see, for instance, Kahn, 2003; Staszak, 2004; Welten, 2015). Welten, for example, introduces Gauguin as someone critical of the rapidly industrialising Europe:

> "Gauguin travelled to French Polynesia in order to escape the 'perverted' European culture of his time. In his dreams, Polynesia was a paradise, situated far from decadent life in Europe with its cold-blooded intellectual peoples who, according to the painter, had lost touch with truth and life as it should be." (Welten, 2015, p. 2)

The picture of Gauguin as a romantic painter looking for beauty in 'unspoilt' places is commonplace; however, according to Welten, this view is incorrect. Gauguin's appreciation for the 'primitive' is ambiguous because his admiration for indigenous 'purity' and 'authenticity' comes from a dominant Western position. With his search for 'truth' and 'purity' in non-Western cultures, Gauguin aims to reject this sense of Western superiority. Therefore, Welten argues, it is too simplistic to see Gauguin's paintings as merely appreciative of Polynesian culture; the works are also critical of European culture while simultaneously containing various cultural biases that obstruct this criticism and feed the appreciation for non-Western customs.

Welten expresses the ambiguity in Gauguin's relationship with European culture with the phenomenological concept of the 'primitive gaze'. Phenomenology is a strand of philosophy that studies the world and its phenomena from the viewpoint of lived experience (Lerner, 2023, p. 303). It analyses how we experience the world via structures of consciousness. Experience, or rather conscious experience, is directed at something; we are aware of what we consciously experience. This directedness is central to Edmund Husserl's notion of 'intentionality': the "necessity for consciousness to exist as consciousness of something other than itself" (Sartre, 1970, p. 5). Intentionality links consciousness and experience and presents this connection as informed by pre-existing expectations (Welten, 2015, p. 4). When we consciously look at a painting, we see or interpret what we see from certain standards (although we may not necessarily be aware of these standards); thus, from a phenomenological viewpoint, seeing is no neutral activity. Instead, Welten argues, looking and seeing are "loaded with strategies of how to look" (2015, p. 4). Artists inscribe their artworks with such strategies and instruct viewers to see the world from a specific angle. Art "paints not only what it sees,

but it rearranges reality in order to make it visible" (Welten, 2015, p. 4). Welten's concept of the primitive gaze operates on such strategies. European artists look at non-Western societies with "a gaze that is loaded with an intentionality obsessed with a criticism of its own Western standards" (2015, p. 3). The notion of primitivism appears in the distance between the Westerner and the non-Westerner, who is seen from a Western perspective. The other is not primitive but *becomes* primitive in the Western gaze, a way of seeing informed by European cultural standards and a longing for a paradise lost in the 'developed' modern Europe.

The concept of the Other is crucial here; without the 'primitive' Other, the 'civilised' Western Self cannot be. Simone de Beauvoir describes the Self and the Other as necessarily co-dependent:

> "A fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself: the subject posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object." (De Beauvoir, 2015, p. 7)

Following Hegel, De Beauvoir presents the Self as realised through the perception of the Other. Without the Other, the Self can only experience itself from within; it has no options to witness itself from the outside, to experience itself as a being separate from its surroundings. Therefore, the Self relies on the Other, yet a 'fundamental hostility' characterises their relationship (Beauvoir, 2015, p. 7). The Self overpowers the Other in claiming identity, positioning itself as 'essential' as opposed to the 'inessential' Other. Fortunately, this imbalance in power may even out automatically as we all consider ourselves 'the Self'. However, in some cases, "for shorter or longer time, one category has managed to dominate another absolutely" (De Beauvoir, 2015, p. 7). According to De Beauvoir, in these cases, we ignore the reciprocity in our relationships with others and see one group as sovereign, whereas the other group consists of individuals who are a mere derivative of the first group. Colonialism relied on this denial of reciprocity between Western people and those who belong to the Global Majority. It only acknowledged the Western perspective and treated non-Westerners as inessential Others. Seeing non-Westerners as subordinate to Westerners allowed the colonising forces to dehumanise colonised people and treat their artworks similarly, as works necessarily inferior in opposition to Western art. There is 'Art', and there is 'primitive art'. As the first category is the norm, no adjectives are needed to specify this art category. The second genre, however, is merely a derivative of the first; 'primitive art' is 'other art'.

2.3 The problem of authenticity

In the times of Paul Gauguin, 'primitive' as a label to describe non-Western art was undisputed. However, this started to change in the second half of the twentieth century. As European nations slowly retreated from overseas colonies, colonialism itself became 'backwards' and 'primitive'. In this

light, calling non-Western art 'primitive' revealed a colonial mindset that no longer aligned with many social and cultural norms. However, discarding the term 'primitive' does not necessarily mean that the othering of non-Western art stopped. In this section, I discuss two replacement terms for 'primitive': the words 'traditional' and 'neotraditional' emphasise postcolonial African artworks as typically non-Western and pre-modern. Both 'traditional' and 'neotraditional' seem to be used to signal various levels of 'authenticity'. In this section, I argue that in specific contexts, 'authenticity' continues the othering that took place earlier.

Walter Benjamin (1968) famously claims a loss of 'authenticity' in mechanically reproduced works. As opposed to reproductions, he presents original works as more 'authentic' Benjamin does not claim reproductions are 'inauthentic' or 'fake'; instead, these are less 'authentic' as the level of authenticity fades in the replication process. Original artworks result from 'unique existence': their being in a specific time and place (1968, p. 3). This uniqueness produces the 'aura' of the artwork. It is this 'aura' or the unique situatedness of the artwork that 'withers' and 'decays' in reproductions (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 4–5). In this light, 'authenticity' as attributed to independent game graphics may be seen as a positive label; it describes artworks as 'unique' and 'original' with a certain inherent situated value.

In 'Handmade Pixels', Jesper Juul (Juul, 2019) discusses 'authenticity' in independent or 'indie' games. A simple definition of independent games defines these games by what they are not; established game companies do not produce them. Instead, independent developers create independent games. One key thing these designers and developers have in common is that they often lack the big budgets for the state-of-the-art computers and software needed to make 'technologically advanced' graphics. Juul suggests that this lack may affect the style of the graphics; according to Juul, independent game artwork is often perceived as 'authentic' because of a low-tech style and analogue materials (Juul, 2019). In these instances, 'authenticity' seems to relate to familiar, long-established ways of working, sometimes even prior to digital imaging.

However, 'authenticity' can also take on different meanings. In 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?' Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991) analyses the catalogue of 'Perspectives: Angles on African Art', an exhibition of African artworks organised by the Center for African Art in New York in 1987. Via a selection of text fragments, Appiah brings to the fore how several of the colonial issues discussed in the previous section still prevail a century after Gauguin migrated to French Polynesia. By connecting two text excerpts from the 'Perspectives: Angles on African Art' catalogue, Appiah draws attention to a specific connection between 'traditional' and 'authentic'; in these examples, both terms oppose concepts such as 'modern' and 'contemporary'. The first fragment

quotes the exhibition's co-curator David Rockefeller[8], who links his appreciation for a sculpture listed as a 'Fanti figure' to its supposed 'contemporary' and 'Western' look:

> "This is a rather more sophisticated version than the ones that I've seen, and I thought it was quite beautiful. . .. the total composition has a very contemporary, very Western look to it. It's the kind of thing, I think, that goes very well with ... contemporary Western things. It would look very good in a modern apartment or house." (Rockefeller, 1987, p.138, quoted in Appiah, 1991, p. 337)

Rockefeller labels the piece 'sophisticated' and seems to connect this 'sophistication' to 'modernness' and 'Westernness'. The second quote demonstrates that this particular artwork may indeed be 'contemporary':

> "It is the desire of the Baltimore Museum of Art to make public the fact that the authenticity of the Fanti figure in its collection has been challenged. Although the figure was authenticated by several distinguished scholars of the area prior to its acquisition by the Museum, it has since been seen by Doran Ross, of the UCLA Museum of Cultural History, who attributes it to the workshop of Francis Akwasi, of Kumasi. The Kumasi workshop specialises in carvings for the international market in the style of traditional sculpture" (Lamp, 1987, p. 29[9]).

Although first perceived as 'traditional', the 'Fanti figure' in the excerpts above turned out to be a present-day piece. Francis Akwasi's workshop created the sculpture in 'modern' times for a Western audience. Apparently, under those conditions, the piece cannot be 'authentic'. This supposed contrast between traditionality and modernity is questionable. It suggests that African art can only be 'authentic' when 'uncontaminated' by the West, implying that nothing ever changed on the African continent before the European colonists arrived (Kasfir, 1992, p. 43). Furthermore, several African peoples already produced works in a client-based way in precolonial times (Kasfir, 1992, p. 45). The suggestion that works produced for Western buyers cannot be 'traditional' fails to acknowledge this past. The labels' traditional' and 'authentic' thus seem to say more about how Western buyers classify African artworks than it says about those works themselves. An African artwork labelled 'inauthentic' may have less value on the Western market; however, this says nothing about the power of its 'aura' in the Benjaminian sense of authenticity.

[8] 'Perspectives: Angles on African Art' was an exhibition of African artworks organised by the Center for African Art in New York in 1987. Susan Vogel curated the show with the help of ten co-curators with different backgrounds. As one of these ten co-curators, David Rockefeller selected various artworks. In the exhibition catalogue, he discusses the artworks he chose.

[9] I took this quote directly from the exhibition catalogue. Appiah does not present this complete quote in his essay but cites some parts directly and paraphrases other parts.

