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**GRADUATION PAPER**

**THE REPRESENTATION OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM  
IN AGE OF EMPIRES III**

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TRONG AGE OF EMPIRES III**

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## ABSTRACT

This graduation paper, containing six chapters, investigates the representation of European colonialism in Ensemble Studios' *Age of Empires III*. To begin with, it offers a summary of common narratives of European colonialism found in traditional media. These narratives later serve as a framework of issues to explore European colonialism in the game. For the purpose of analyzing the game's system in perpetuating common narratives about European colonialism, I adopted Chapman's (2016)'s framework, according to which the system of a video game consists of simulation, epistemology, space and narrative. The study's findings shed light on how Ensemble Studios' game presents a version of the historical era that makes its implementation within the game's system possible and appealing to their player base. While still keeping colonization as the main process of the game, through the careful selection of what to retain and what to avoid, *Age of Empires III* mitigates offensiveness when dealing with colonial atrocities done to Native Americans.

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## **KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS**

AOE III      Age of Empires III



# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

As this chapter provides a background for the study, it offers a brief history of strategy video games and a brief description of *Age of Empires III*, my particular focus. Such a background highlights the fact that this project comes from an interest in the face of colonialism in a postcolonial age, our contemporary world. From the background, a research problem is stated. I will delineate how the study approaches the problem and develops into chapters.

### **1.1. History of strategy video games and colonialism in a postcolonial age**

Nowadays, video games, especially games played on personal computer (PC) platform, is a very popular form of entertainment, especially among young people. Initially a research project conducted by scientists for the development of computing in the United States, video games have become a staple fragment of popular culture. They went into mainstream when a massive number of gaming consoles and other gaming platforms were introduced in the 1970s and 1980s. Video games, akin to other forms of entertainment such as films and books, can be split into many different genres. One of the most popular video game genres is strategy video games.

Strategy video games have their roots in classic strategy games. Strategy games are games requiring meticulous devising of strategic maneuver and decision thinking to triumph over opponents. Products of human civilizations from various parts of the world, they have developed over thousands of years. Most of them are wars and conflicts reenactments on a smaller scale, usually for recreational purposes. Notable traditional strategy games include Chess, Go and Xiangqi, all of which are still popular recreational sports as of the contemporary time. Take Chess as an example of how strategy games are structured and played. The game consists of miniaturized figures on a representative landscape resembling the battlefield, usually a tabletop, a board, a sheet of paper or other similar platforms. These figures represent personnels based on actual military rankings in an army, such as soldiers and commanders,

divided into two sides. Each unit has its own rule and pattern of movement which players have to closely abide, and one unit can eliminate another from the other side depending on who strikes first. The ultimate goal of the player is to take the King of the opposite player out of the game, via the means of depriving him of any move available, which is called 'checkmate'. Many other board games that utilize conflict reenactment on a small scale as their fundamental segment are products of the modern era. Examples are *Risk* (1957) and *Settlers of Catan* (1995). In the advent of technological explosion, strategy games have made it way to the digital realm, morphed into 'strategy video games'.

The first strategy video game ever invented is perhaps a Risk-like game called *Invasion* (1972), released for Magnavox Odyssey, the first commercial home video game console platform (Mehdi, 2013). In 1980, the first war game based on historical events, *Computer Bismarck*, was released (Mehdi, 2013). In the 1990s, game developers and specialists started creating terms for subgenres of strategy video games. Some of the most popular subgenres are 4X (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate) and RTS (Real-time strategy). Both of them generally deal with the issue of conquering all of the enemies present on a map and claim new territories, by managing resources and other gameplay elements in order to build up a sufficiently powerful force. Without doubt, they present forms of colonialism, roughly understood as the policy and practice of a power in extending control over weaker peoples or areas.