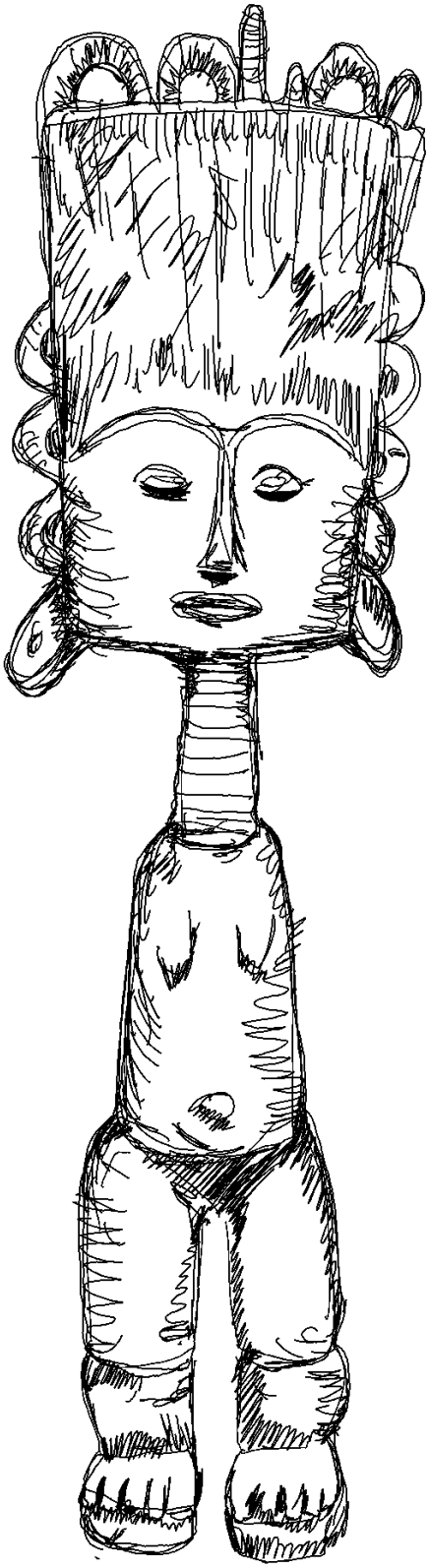

Figure 2 sketch of the 'Fanti figure', based on a photograph of the sculpture in 'Perspective, Angles on African Art' (Baldwin et al., 1987, p.138).

Appiah's discussion of the label 'neotraditional' that appears in the catalogue to describe another artwork, *Man with a Bicycle,* further illustrates the above. Appiah characterises 'neotraditional art' as typically produced for the West or African buyers educated in the West (Appiah, 1991, p. 346). This audience sees African art through a gaze affected by Western culture, "if they want African art, they would often rather have a 'genuinely' traditional piece, by which I mean a piece that they believe to be made precolonially, or at least in a style and by methods that were already established precolonially" (Appiah, 1991, p. 346)[10]. For this audience, 'traditional art' must be free of Western influences. The catalogue invents the new label of 'neotraditional' to bridge the gap between precolonial artworks and similar pieces with contemporary topics. With this fix, contemporary artworks can be 'genuinely traditional' again.

Consequently, 'traditional art' may contrast well with 'Western things', such as a 'modern apartment or house'. In this context, Rockefeller's use of the adjective 'sophisticated' becomes questionable. Although he uses the word in an appreciative manner, Rockefeller's explanation also suggests that African art may generally be unsophisticated and that sophistication is a typically Western feature. On their own, labels such as 'traditional' and 'sophisticated' seem harmless, but in the context of our colonial history, they may echo toxic and damaging beliefs. If we read 'traditional' as a substitute for 'non-Western' and 'sophisticated' as identical to 'the West', we are again trapped in an asymmetric relationship with colonial characteristics; the 'traditional artwork' in the 'modern apartment' may make the apartment, or the person that placed the artwork there, appear even more 'sophisticated', and in this way, secure the dominance of Western culture.

2.4 Primitivism in disguise

The colonial echo in words such as 'traditional' and 'authentic' resembles practices of implicit political messaging, also known as 'dogwhistling'. Dogwhistles are coded messages allowing users to spread ideas they would rather not say out loud. Although much research on dogwhistles focuses on spoken or written language, dogwhistles often appear in a mix of text and imagery (Drainville & Saul, 2020, p. 21). Dogwhistles are used intentionally or unintentionally, and their coded messages can be apparent or disguised. In overt dogwhistling, only those who are targeted can hear the the whistle. Others, who are not part of the intended audience, get the literal meaning of the message only and can miss the symbolic extra layer. An example is the word 'Google', which stands for 'black person' in alt-right dog whistling. Racist online groups may use codes like these to spread hateful speech unnoticed and

[10] In the case of *Man with a Bicycle*, this refers to the present-day image of the man with the bike, executed in woodcut, a long-established medium and style.

without getting banned from social platforms (Drainville & Saul, 2020, p. 3).[11] An intentional, overt dogwhistle aims for its audience to "consciously grasp the message" (Drainville & Saul, 2020, p. 7); alt-right members addressed by the 'Google'-dogwhistle get the message directly. However, a person unaware of the second meaning of 'Google' in these groups can use it unintentionally when those in the know misinterpret a regular reference to the search engine for the coded version (Drainville & Saul, 2020, p. 7).

Covert dogwhistles are different; in these messages, the code is concealed for the in-group, too. The target audience picks up on it unconsciously via previously formed associations. Jennifer Saul (2018) argues that many US citizens do not consider themselves racist and do not want to be perceived as such. However, "a belief system that psychologists have called 'racial resentment' remains widespread" (Saul, 2018, p. 364). Although people adhere to a norm of racial equality, it is also "socially acceptable to make reference to the ills of black culture…" (Saul, 2018, p. 365). Covertly coded dogwhistles address the racial resentment that people do not acknowledge they have. Politicians who want to target these repressed sentiments in their campaigns cannot use explicitly racist messages; this would put off the majority of the voters who do not consider themselves racist. However, suppose the campaign applies words or images that subconsciously connect to racial issues (because of intentionally created associations between these words and racist ideas). In that case, voters might pick up on the shared sentiment and respond to it. Consequently, this type of dogwhistle functions "without the conscious awareness of those whose racial attitudes are activated by the term" (Drainville & Saul, 2020, pp. 7–8). Importantly, once a covert dogwhistle is exposed, it no longer works; if the racist connotations are out in the open, people will distance themselves from these messages.
However, recent changes in political speech challenge this contention; overt racism will not always put voters off. In her new book 'Dogwhistles and Figleaves', Jennifer Saul (2023) introduces the concept of the 'figleave' to identify coverup actions that make racist remarks palpable for those groups who do not consider themselves racist yet are attracted by other content in otherwise racist political campaigns[12].

[11] In this paragraph, I introduce dogwhistles as problematic tools used to spread racist ideas. However, Saul and Witten point out that people can also apply dogwhistles in positive ways. For example, they point at the extra layer of jokes and cultural references aimed at adult viewers in many children's movies that entertain parents who watch these movies together with their children.

[12] Saul (2023) illustrates this idea with the example of former US president Donald Trump, who made and makes numerous openly racist and sexist comments. Trumps followers consist of a wide range of people. Some of Trump's supporters openly embrace his racists views, others seem to merely ignore his problematic remarks and focus on other content in Trump's campaign. Trump assists this last group by adding distractive comments or by simply denying his racism, which makes his racism easier to ignore. Saul identifies these distractions and denials as racial figleaves.

Problematically, covert dogwhistles can be used unintentionally, too. As recipients do not consciously decipher the code words and images in covert dogwhistles, the codes can be applied while users are unaware of them and thus spread them unintentionally. In this double disguise, unintentional covert dogwhistles resemble the colonial ideas that may echo in specific uses of 'authenticity'.

As 'primitive' is no longer accepted, critics, curators, and others may unconsciously label a non-Western art piece 'authentic' to emphasise its non-Westernness. Now that the pejorative term 'primitive' is no longer used, the discrimination of non-Western art seems lifted. However, 'authentic' in these instances merely conceals 'primitive' and offers users a way to evade the colonial issues that cling to 'primitive'. Unlike vocabulary changes such as, for example, the transition from 'slave' to 'enslaved person' where the latter critiques the first, 'authentic' does not reject 'primitive'. In these specific cases, 'authentic' does not condemn or change colonialism but conceals it. In this hidden way, 'authentic' resembles unintentional covert dogwhistling. Unaware of the colonial undertone in 'authentic' that primarily focuses on these works being non-Western, people may use 'authentic', thinking they talk or write about non-Western art in a non-discriminatory way. As in unintentional covert dogwhistling, others may pick up and repeat these uses of 'authentic' and, in doing so, spread the hidden 'primitive' message. However, unlike covert dogwhistling, it seems like no one intentionally created 'authentic' as code for 'primitive'. Although the effects are nearly identical, 'authentic' may have emerged from a different dynamic; 'authentic' may not have been constructed to conceal 'primitive' but to ignore 'primitive' and the responsibilities that come along with changing such a problematic term.

Although many may overlook the colonial echo in 'authentic' as a replacement for 'primitive', those harmed by its discriminating undertone will eventually notice it. An example is Nigerian-Canadian artist Ojo Agi's criticism of the questions asked after the screening of *Kati Kati*, a film by the Kenyan director Mbiti Masya, at the Toronto International Film Festival. The Western audience, she argues, demands that African artists tell 'authentic' stories. However, 'authenticity' in these views does not imply any positive meanings, such as 'uniqueness' or 'originality'. Instead, 'authentic' again seems to translate to 'pre-colonial' and 'non-Western', and as such, it pushes contemporary artists back in the "mold of the Africa of 'Primitivism'" (Appiah, 1991, p. 339):

> "Although the term "African art" remains arbitrary and polysemic, there is still in some ways a general expectation of prints, patterns and cultural elements. It becomes tricky for a contemporary African artist in a digital era influenced by many cultures to ascribe to this particular aesthetic. But if our work doesn't feature obvious cultural cues, we risk being told that we aren't 'authentic'" (Agi, 2016).

From these uses of 'authenticity' emerges the persistent view of African art as the art of the Other. Like many unintentional covert racist dogwhistles, it carries an unnoticed message of othering and a repressed celebration of Western culture.

2.5 Sophisticated videogame graphics

The colonial echo in the application of 'authentic' above has two modes of appearance; it can manifest as a hidden layer of contempt for anything or anyone perceived as 'non-Western' or 'non-modern' and can emerge as a celebration of typical 'Western' and 'modern' values. In various applications, 'sophistication' and 'authenticity' are unproblematic terms. However, in the context of colonialism, they become questionable antonyms. Although validation of the one does not necessarily mean disapproval of the other, caution is warranted in contrasting concepts like these. As we saw before, to be 'sophisticated', the Westerner needs another, too often the non-Western person, to be 'primitive', which can be substituted by 'authentic'. By positioning itself as essential, and non-Western art as 'primitive' or inessential, Western art stays in control and protects its dominant position. In this light, an appreciation for 'sophistication' may imply dismissal of anything 'not-sophisticated' or non-Western and non-modern.

Relevant to this thesis, several scholars in videogame aesthetics have adopted the term 'sophisticated' to describe videogame graphics. A prominent example is Grant Tavinor in his book 'The Art of Videogames' (2009). In the first chapter, Tavinor (2009) uses the word combination' artistic sophistication' four times to characterise contemporary videogame graphics:

1. "…recent times have seen the technical and *artistic sophistication* of games grow to an amazing degree" (2009, p. 1 - my Italics).
2. "…commercial growth underpins the technological advances in providing an economic rationale for the research and development necessary for the gaming technology, and hence has a direct bearing on the current *artistic sophistication* of gaming" (Tavinor, 2009, p. 7 - my Italics).
3. "…because recent games are more *artistically sophisticated*, particularly in terms of their graphical qualities, the immoral content of games seems all the more lifelike and hence worrying" (Tavinor, 2009, p. 8 - my Italics).
4. "Videogames are a growing phenomenon and influence in the modern world, and are displaying new levels of *artistic sophistication*" (Tavinor, 2009, p. 13 - my Italics).

Tavinor is not alone in his attachment to 'sophistication' as a categorisation for contemporary game graphics (see, for instance, Greenfield, 1994; Hancock, 2016; Smuts, 2005), but even if he were, his aesthetic judgements would reach far. Tavinor's book is well-cited on various databases. It has 705

citations on Google Scholar[13] and 170 citations in Scopus. Additionally, the book's metrics on Scopus show a field-weighted citation impact (FWCI) of 2,69[14]. This number of citations implies that the book is at least well-read.

As an explanation for 'artistic sophistication', Tavinor elaborates that "many videogames are now simply stunning in their graphical and auditory depictions" (2009, p. 1). This answer seems fairly unproblematic and primarily a judgment of taste. Additionally, I do not want to imply that Tavinor has an agenda here. He merely seems to use 'sophisticated' because it seems to be a fitting adjective to describe his appreciation of videogame graphics. However, as we saw before, in terms such as 'sophisticated', the colonial echo may be uttered unintentionally with its author unaware. Tavinor's descriptions characterise the visual quality of videogame imagery as improved, and thus as better than before or better than other images. I take this implicit comparison between good, 'sophisticated' videogame imagery and 'other' or older videogame graphics as an invitation to explore how these two categories relate.

Tavinor attributes the supposed 'sophistication' in game graphics to technological changes; videogame hardware, such as gaming consoles and computers, renders increasingly more *complex* images (2009, p. 6). Aaron Smuts (2005) follows a similar line of reasoning when a specific selection of games:

> "…represent recent trends in video game design made possible by increasingly sophisticated technology. All feature integrated narratives, graphics nearing photo-realism and elaborate three-dimensional worlds with rich and detailed textures" (Smuts, 2005).

In both accounts, 'sophisticated' appears to signal higher levels of complexity and detailedness, made possible because of new, advanced technology. Noticeably, Mark Wolf (2004) also discusses videogame graphics in terms of complexity; however, he speaks of 'graphical complexity' directly instead of 'sophisticated technology' or 'artistic sophistication'.

The difference between 'sophistication' and 'complexity' is subtle yet distinct. Although Tavinor and Smuts apply 'sophisticated' as a synonym for 'complex', 'sophisticated' has a history of describing typical 'Western', 'modern things'; more than just 'complex', 'sophisticated' beckons' progress' and the development of something formerly 'crude' into something more 'advanced' or

[13] These numbers are from December 9, 2023.

[14] The FWCI score measures the number of citations of a particular document compared to similar documents in its field. A number higher than 1 indicates that the paper or book is 'more cited than expected according to the global average' (*What Is Field-Weighted Citation Impact (FWCI)?*, 2022). In the case of 'The Art of Videogames' the book is cited 169% more than expected on Scopus. However, what that means exactly is unclear. Scopus does not provide information on how the similarity of documents is assigned which makes it difficult to understand how the 'global average' is measured.

'civilised'. In an admittedly much older paper, Patricia M. Greenfield (1994) uses the term 'sophisticated' in precisely this way:

> "The studies in this section cover a range of arcade-style action games that reflect the constant change in software from the more primitive graphics of Evolution (Greenfield, Camaioni, et al., 1994) to the more sophisticated three-dimensional representations of Marble Madness (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1994). This trend toward more sophisticated graphics has continued and will continue into the foreseeable future" (Greenfield, 1994, p. 8).

Greenfield characterises the graphics of the game *Evolution* as 'primitive' as opposed to the 'sophisticated' imagery of *Marble Madness*. Although 'primitive' does not consciously refer to anything 'non-Western' or 'pre-modern' in the quote above, and 'sophisticated' seems to mean 'complex' rather than 'Western' or 'modern', the colonial echo may also linger here. All authors in this section attribute the success of the 'stunning and brilliant graphics'[15] to 'technology', the field the West sees as synonymous with modernity and thus Westernness. As advanced technology facilitated the supposed evolution from 'primitive graphics' to 'sophisticated three-dimensional representations', it may be this technology, symbolising Westernness and modernity, that is most valued here.

Wolf's discussion of graphics in 'Abstraction in the Video Game' (2004) supports this claim. Wolf describes the level of detailedness and complexity in game graphics as the main driver for technological change:

> "The number of games available for a given system was one consideration for system buyers, along with graphical complexity. Game graphics were, and to a large extent still are, the main criteria by which advancing video game technology is benchmarked by the buying public; thus representational graphics act as a means of visually benchmarking the *computer's* graphics against the visual experience of unmediated reality" (Wolf, 2004, p. 53).

The appreciation for complexity encouraged game programmers to "outdo each other" (Wolf, 2004, p. 56) with detailed and realistic graphics. Realism became the style that seemed best fit to expose the technical complexity of the graphics as "the simplest and quickest way that consumers could compare systems…" (Wolf, 2004, p. 58). Wolf's analysis implies that a general appreciation for advanced technology affected the visual style of videogame graphics. Wolf does not oppose 'realism' as a visual genre, but he regrets the loss of 'abstraction', the 'heritage' of videogame graphics. In competition with realistic graphics, abstract images fit the category of low-tech images that Juul

[15] Here I am referring to Tavinor. In addition to his remark that "many videogames are now simply stunning in their graphical and auditory depictions"(2009, p. 1), he talks about 'artistic growth' (2009, p. 6), and 'graphical brilliance' (Tavinor, 2009a, p. 8).

earlier classified as 'authentic'. As such, unintendedly, 'sophistication' may promote the exclusion of certain 'other' visual styles. In the next chapter, I return to this dominance of 'sophisticated' graphics and, consequently, the dismissal of 'low-tech' graphics, where I discuss visual styles as languages that represent specific groups of people.

2.6 Conclusion

As discussed in the previous chapter, scholars and game designers are becoming more concerned with the decolonisation of videogames. In this chapter, I discussed the labels' authentic' and 'sophisticated' to describe artwork in relation to 'Westernness' and 'modernness'. With this discussion, I aim to suggest that the decolonisation of videogames could benefit from exploring and identifying some of the values that keep Western aesthetics dominating or even colonising the field.