The genre '4X' was popularized by Sid Meier's *Civilization*, a game created by Sid Meier and Bruce Shelley for MicroProse in 1994. Actually, the term '4X' was coined two years after the release of the game by Emrich (1993), in his review for another 4X game 'Master of Orion'. Sid Meier's *Civilization* generally revolves around recreating a historical past, including exploring the world of the game, pillaging and plundering villages within enemy lands, using settlers to collect resources to build a colossal empire, maintaining diplomacy between allied factions, stabilizing social order and gather a large and formidable army to continue the process of territorial

expansion. 4X games developed following the success of Civilization include *Imperium Galactica* (1997), *Starship Unlimited* (2001), and *Empire: Total War* (2009).

4X games rely on turn-based mechanics while real-time strategy games (RTS) do not progress incrementally in turns. Bruce Geryk (2001, p. 4) described how RTS games worked in detail:

Early computer strategy games adhered firmly to the turn-based concepts of their board game ancestors, where--by necessity--players had time to plan their turns before their opponents had a chance to move. Real-time strategy changed all of that so that games would begin to more closely resemble reality: Time was limited, and if you wasted yours, your opponents would probably be taking advantage of theirs.

*Herzog Zwei*, a video game developed by Technosoft, first released in 1989 in Japan, is usually considered the first game that contain elements resembling the Real-time strategy genre. However, much like the 4X genre, at that time, the term 'real-time strategy game' had not been created yet. When *Dune II* was released by Westwood, Sperry (1992) coined the term 'Real-time Strategy Game', as part of the marketing campaign for the game. Numerous RTS came out in the 1990s, some of which were *Command & Conquer* (1995), *Age of Empires* (1997), *Starcraft* (1998), *Dune 2000* (1998), etc. RTS games gradually became more realistic in terms of gameplay, a term referring to the specific way in which players interact with a game. Due to technological advancement, players can have more interactions with their own units, resources on the map and structures. Advancements in both graphic and gameplay of RTS can be seen in *Cossack: European Wars* (2000) by GSC Game World, where 3D graphic was implemented, and players can create and control more than just several hundreds units at a time, up to 10000. With these improvements, players can recreate fictional or historical events more creatively. They can construct a majestic scene of battles and micromanage civilians and military forces of a large empire. The availability of the LAN Network and the Internet gave way to the introduction of multiplayer mode,

allowing human players to compete against each other, further consolidates the popularity of RTS games. Currently, more and more RTS games are being developed and released each year by various game developers all over the world.

In general, commercial strategy video games, coming into popularity since 1990s are intriguing to me because they raise questions about how colonialism is present in a post-colonial age and how technological affordances open up possibilities of presenting colonialism.

In actuality, the legacies and the continuation of colonialism, especially European colonialism, in the present day manifest in all forms of media. In movies, comics, musics and novels, we observe stories about great feats by European colonizers, the daring spirit of colonizers in exploring uncharted and dangerous lands, or the sufferings endured by the colonized from continents all over the world. The study of games, game studies or ludology, is just an emerging academic field throughout the last two decades. There have been quite a few debates on whether European colonialism-themed video games are the medium of perpetuating the historical past or not. Lammes (2010) commented that as those games are produced in (post) capitalist cultures, they have a strong fascination for the legacy of European colonialism. As it can be seen, players are invited to be conquerors who try to succeed in their conquest fantasy. Lammes (2010), however, argued that such games do not simply reproduce the past, but they allow players to manipulate and play with it, due to the fact that many elements in the game are rather fictitious or only loosely based on reality. Thus, “the ‘post’ in postcolonial registers neither a celebration of the end of colonialism nor the simple reproduction of the colonial in the present, but the mutated, impure and unsettling legacies of colonialism” (Nash 2002, p.225, cited in Lammes, 2010, p. 5). Also, Mukherjee (2017, p. 11) noted:

Just as in earlier narrative media such as novels, postcolonial readings are important for video games-- not least because they challenge the centrality and fixity of readings and offer a multiplicity of perspectives. Meaning, instead of being preserve of imperial ‘centres’, is in play

(Mukherjee, 2017, p. 11).

Unlike other forms of media, narratives of video games manifest in a more than the textual content. They also exhibit ideologies through the space and the gameplay of the games. As Jordan (2001) explained, a ludological research project would employ multiple ludological concepts such as gameplay, game spatiality, game mechanics, etc.