Based on the Hegelian notion of the Self as dependent on the Other, I claimed that 'sophisticated' Western art needs non-Western art to be 'primitive'. When 'primitive' stopped being an accepted label to describe non-Western art, an attempt was made to 'solve' this by replacing 'primitive' with alternatives such as 'traditional' and 'authentic'. However, this 'solution' contains a problematic Western bias; 'authentic' may initially sound harmless but still primarily emphasises non-Western art as 'other' art. Furthermore, the introduction of terms such as 'authentic' and 'traditional' to describe non-Western art helped the West avoid the responsibility of facing its colonial history. By changing the label unconsciously or, at least, not openly as a substitute for 'primitive', 'authenticity' does not openly address the problems connected to 'primitive'. Unlike these uses of 'authentic', 'sophisticated' signals the opposite. 'Sophistication' does not dismiss anything non-Western or non-modern but strengthens Westernness and modernness. 'Sophistication' celebrates Western culture and technology as a typical Western phenomenon. However, because 'sophisticated art' relies on 'primitive art', this promotion of Western values happens in contrast to supposedly non-Western values. Therefore, it may not be enough to invent terms that seemingly stop the misrepresentation and oppression of marginalised groups in videogames. Instead, the decolonisation of videogames requires an examination of the values underlying these terms that dictate whether a game is 'professional' and has 'quality visuals'.

Chapter 3: Polished vs primitive – visual styles as dominant, colonial narratives

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter explored the language that theorists use to describe art, including videogame graphics. This chapter focuses on visual language in videogames. It starts with a broader discussion of language from an anti-colonial perspective. In the following sections, I apply two main concepts from this discussion: Frantz Fanon's (2001) notion of 'violence' and Jacques Derrida's (1998) 'monolingualism'.

I apply Fanon's (2001) notion of 'violence' to identify colonialist ideology in the acceptance - or lack thereof- of games by Global Majority developers. To Fanon, decolonisation is necessarily violent because colonisers and their morals must change (Fanon, 2001). Colonised people who question the colonisers' superiority and demand equal treatment disrupt colonial norms. Fanon sees this disruption as a 'violation' of the colonial justice system (Gordon, 2020, p.36). Colonial ideology locates people of the Global Majority in the past, in pre-modern times and presents them as not belonging in the technological, contemporary world (Agi, 2016; Appiah, 1991; Gaertner, 2015; Lewis & Fragnito, 2010; Longboat, 2019b). By making videogames, technological artefacts, these game makers 'violate' colonial norms; they appear in spaces that find it just to exclude them.

Next, I relate Derrida's (1998) concept of the 'monolingualism of the other', the refusal of the dominant other to speak and recognise languages different from their own, to mainstream videogame visuals. I argue that 'polished' and 'high-end' visuals dominate the visual styles of mainstream big-budget and casual games. In this context, I explore Jesper Juul's (2019) notion of 'Independent Style' to analyse potential alternative styles that can challenge the monolingualism of mainstream visuals. In the last section, I illustrate the ideas above by exploring three videogames with distinctly different visual styles. The designers who worked on two of the games identify as Indigenous game makers, and the artist who worked on the third game created the images in close collaboration with Alaskan people who also identify as Indigenous people. I examine their artistic choices and relate them to the various visual styles I categorised in section three.

3.2. Language

Language influences the position of people of the Global Majority in the (post)colonial world. Colonial thinking presents Western cultures as superior to the culture of (former) colonised communities (Laenui, 2016; Osterhammel, 1997). Culture and language co-shape each other; a language reflects a

culture, and this culture affects the language (Jiang, 2000, p. 328). Besides this direct interaction, Wenying Jiang (2000) argues that from a broader perspective, language "…is also the symbolic representation of a people, since it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking" (p. 328). This section explores how this close connection between language and culture and the presumed superiority of Western culture in colonial thinking impacts people of the Global Majority.

In 'Black Skin, White Masks', Frantz Fanon (2021) discusses language as a bridge between the different worlds of the colonisers and the colonised. According to Fanon, to speak a language is to own or gain access to the culture this language represents:

> "A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language." (Fanon, 2021, p. 2)

In colonial societies, colonised people can speak the dominant language of the colonisers and, according to Fanon quoted above, claim access to the dominant culture. However, they may also speak a 'native' language and reside in the world that language represents. Fanon illustrates these ideas in a discussion of language in Martinique, the former French colony where Fanon was born. French is Martinique's official language. However, many Martinicans speak Creole, a new language that emerged from colonial contact between, in this case, French and several other languages (Mufwene, 2015, p. 133).

To Fanon, it matters who speaks which language in which context. The Martinican bourgeoisie, Fanon claims, speaks French instead of Creole, and -at the time of his writing- schools taught their pupils to "treat the dialect with contempt" (2021, p. 4). Black people who spoke 'proper' French may have felt superior over fellow Blacks with thick Martinican accents (Fanon, 2021, p. 4). To these schoolteachers and the Martinican middle class, the French language became a measurement of success and status, a way to cope with the inferiority complex that colonialism inflicted upon them. Fanon dismisses this behaviour (Fanon, 2021, p. 7) and changes his focus to black people's command of French in the colonisers' culture, as this is where speaking fluent French matters.

According to Fanon, the colonisers in the metropole held a fixed image of black people and considered them less developed (Fanon, 2021, pp. 17-18). Therefore, when a white French person addresses a black person from the colonies, they will talk to them in Pidgin, assuming this will be easier to understand for the black person. Pidgins, like Creoles, are new languages that emerge in places where people with different linguistic backgrounds meet, such as (post)colonial Martinique. Pidgins are often perceived as simplified dialects. This supposed lack of complexity makes sense, as Pidgins are "makeshift, but limited communication devices" (Bakker & Matras, 2013, p. 6); people invent them for fast and practical communication. However, according to Fanon, when white people address black

people in Pidgin, this does not follow from a practical mindset but from a wish to secure white people's power (Fanon, 2021, pp. 14–15). In Fanon's view, Pidgin-speaking white people treat Blacks as children, as people who are less intelligent and less educated (Fanon, 2021, p. 14), thus assuring black people cannot be seen as equals and preventing them from fully entering the white world.

Although some white people addressed black people in Pidgin, black people may have responded in French (or in different settings, other colonial languages). From a colonial perspective, these black people 'appropriated' the French language, and according to Fanon, by doing so, they were consequently "appropriating the white world" (Fanon, 2021, p. 19). In Lewis Gordon's (2020) interpretation of Fanon's work, this appropriation of the French language by colonised people counts as an act of violence. "Colonized and racially subordinated people", Gordon writes, "commit 'violence' simply by appearing" (2020, p. 36). For Fanon, decolonisation is necessarily violent because it means radical change (Fanon, 2001, p. 27). Gordon explains Fanon's concept of violence by switching sides. The colonisers' justice system, with its superiority claims, is, in colonial terms, just. Therefore, according to this system, the exclusion of colonised people is also just. When colonised people disrupt this justice framework by demanding inclusion from the system that excludes them, they 'violate' colonial norms. To Include colonised people would break the colonial justice system's logic: "…the system presumed their exclusion was just. Thus, their inclusion in that system would be a form of injustice" (Gordon, 2020, p. 36). In this explanation, Fanonian violence is synonymous with disruption. In some cases, language, too, may have such a violent, unsettling power. "There is nothing more sensational than a black man speaking correctly", writes Fanon,"…for he is appropriating the white world" (2021, p. 19).

Appropriating the language of the dominant other may violate colonial norms and provide access to otherwise inaccessible places; however, using the dominant language can also restrict (formerly) colonised people. In 'Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin', Jacques Derrida (1998) explores this constraint with his notion of the 'monolingualism of the other', the refusal of the dominant other to speak and recognise languages different from their own. Derrida writes on the book's first page: "I have only one language; it is not mine" (Derrida, 1998, p. 1). Derrida grew up in Algeria, where French was the dominant language in the arts and academia (Chow, 2008, p. 220). According to Rey Chow (2008), the French imposed their language "as a 'superior' language on the Algerian people" and made "native languages such as Arabic and Berber become increasingly marginalized and useless" (Chow, 2008, p. 220).

Like Derrida, Achille Mbembe questions the dominance of colonial languages. "Colonialism rimes with mono-lingualism" (2015, p.17), claims Mbembe in 'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive'. Mbembe argues for multilingualism in African universities (2015, p. 17). This

multitude of languages is necessary to ensure a "creative repository of concepts originating from the four corners of the Earth" (Mbembe, 2015, p. 18). If language symbolises culture, cancelling specific languages may erase or suppress the cultures or part of the cultures these languages represent. Colonialism demands that colonised people speak the colonisers' language (Chow, 2008, p. 220). Although the colonisers' language may positively affect the colonised person's sense of power, the black Martinicans in Fanon's examples had little choice in adopting it. Colonialism erased their native tongue and ridiculed the Creole dialect that replaced it. Adopting the language of the coloniser may violate the coloniser's norms and worldview, but it also forces the colonised person to speak in a 'language that is not theirs'.

3.3. Violating Videogames

The previous section introduced the concepts of 'violence' and 'monolingualism'. In Frantz Fanon's notion of violence, colonised people disrupt colonial territory when they show up in places that mean to exclude them; their appearance 'violates' colonial norms. In a similar vein, Game designers of the Global Majority violate the colonial idea that presents non-Western people as non-technological. Videogames made by designers from the Global Majority disrupt this colonial concept; these games are simultaneously technical and potentially[16] non-Western. In this section, I use this disruption to explore some of the colonial biases in the beliefs that present people of the Global Majority as untechnical and videogames as inherently technological.

3.3.1 Global Majority people as untechnical

Lingering colonial beliefs regularly located people of the Global Majority in the past; in premodern times regarded as non-technological. Gordon (2020) explains this notion by describing a historical split in time: "Time was divided after the 15th century into a Eurocentered one, which was presumed to be the present into the future. That juncture produced 'primitive' or 'premodern' time, which was marked from then onward as belonging to 'the past' " (p. 38). This separation, Gordon argues, led to "ultimately two types of people—Euromodern and the supposedly premodern rest" (2020, p. 38). The 'premodern rest' must first become "European or at least European-like" (Gordon, 2020, p. 38) to be considered 'modern'. Colonial thinking that conflates modernity and technology implies that non-Western people would also have to become more European or 'European-like' to be perceived as 'technological'.

[16] Many people who belong to the Global Majority live in Western countries and identify as Western. However, the racism in colonial thinking excludes them from the West and Western identity. Although some Global Majority designers identify as non-Western, others don't. They see themselves as Western, yet are excluded from this category because of problematic colonial thinking.

Several game designers of the Global Majority break the boundaries of categories that regard technology as exclusively Western by using technology without being 'European-like'. Game designer Maize Longboat (2019), who identifies as an Indigenous person of mixed ancestry (p.14), states the following:

> "Indigenous peoples have had a rich tradition of utilizing digital media to tell their stories in new ways. These stories often run counter to popular Western-centric narratives that perpetually position Indigenous peoples as only existing in the past. Indigenous peoples are regularly forgotten as participants of the technological world, but we are also both players and producers of videogames" (Longboat, 2019, p.iii).

In a similar vein, Skawennati Tricia Fragnito uses 'NetArt', digital artwork that uses the Internet as its main medium, to fight the colonial exclusion described by Longboat and Gordon above (Lewis & Fragnito, 2010). Although NetArt and videogames are different artistic media, they share similar components. Fragnito's project *CyberPowWow*[17] uses visual imagery, narratives and interaction in "a virtual exhibition and chat space" that, according to Fragnito, "…would dispel the myth that Native artists didn't (or couldn't!?) use technology in their work" (Fragnito, n.d.). Longboat, Fragnito and other Global Majority artists use digital media such as the Internet and videogames to reclaim space: They use technology to take back control over the representation of Global Majority people and utilise virtual worlds that did not invite or expect them (Lewis & Fragnito, 2010). By 'simply appearing' in the digital places that meant to exclude them, these artists violate the colonial structures that pushed Global Majority people into premodern and untechnical categories.

Besides the supposed non-technical character of Global Majority people, the argument above considers videogames to be typically technological. The latter assumption seems reasonable, as videogames generally require computer technology to function. However, none of the videogame definitions I discussed in Chapter 1 mention technology as a core element; technology in these definitions seems so fundamental it moves out of sight. Still, since videogames' technological character is a necessary condition in the argument of non-Western videogames as 'violating colonial beliefs', the following paragraphs explore and question technology as a defining factor in videogames.

3.3.2 Videogames as typically technological

Videogames did not exist in pre-colonial worlds; they are usually seen as relatively new inventions that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Videogame developer and critic Anna Anthropy (2012) states it is "beside the point to try to identify the first videogame" (p. 23). According to

[17] https://www.cyberpowwow.net/library.html

Anthropy, several people worked on the supposedly 'first videogames' simultaneously, inspired by a vast collection of folk games, carnival games and mechanical games in various cultures (Anthropy, 2012, p. 23). With this comment, Anthropy suggests that it is hard to identify the origins of video gaming because videogames are embedded in and have a broad cultural history that cannot be attributed to one single group or location. Anthropy differentiates between videogames and games in other formats by separating material qualities. To Anthropy, videogames are *digital games*. With this distinction, Anthropy changes technology from a defining feature into a mere material description. According to Anthropy, "games, digital and otherwise, transmit ideas and culture" (2012, p. 3). What separates videogames from other games, such as board games and folk games, is that videogames are digital. Anthropy's distinction rejects 'videogames' as a stand-alone category and makes 'digital games' a digital subset in the broader category of 'games'.

Anthropy is mindful of these nuanced differences when she situates the first 'digital games' in the computer labs of US universities in the hands of white male engineers: "They alone had access to computers, and they alone had access to the technical information required to teach those machines to play games" (Anthropy, 2012, p. 40). A prime example of such an early game is *Spacewar!* (Wolf & Perron, 2013). Computer scientist Steven Russell and colleagues created *Spacewar!* in a lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1962 as an application to showcase the capabilities of the PDP-1 minicomputer (Monnens & Goldberg, 2015). In 'Space Odyssey: The Long Journey of Spacewar! from MIT to Computer Labs Around the World', Devin Monnens and Martin Goldberg (2015) confirm the exclusivity in Anthropy's claim:

> "For one thing, Spacewar! was only available in computer labs, making it accessible only to a select group of students, scientists, and technicians, and on occasion their friends and relatives. In fact, it was only by the end of the 1960s that the general public was finally made aware of the game. In addition, computers in the 1960s were incredibly expensive, with costs often calculated in dollars per minute." (Monnens & Goldberg, 2015, p. 125)

However, videogames did not stay exclusively in these academic environments and eventually travelled well beyond US borders. Today, people play, design, develop and distribute videogames "in virtually every country in the world" (Penix-Tadsen, 2019, p. 6). Locating the origins of videogames in US university labs provides one explanation for the notion of videogames as typically Western and technological. However, the time that games were exclusively developed and played at university labs was brief. The focus on 1960s computer developments excludes other relevant influences that are not necessarily Western or typically technological. Anthropy's label of 'digital games' provides ways to explore these other influences by placing videogames in the larger contexts of games.

3.4. Monolingual Mainstream Graphics

The concept of 'digital games' challenges the idea of videogames being fundamentally technological, and the technology use of people of the Global Majority challenges the assumption that non-Western people are inherently untechnical. Frantz Fanon's notion of violence provided a perspective on coloniality in the evaluations of videogames created by Global Majority designers; Global Majority designers may disrupt colonial norms by simply making videogames. However, for those games to be accepted and understood by an audience captured by such colonial thinking, the game's visual language matters. In this section, based on Jacques Derrida's notion of the 'monolingualism of the other', I argue that the videogaming industry is visually monolingual by favouring realistic, technological-looking imagery over low-tech-looking visuals.

The previous chapter argued that graphics play a vital role in emphasising and showcasing the technological character of videogames. Graphics that look 'sophisticated' and complex make a game appear more 'technologically advanced'. However, this complex visual style may not be accessible to all videogame makers. In 'The Queer Games Avant-Garde', Bo Ruberg presents videogame development as "becoming more 'diverse'" (2020, p. 3), even though, according to them, the industry also still seems to embrace the image of the 'white male developer' (Ruberg, 2020, p. 2). Independent games and DIY games provide ways of fighting the exclusivity of the gaming industry (Anthropy, 2012). However, independent game designers often lack the bigger budgets of large established studios and may create visuals that appear less high-tech.

Their lower levels of 'visual high-tech' may affect the acceptance of independent games in mainstream videogame culture. With its focus on technology, the mainstream visual style of many big-budget and casual games resembles Western narratives about European languages in the (post)colonial world. Technical-looking 'polished' and 'high-end' visuals speak a language that symbolises a seemingly advanced technological culture. The same colonial bias that sees Western cultures as superior to non-Western cultures may rank complex mainstream visuals higher than independent games' often low-tech styles. The videogames industry's monolingualism covertly urges independent designers to (re)consider their relationship with mainstream graphics and the impact of mainstream style graphics on videogame culture. This section explores this relationship by discussing mainstream and independent graphics, and potential possibilities of visual multilingualism in videogame graphics.

3.4.1 Independent Style

In 'Handmade Pixels', Jesper Juul (2019) coins the term 'Independent Style'. Although Juul establishes Independent Style as a category of its own, it seems to exist in relation to another, dominant visual style that I will refer to as 'mainstream style'. Juul based the concept of Independent Style on a decade of awarded graphics at the Independent Games Festival. Whereas early festival winners seemed to aim for smaller versions of big-budget games, the winners' graphical styles moved away from this 'mainstream identity' in the following years. The imagery in later games covered a wide variety of styles. Some games were visualised in 3D, others in 2D or an isometric perspective. Some used pixel-art style graphics, others mimicked analogue drawings or incorporated watercolour painting. Some games were colourful, others greyscale. These different styles have one thing in common: according to Juul, they tend[18] to look low-tech and handmade. Juul does not specify precisely what 'handmade' means. Still, he seems to relate 'handmade' to analogue media and older digital technologies, which are usually affordable and accessible to many developers. This conception of 'handmade' matches Anna Anthropy's (2012) notion of 'DIY games' where independent designers make visuals with their own 'hands'. Although DIY games involve computers, these handmade visuals do not require expensive technologies and can be created with the 'simple' tools many developers have 'at hand'.

3.4.2 Mainstream Style

Whereas Independent Style is or seems low-tech, mainstream style appears high-tech. Juul describes the graphics in big-budget and casual games as 'shiny', 'polished' and 'high-end' or as visuals with 'high-production value' (2019). Although Juul's terminology differs from Tavinor's 'artistic sophistication', the words signal similar, technological, 'developed' and 'expensive' imagery. According to Juul, Independent Style visuals "break with the common idea that video games are destined to move on a linear path toward *realism through technological progress*" (Juul, 2019, p. 38 - my italics). This 'common idea' refers to mainstream style images and their 'realistic', 'high-end' look. The previous chapter argued that realism became the style that seemed best fit to expose the technical complexity of videogame graphics and, consequently, the technological advancement of videogames. However, 'realism' is a problematic term in this context.