It is safe to say that game studies is new to Vietnamese scholars. While this situation definitely limits what I can access, I have decided to venture into the area, not only to satisfy my curiosity but also to attract attention to the issue of colonialism in contemporary landscape of media.

### **1.2. Age of Empires III**

To be specific, my humble venture is anchored by *Age of Empires III* (also known as *AOE III*), a real-time strategy game developed by Ensemble Studios and published by Microsoft Game Studios in 2005. I decide to focus on *Age of Empire III* to illustrate the issue of colonialism in a postcolonial age because the game is popular and it deals primarily with European colonialism. In other words, the game is a prominent representative of video games dealing with European colonialism. However, it should be carefully noted that my study does NOT aim at any generalizability. It is going to be a qualitative textual analysis. I believe that a popular game can generate good conversations since many people can relate to it.

*AOE III* is the third installment of the *Age of Empires* franchise. The game is set where *Age of Empires II* left off with the discovery of the New World and the first wave of European colonialism between the 1500s to the year 1850. *AOE III* follows in the style of the previous games of the series, with the player taking a European colony from a small settlement into a powerful empire.

### **1.3. Statement of research problem and scope of research**

The aim of this research is to analyze how European colonialism is treated in *AOEIII*. In other words, it addresses the question: In what ways does European colonialism is represented through *Age of Empires III*?

This study is limited to reading the design of the game in relation to narratives of European colonialism, the period between the 1500s to the year 1850. The experience of the player base of this game will not be taken into consideration. I acknowledge that such a limitation does not help us see how meanings are personally negotiated, a very interesting dimension of postcolonial readings of strategy video games. However, this limitation is necessary to make this study feasible. I believe that a description of issues in how the design of the game portrays European colonialism would serve as a basis for further studies in personal negotiations of meaning.

A focus on how the game manifests European colonialism does not mean that the game simply reproduces European colonialism as European colonialism has always been. There have been multiple versions of European colonialism. Developed in a postcolonial age, the game reflects as well as constitutes a part of the age, as Murakami's famous quote goes: "Stories change form freely as they inhale the air of each new age." While this study attends to the social context of the game, it does not make this context a research problem.

#### **1.4. Research approach and design**

##### **1.4.1. Mode of inquiry**

This is a humanities oriented research in the sense that it does not rely on conformity to an established procedure of steps. It is done through extensive reading and synthesis of information. Thus, the themes emerging in this thesis results from my specific reading rather than objective coding of information. The point is how my writing allows understanding about the research problem. The findings of the study are a group of arguments that should be seen in terms of its persuasiveness.

##### **1.4.2. Theoretical perspective**

This study adopts a poststructuralist perspective. I examine the game as it is presented to me as a form of text. This study does not address how the authors of the game think about European colonialism. It does not assume that it is the authors of the game that determine its meanings, though the game has

been certainly created with purposes. From a poststructuralist perspective, the game makes sense in existing networks of meanings and forms. For example, European colonialism in the game makes sense in relation to existing narratives of European colonialism. Therefore, Chapter 2 offers an overview of these narratives. As well, European colonialism in the game makes sense in relation to how a strategy video game is structured, and hence Chapter 3 attempts to describe elements of a strategy video game.

### **1.4.3. Theoretical frameworks**

To analyze European colonialism in the game, the study specifically resorts to two theoretical frameworks, which will be respectively presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

In Chapter 2, I will present common narratives of European colonialism in traditional media, which will serve as the themes that guide my analysis of European colonialism in *AOE III*.

In Chapter 3, due of the fact that this study concentrates on the representation of European colonialism in strategy video games, I will utilize the theoretical framework of Chapman (2016). He established this framework to analyze historical video games, consisting of simulation and epistemology, space and narrative within the system of a game. By adopting the framework of Chapman (2016), I adhere to his systematic exploration of the historical narratives in strategy video games and fundamental concepts in this game genre from which ideologies can manifest, as well as the game elements within the game systems of strategy video games with European colonialism as the theme. The binary characteristic of video games will also be taken into consideration, to explore the binary between the fictional world of video games and historical issues.