[18] I say tend, as Juul argues that, for instance, implementing a style that looks like a paper drawing in a game engine may be technically complex. As such, Independent Style is not necessarily low-tech but appears low-tech; it "…uses contemporary technology to emulate low-tech and usually cheap graphical materials and visual styles…" (Juul, 2019, p. 38). Juul argues that, at first, independent developers tried to recreate the high-tech imagery of bigger-budget games. However, over time, Independent Style became accepted on its own terms. Today, some developers make current-day technology emulate earlier visual styles to achieve a specific 'independent look'. Therefore, in some cases, Independent Style graphics appear low-tech while produced by state-of-the-art technology.

Mainstream game art classifies images into two main categories: realistic and stylised. According to game artist Kim Aava, "…realism refers to realistic graphics mimicking lifelikeness. It doesn't necessarily need to exist in the real world but be conveyed as if it would belong in our world" (Aava & Tokarev, 2017). Stylised images also relate to our world, yet "[w]ith stylized you are free to play with the shapes and colors, exaggerate or remove details to enhance the look and feel in any direction" (Aava & Tokarev, 2017). Taking as much freedom playing around with visual elements in realistic styled images would "break the illusion of reality" (Aava & Tokarev, 2017). Still, Aava suggests that realistic images, too, engage with stylisation because of what she calls 'enhanced realism':

> "What I mean with enhanced realism is that the colors, light, and atmosphere are more vibrant and has *[sic]* the perfect weather and lighting condition *[sic]* compared to what you would see in your everyday life in a similar environment. … Real life can be quite dull and boring to look at and a movie, photo or a game wouldn't sell very well if it didn't look inviting enough. So what we as artist *[sic]* mimic when it comes to a realistic graphic is typically an enhanced reality with the perfect scene, color, lighting, and atmosphere; in order to craft something that would appear to the player as though it belongs in our reality. … In conclusion, you could argue that realism is a stylisation in of itself *[sic]* and that nothing is truly realistic, but manufactured to appear realistic within today's technological limitations." (Aava & Tokarev, 2017)

Enhanced realism is a stylisation of reality that makes reality 'more pleasing' to the audience, and technology provides or limits the means to achieve this realism. Technological developments allow game engines[19] and hardware platforms such as personal computers and gaming consoles to render increasingly more detailed scenes with complex lighting and lifelike animations. These developments allow for increasingly more realistic imagery. However, stylised images, too, apply these new techniques. Stylised characters or environments may have exaggerated proportions or unusual colour themes; they, too, look increasingly more 'real' within the reality limits of their game worlds because of the same technological developments. Stylised images are also increasingly more detailed, extravagantly lit, and use 'polished' smooth animations. Based on the effects of their application of state-of-the-art technology, I argue that both realistic and stylised styles appear technological. Consequently, both types of mainstream style visuals set the norm of detailed, 'high-end', 'polished', and 'high-production value' images.

[19] As digital artefacts, videogames require code. Game engines streamline this layer of code by combining several technical systems in one framework. Among other things, a game engine organises how graphics are displayed in the game; it handles the game's physics (i.e. how objects collide), audio, and user input (i.e. how hardware such as mouse, keyboard, or joysticks control the game). Some videogaming companies make and use their own game engines. Many studios, however, use existing engines. The games discussed in this chapter run in *Unity* (Unity Technologies, 2005), a popular engine among independent developers.

3.4.3. Applications of Independent Style and mainstream style

As announced in the first paragraphs of this section, visual styles may impact the acceptance of non-mainstream games, particularly non-Western games. In the following paragraphs, I discuss how Global Majority game designers may apply Independent Style and mainstream style in various ways. I distinguish two main applications of Juul's Independent Style that I will call 'classic' and 'innovative'. Next to these varieties of Independent Style, I discuss the appropriation of mainstream style elements.

Classic Independent Style is characterized by 'classic' videogame graphics. An example is the application of pixel art. Influential early games such as *Pong* (*Atari,* 1972), *Pac-Man* (*Namco*, 1980), and *Super Mario Bros* (*Nintendo*, 1985) used pixel art, a visual style that uses pixels, tiny squares, as building blocks. Classic videogame graphics like these belong to the 'videogame tradition'. Juul categorises contemporary games that rely on earlier visual styles as Independent Style because they move away from mainstream imagery and its high-tech appearance. However, these now low-tech images were once technologically advanced. The initial wonder and admiration over their then-technological novelty contributed to their status as 'classic' styles today; in the early days of videogame development, pixel art was radically innovative. When Global Majority designers use such a classic style in a non-Western game, they place their game in the videogame tradition. In ways similar to colonised people appropriating the coloniser's language by speaking it perfectly, using formerly mainstream visual styles allows Global Majority designers to gain access to the dominant culture that otherwise excludes them.

Innovative Independent Style does not rely on classic videogame visual styles but creates new styles. An example is the -now classic, but back then novel- game *Braid* (*Number None,* 2008). Juul argues that *Braid's* graphics, like other Independent Style imagery, move away from mainstream style. *Braid* does this by introducing watercolour graphics, an existing 'low-tech' medium yet novel and innovative in the context of videogames. According to Juul, *Braid's* watercolour images suggest "a high culture usually absent in video games" (Juul, 2019, p. 14). In a similar way, Global Majority game makers who introduce other, existing art styles into videogame graphics may also introduce such 'absent cultures' in videogames. Innovative Independent Style allows Global Majority designers to claim space in videogame development by introducing new visual languages that represent non-Western or other cultures.

The third option, working in mainstream style, may not be accessible to everyone. The 'polished', 'high-end' and detailed look that characterises mainstream style often requires budgets outside the scope of individual designers and small independent teams. Furthermore, game designers who do not fit the ideal of the 'white, male engineer', are more frequently impacted by what Lindsey Grace (2021) calls 'technographic limitations'; limited "access to the technology, a fluency with it, a network of peers to support interest in it, reliable internet connections, the hardware to produce

digital games and a variety of other elements that many experienced game professionals take for granted" (p. 9). Because of technographic limitations, many independent and Global Majority designers do not have the option to choose mainstream style as a visual style. Juul (2019, p.53) presents East Asian/Asian American designer Robert Yang (Ruberg, 2020, p. 45) as an exception; as a solo developer, Yang frequently uses 'high-end' and detailed visuals. Juul describes *Rinse and Repeat* (Yang, 2015), one of Yang's games, as "the experimental game here most different from Independent Style, given its use of high-end visual effects and detailed human models" (Juul, 2019, p. 53). Yang solves the budget problem by reusing the same realistic-looking 'high-end' 3D character model in different games (Ruberg, 2020, p. 48). In an interview with Bo Ruberg (2020), Yang, known for games centred around male gay sex, says the following:

> "A lot of queer games follow punk aesthetics. They try to move away from polish. That makes sense, but I also want to start a second aesthetic front. Gay people should be expensive. Gay issues should be expensive. Gay politics should be rendered with high production value" (Ruberg, 2020, p. 50).

Yang talks about 'queer games' and 'punk aesthetics'. Like non-Western games, 'queer games' often do not fit mainstream norms. The 'punk aesthetic' that Yang refers to may emphasise the perceived 'otherness' of 'queer games'. This 'punk aesthetic' moves away from 'polish'; it distances itself from mainstream style, characterised by 'high-end' visuals. In contrast to this 'punk aesthetic', Yang advocates for a style that renders 'queer games' with 'high production value'. His detailed realistic 3D models do exactly that; by appropriating mainstream style imagery, Yang claims space for 'queer games' and 'gay issues' in the prime location of mainstream videogame development.

The various types of Independent Style and the appropriation of mainstream style offer Global Majority designers and other marginalised groups the possibility to reclaim space in videogame cultures that would otherwise exclude them.

3.5. Case Studies

In the previous section, I distinguished ways to reclaim space for non-Western culture in videogame development via three visual styles. In this section, I illustrate these styles with case study examples. I selected three videogames that, although created in the US, may be perceived as non-Western. I selected the games because of this potential non-Westernness, their variety in visual styles, and because the game's artists publicly explained their design choices in academic papers, online interviews, and recorded conference talks. I will use these artists' explanations to analyse the visuals in relation to the style types mentioned previously: a classic type of Independent Style, an appropriation of mainstream style, and an innovative type of Independent Style.

3.5.1 Classic Independent Style: Terra Nova

Maize Longboat created *Terra Nova* with a small team of three others. Longboat documented the game's design choices in his Media Studies master's thesis' Terra Nova: Enacting Videogame Development through Indigenous-Led Creation' (Longboat, 2019b). *Terra Nova's* pixel art graphics (see Figure 3) fit the characteristics of the classic type of Independent Style. By using pixel art, the graphics represent an earlier low-tech visual style. Pixel art may have looked novel and high-tech in the 1970s and 1980s, but today's computer graphics are usually much more detailed and complex than these blocky images with simple shading.

Longboat identifies as an Indigenous person of mixed ancestry (2019, p. 14) and wants *Terra Nova* to represent his Indigenous culture. In his thesis, Longboat discusses how he embedded Indigenous values and concepts in *Terra Nova's* narrative, interaction, and production context (2019, p. 15). Although Longboat also writes about imagery, he does not explicitly insert Indigenous values in the game's visual style. As the quote below shows, Longboat seems primarily concerned with the portrayal of Indigeneity in *content*, not *style*:

> "I did not want the art of Terra Nova to depict stereotypical Indigenous iconography. Videogames, especially those made by non-Indigenous production companies and studios, often rely heavily on trite representations from the film and television industry to signify Indigenous characters and presences within their narratives. Visual design for Terra Nova actively pushes back against the assumption that Indigenous characters in media must don feathers and buckskin to truly be Indigenous" (Longboat, 2019b, p. 30).

Longboat wants to refrain from stereotypical images and creates characters that represent fictional peoples without visual links to existing Indigenous peoples. With this approach, Longboat focuses on developing appropriate content. Pixel art supports this approach by offering a once-standard visual style. As a much-used visual style in the history of videogame graphics, pixel art looks familiar, and Longboat consciously applies it as a well-known style. He writes that pixel art "gives *Terra Nova* a classic, retro arcade style" (2019, pp. 28–29) and continues that "2D pixel art platformers are a longstanding and approachable genre due to their familiarity to a wide array of players with varying levels of experience with videogames" (Longboat, 2019b, p. 30). Pixel art does not make *Terra Nova's* visuals look particularly Indigenous. Instead, it makes the game appear basic and accepted; *Terra Nova's* visuals resemble many other games. Longboat's application of the classic type of Independent Style supports *Terra Nova* in two ways. It helps to prevent the imagery from being perceived as 'exotic', and it 'normalises' the game's non-Westernness. By using a well-known visual style firmly embedded in videogame history, Longboat appropriates what I have described above as the monolingualism of

the videogame industry and reclaims space for Indigenous games and Indigenous game designers in the videogame industry.

Figure 3: Screenshot of Terra Nova (Longboat, 2019).

3.5.2 Appropriating Mainstream Style: Never Alone

Two organisations and several individuals jointly created *Never Alone: Kisima Ingitchuna,* a videogame based on *Kunuuksaayuka*, an Iñupiat story. The actors involved were the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), a nonprofit organisation in service of Indigenous peoples in southcentral Alaska, the videogame company E-line Media, and several Alaskan Native storytellers and Elders. In a YouTube video, CICT executive vice president and chief financial officer Amy Fredeen comments on the initial concept art for *Never Alone* (see figures 4 and 5):

> "We had E-Line come up and visit again in Alaska to show some drawings around the concepts of the game, and they were beautiful, but they kind of looked like Disney. It didn't reflect us as a people". (CITC Alaska, 2016, 7:35-7:43 min.)

What Fredeen understands as 'beautiful' is difficult to infer from this quote. What is clear, however, is that the stylised graphics are polished, shiny and slick. With these characteristics, the images seem to fit the category of mainstream style. Because CITC did not feel represented by the initial concept art, E-Line Media contacted Dima Veryovka, an experienced game artist, to work on a new set of concepts as the game's art director (Roberts, 2015). Veryovka was interested in Inuit art, and Fredeen sounded pleased when she said, "he immediately started taking pictures of our traditional sculptures and using it to inspire what the character should look like" (CITC Alaska, 2016, 7:58-8:06).

Figure 4: Early concept for Never Alone (E-line Media, 2016, 7:39).

Figure 5: Early concept for Never Alone (E-line Media, 2016, 7:41).

Veryovka's new concepts (see Figure 6) resemble the first sketches in content but are very different in style. Both sets of images depict a young girl in an open landscape in the company of Alaskan animals. Veryovka's graphics are detailed and polished; however, unlike the first concepts,

they are not slick. The new visuals appear too much 'handcrafted' to qualify as slick. Although Veryovka does not explain 'handcrafted' in detail, the concept seems similar to Juul's notion of 'handmade' and Anthropy's 'DIY'. Handcrafted artworks imply pieces created with accessible tools, often in culturally traditional ways of working; in this sense, these artworks appear 'low-tech'. In a talk at the Game Developers Conference in 2015, Veryovka stated that this "handcrafting quality is what stands out in the art of the Iñupiat people" (GDC, 2017, 16:47). Veryovka worked closely with local Alaskan artists and analysed traditional Iñupiat art to achieve this handcrafting appearance in his concepts (GDC, 2017). He looked at colours, textures, and shapes for inspiration in style and at depictions and visual representations for inspiration in content.

Veryovka selected a dim and desaturated colour palette that heavily contrasts with the bright colours in the initial concept art. The new colours match the Alaskan plains in the thunderstorm of the *Kunuuksaayuka* story and form a perfect contrast to the bright green northern light that appears later in the game. This fluorescent light illuminates the screen in ways unimaginable in pigment-based traditional painting. However, much of the handcrafted quality of Veryovka's images is located in technology. It comes from the elaborate textures[20] with extravagant brushstrokes, the vignetting[21] in the corners of the screen and the low-poly[22] look in the 3D characters. As is typical for images in Independent Style, *Never Alone's* graphics emulate a sense of tradition by recalling earlier visual styles that appear low-tech and handmade compared to mainstream images today. The vignetting in the corners of the screen helps to draw the player's attention to the centre of the screen, assisted by dazzling snowflake particles. Besides this practical effect, the vignetting adds to a feeling of low-tech as it mimics old photographs with dark and fuzzy edges and the limitations of twentieth-century cameras. The various strands of fur on the girl's clothing look slightly different, and the tapered tips blend well with each other and the background. The fur looks low-tech in the sense that the 3D model under the fur texture has the typical blocky style of the low-poly 3D models in older games.

[20] Game artists apply textures to their 3D models to make the model look more lifelike or realistic. Without a texture layer, a 3D model looks plain. The texture layer wraps around the 3D object and adds details, colours and patterns. The textures define the visual representation of a real-life surface. Certain texture types determine the reflective qualities of the object; it defines how it reflects the light in the 3D scene. There are three primary methods to create textures for 3D models: artists can hand paint their textures, take pictures of existing materials and convert those to digital images, and they can procedurally generate textures using specific computer applications and algorithms.

[21] Vignetting happens in photography when lenses reduce the brightness of an image towards the corner of the picture. It causes dark edges that brighten towards the centre of the photograph. Vignetting often happens accidentally and is caused by lens limitations. However, photographers may also apply vignetting as an artistic effect.

[22] 'Low poly' refers to 3D models with limited numbers of polygons. Polygons are the basic flat surfaces that form the meshes of the 3D model. Early 3D models had low polygon numbers because back then, the hardware of specific platforms (personal computers or consoles) did not have the capacity for more elaborate models.

Never Alone's imagery fits the criteria of Independent Style. However, I argue that Veryovka primarily achieved this look by altering mainstream style elements. He built on the initial shiny and slick concept art yet added a handcrafted feel by modifying several technological elements in the game's graphics in a simultaneously low-tech and high-tech way. Although the graphics in *Never Alone* emulate earlier low-tech styles, this emulation looks polished and 'high-end'. The blocky, low-poly style of the models contrasts with the 'high-end' textures. The fur texture's transparency makes it look expensive. Early low-poly and pixel art games did not have transparent layers surrounded with lens flare and particles like *Never Alone's* graphics do; the low-tech and handcrafted elements are supported by and make the high-tech elements such as the particle effects and transparent textures stand out. The development of *Never Alone* was a joint project initiated by CITC. By involving E-line Media, CITC brought in videogame developers proficient in mainstream style. By working with E-line Media, CITC and the Alaskan Elders and storytellers appropriated mainstream style and used it to tell a non-Western story in an adapted mainstream language, that both reflects Iñupiat culture and is understandable for a wider audience of non-Iñupiat people.

Figure 6: Screenshot of Never Alone (Upper One Games, 2014a).

3.5.3 Innovative Independent Style: Thunderbird Strike

Indigenous game maker Elizabeth LaPensée designed *Thunderbird Strike* with a small team on a modest budget supported by an art grant (Thunderbird Strike, n.d.). *Thunderbird Strike's* website introduces the game with the subtitle 'A lightning searing sidescroller' (Thunderbird Strike, n.d.). Various videogame genres use side-scrolling[23] however, the framework was particularly influential in

[23] In side-scrolling games, the player interacts with the game level from a side view and the screen scrolls with them when they move to the right or the left. Usually, characters in side-scrollers move from left to right and the screen scrolls along with them. Thunderbird Strike reverses this direction, the thunderbird character flies to

classic platform games, such as *Super Mario Bros*. The format of the 2D sidescroller places *Thunderbird Strike* in the videogame tradition. Besides side-scrolling, the game's voiceovers also connect to older games. An online reviewer remarked that the voiceovers sound like *Mortal Kombat* (*Midway Games*, 1992), a popular fighting game in the 1990s (NLeseul, 2017, 12:46). Aside from these recognisable videogame characteristics, the game does not look familiar in terms of graphics. Whereas *Terra Nova* borrowed the classic style of pixel art and *Never Alone* appropriated mainstream style textures and particles, the origin of *Thunderbird Strike's* visuals lies outside the videogame graphics tradition (see Figure 1 and 7). LaPensée is Irish, Anishinaabe, and Métis, and her Anishinaabe background influences the game's imagery. *Thunderbird Strike's* graphics are collages of layered hand-drawn images in the traditional Anishinaabe Woodlands style and photographic textures (LaPensée, 2018, p. 29). In this context, 'hand-drawn' refers to 'handmade' digital drawings: images that are created manually with (accessible) digital tools without, most likely without automating the process with the help of computer programs. LaPensée took photographs of locations that played a role in the game's narrative and animated the Woodlands-style drawings manually. She describes the making of the graphics as a strenuous and meticulous process:

> "So, everything is drawn by hand. Thunderbird Strike, like some of my other work, is a pixel-by-pixel stop-motion animation at six frames per second. So when you see my work, it means I'm going '1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10'. It's very painstaking" (Games for Change, 2018, 3:01).

Thunderbird Strike's visuals are the innovative variant of Independent Style: they look handmade, low-tech and new. Unlike the images in *Never Alone*, *Thunderbird Strike's* visuals do not borrow familiar mainstream style elements or apply an existing classical style like *Terra Nova's* pixel art. *Thunderbird Strike* develops innovative new visuals combining a digitalised Woodlands art style and photographic textures. The photographic textures in the images do not have the signature of a pre-existing visual style. Instead, the textures seem untouched, 'raw footage' from the real world brought into the digital realm. The realism in the photographic textures contrasts with the imaginative, stylised appearance of the drawings. This contrast aligns with the narrative layer of the game, where the reality of oil pollution disrupts the reality of Indigenous culture.

> "Aesthetically, Thunderbird Strike uniquely brings Anishinaabe Woodlands-style art to stop-motion animations and side-scroller game design (fig.1). The levels represent the lands and waters of Turtle Island (North America) in the midst of the continuation and expansion of pipelines that intrude on Indigenous territories. The gameplay reflects

the left of the screen. LaPensée explains this choice from the Anishinaabeg worldview which envisions the Thunderbird's journey as “West to East”.

> the hope that lands, waters, and all life on the island thrive, despite damage by oil operations." (LaPensée, 2018, p. 29)

LaPensée refers to the game's art style as 'Anishinaabe Woodlands-style art'. However, LaPensée colours traditional Woodland style drawings with fluorescent digital paint and combines them with the technical appearance of photo-textures. She creates a new visual style that allows her to speak in a language representing the richness of her cultures. Like the graphics in *Terra Nova* and *Never Alone*, LaPensée's visual style challenges the earlier mentioned monolingualism of the videogame industry. However, where the other games appropriated familiar visual styles, *Thunderbird Strike* disrupts mainstream style dominance by ignoring it. LaPensée's visual style reclaims space by showing that the world is bigger than 'high-end' and polished images suggest.

Figure 7: Screenshot of Thunderbird Strike (LaPensée, 2017).

3.6. Conclusion

After establishing the approach of examining colonial values in videogames from the perspective of graphics in the first chapter, I focused on problematic uses of 'sophistication' and 'authentication' in Chapter 2. These two terms resurfaced in Chapter 3. 'Sophisticated' reappears disguised as the high-

tech mainstream style images often created by established studios in bigger-budget production. 'Authentic' returns in the shape of the low-tech videogame graphics frequently produced by independent game makers.

I compared the dominant visual style of high-tech mainstream imagery with dominant colonising languages and applied Jacques Derrida's notion of 'the monolingualism of the other' and argued that the videogames industry is monolingual in a similar way to the monolingualism of European colonisers. Like many European languages, mainstream style visuals dominate other visual styles. I applied Frantz Fanon's concept of the violation of colonial norms to reveal visual power relations in the videogames industry. I argued that many independent game makers, particularly game designers from marginalised groups face several technographic limitations, such as lacking the budgets to use the dominant mainstream style. These game makers may need to, and want to, look for other ways to make their non-mainstream visuals seen. Various visual styles allow these game makers to criticise the dominance of mainstream style and reclaim space for their marginalised positions in the videogaming industry.

I discussed three ways in which these game makers can reclaim space. Following Fanon, I argued that appropriating the dominant visual language violates colonial norms and, by doing so, disrupts and decolonises. Game makers who are excluded or ignored can violate the videogame industry's norms by utilising classic, former mainstream visuals, or appropriating current mainstream visuals. However, speaking (part of) the coloniser's language is not always the answer. As language shapes culture and vice versa, having the option to communicate in languages other than the dominant norm is vital to ensure more perspectives and cultures are heard. Therefore, the third option to reclaim space in the videogame industry for marginalised game makers is to introduce a new visual style that represents the cultures that the industry ignores.

Conclusion

This thesis explored coloniality in videogames via a visual lens and used concepts from decolonial literature to focus the research. I justified this visual perspective based on videogame anatomy: in many videogame definitions, 'video' is a core videogame element. Inspired by Sabine Harrer (2018) and Joshua Miner (2022), who apply other fundamental videogame aspects as a starting point for decolonial discussions of videogames, I departed from imagery. Examining potential coloniality through game graphics and other artworks provided a way to engage with the tacit and covert values and assumptions that often inform aesthetic evaluations. Although images can depict colonial practices literally, this visual approach explored the less obvious but still problematic concepts and ideas that reside below direct representation.

I presented colonialism as a loathsome ideology that relies on a make-believe dichotomy between 'superior' Western people and 'inferior' non-Western 'others'. The idea of Western superiority is openly contested today and generally seen as belonging to the past. However, colonialism is as much a problem of the present, and its problematic ideas are still very much alive in contemporary thinking. This thesis showed that the concept of Western superiority impacts various aesthetic evaluations, including general descriptions of videogame graphics. I argued that seemingly unproblematic adjectives such as 'authentic' and 'sophisticated' may signal underlying assumptions that link back to a colonial appreciation for modernity and Westernness. Several scholars in videogame aesthetics seem to use 'authentic' to emphasise otherness and 'sophisticated' to highlight modernness and Westernness. Based on their use of these labels and similarly problematic adjectives such as 'traditional', I claimed that the dichotomy between the 'superior West' and 'the inferior non-West' resurfaces in evaluations and descriptions of videogame graphics.

Based on the tension between Westernness and non-Westernness, I argued that dominant Western values impact videogame graphics and their visual styles. I applied two concepts from decolonial literature to illustrate this claim. I used Frantz Fanon's (2001) notion of 'violence' to demonstrate how lingering colonial ideas in the videogame industry exclude game makers who identify with groups in the Global Majority. According to Fanon, colonised people 'violate' colonial norms when they appear in spaces that mean to reject and ignore them. Global Majority game makers who bring openly non-Western perspectives and identities to the videogaming industry that some believe to be typically Western and technological, violate these norms in a similar way. From a Fanonian perspective, these presumably untechnical non-Western game makers are intruders in the Western technological realm of videogame development.

I used Jacques Derrida's (1998) concept of the 'monolingualism of the other' to expose problems and propose potential solutions. The 'monolingual other' is the colonising Westerner who shows no interest in (non-Western) languages other than their own and expects colonised peoples to forget their native languages and adapt to the vocabulary of the metropole. I applied Derrida's monolingualism to videogame graphics by claiming that 'mainstream style' images in big-budget and casual games follow a similar monolingual conviction. Like many European languages, mainstream style videogame graphics signal a 'superior' technological Western culture and dominate other visual styles that appear less technological.

Based on Jesper Juul's (2019) concept of 'Independent Style', I identified three possible methods for Global Majority game makers to evade the dominance of mainstream style. Global Majority game designers appropriate familiar mainstream visual styles to share non-Western stories when they apply a 'classic' Independent Style or utilise mainstream style elements. When they use an 'innovative' Independent Style, the designers share their stories by introducing a new visual style. All three approaches reclaim space for non-Western cultures in videogame development by stimulating multilingualism in visual styles and developing visual dialects and accents that better represent excluded non-Western cultures.

Based on the summary above, I argue that the visual approach of researching colonialism via videogame graphics combined with aesthetic and decolonial concepts is suitable for decolonial games research. Derrida's 'monolingualism' and Fanon's 'violence' provided constructive perspectives for identifying and discussing colonial bias in videogames and the aesthetic evaluation of videogames. The outcomes of my applications of their work in the videogame context may contribute to broader discussions of colonialism in virtual worlds and strategies for decolonising videogames. Furthermore, the enlightening perspective switches in Derrida's 'monolingualism' and Fanon's 'violence' may also apply to videogames and (de)colonialism. Aesthetic and decolonial concepts provide a means to look at coloniality in videogames; however, reversed, videogame graphics also offer a constructive perspective to examine aesthetic and decolonial thinking. Because of their unique configuration as technological and cultural objects, videogames and videogame graphics are illuminating lenses themselves.

However, to benefit from these perspectives in future research, I must also point out several limitations. The 'West' versus 'non-West' dichotomy that underlies the colonial context in this study necessitated many instances of insensitive and problematic language. Although I in no way intended to reproduce the coloniality responsible for the concept of the 'non-West', it seemed impossible to write about 'non-Westernness' without naming it exactly that. And while I tried to zoom out and escape colonial categories, my writing was certainly impacted by my 'Westernness'.

Furthermore, because of the thesis' limited scope, I did not include evaluations of videogame graphics from the perspective of players. The thesis discussed several labels that scholars use to describe videogame graphics, such as 'sophisticated', 'polished', and 'high-end'. This analysis was based on academic discussions only. For future research, I would recommend including more perspectives, for instance, by analysing remarks on visual style and videogame graphics in online reviews and message boards. It would be helpful to know if other actors use different labels and if these potentially different labels share any of the problems of the terminology in this thesis. Also, discussing these labels with various actor groups could contribute to researching and developing potential alternative labels and concepts that could substitute problematic terminology.

Finally, the range of colonial concepts could be extended. I employed Derrida's monolingualism and Fanon's violence as entry points to locate coloniality in games; however, decolonial studies have far more perspectives to offer. In Chapter 2, I claimed that 'authentic' as a replacement term for 'primitive' assists the hidden erasure of colonial concepts. This concept of 'erasure' in videogames and the potential impact of visual styles on the erasure of colonial practices and concepts would also make an interesting concept for further research.

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