### **1.5. Significance of the study**

I believe that this study is significant due to its research problem. Definitely, it explores issues that pertain to how we recreate the history in the form of entertainment, hence have practical implications for our everyday exposure to the entertainment industry. Furthermore, this study provides a

reading of *AOE III* that has not existed in the field of game studies.

## **1.6. Preview of chapters**

This research on the manifestation of European colonialism in *AOE III* (Age of Empires III) contains six chapters. The first chapter introduces this research, offering a brief history of strategy video games and a brief description of *AOE III*, defining the research problem and its scope, and outlining how the study approaches the problem and develops into chapters. The second chapter will recount the history of European colonialism and common narratives of the historical era in order to create a background for the primary topic of this study. The third chapter will be an overview of elements in the system of a historical strategy video game, including simulation style, epistemology, time, space, and narrative. The fourth chapter will analyze the simulation style, epistemology, time, space, and narrative of *AOE III*. The fifth chapter is the discussion of the representation of European colonial era in *AOE III* through these elements. The last chapter summarizes what have been explored in the thesis and outlines the limitations of the study.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **COMMON NARRATIVES OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM**

This chapter will give a brief introduction of European colonialism, the primary theme in *AOE III*, as well as common narratives which are associated with the era in order to form a theoretical framework for the analysis of the representation of European colonial era in *AOE III*. The version of European colonialism history featured in this chapter is generally accepted among historians worldwide, as such it is classified as common knowledge. Due to the fact that *AOE III* features European colonialism during the period from the 15th century to the 19th century - the initial wave of European colonialism, only events related to this era will be mentioned. Other European colonialism historical issues such as the Scramble of Africa occurred after the first wave will not be included.

In addition, this chapter will analyze the shift in the general perception of European colonialism during the course of the 20th century, and orientalism, the way which the culture of the East, especially that of India, is represented. Video games are products invented after the change in common narratives about European colonialism, so understanding this view will draw a better picture of how European colonialism is depicted in the popular culture, thus providing a basis to explain the narrative about European colonial era in *AOE III*.

#### **2.1. Definition and a brief history of European colonialism**

European colonialism in general can be understood as the policy or practice of acquiring total or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers and armed forces, and economically exploiting it, carried out by European powers. It is generally accepted that European colonialism began after Christopher Columbus discovered the continent of America in 1492 while searching for naval trade routes to India. After that, European colonists started to send armies and settlers to conquer, occupy and exploit other continents, established numerous trade routes and competed for

global colonial hegemony. The Spanish and the Portuguese were the pioneer of this colonial era in the continent of America, Africa and India, while the British emerged superior later in the 18th century. European colonialism declined following the end of the 19th century, and decolonization took place after the Second World War. The time from the late 15th century to the 19th century is known as the first wave of European colonialism, to differentiate it from the latter wave, dubbed by historians as “New Imperialism”. In this era, European colonists focused on the colonization of the continent of America, although countries surrounding the Indian Ocean such as India and Malaysian archipelago also suffered severely from European colonialism.

Previously, numerous colonial quests had been done by various civilizations, such as the Roman conquest of Mediterranean and the Mongol conquest in the 13th century. What distinguished European colonialism from preceding “colonialisms” was the more complex method of colonies exploitation and domination, along with the much larger scale of global presence. As such, European colonialism is an occasionally talked topic among historians. The policy conducted by European colonists, as agreed by most historians, is distributed into a set of stages: Discovering new lands, contacting with native tribes or existing civilization, coercing them to conform to their rules, economically exploiting them, and competing with other colonists for power.

## **2. 2. Stages of colonization by European colonists**

This section discusses about stages of colonization occurred whenever a colonist found a new land with existing tribes, dynasties, or empires. A typical empire building games usually allows players to start small and grow much more potent as the game progresses. Historical real-time strategy games often divide the progress of the game into different stages based on actual historical eras. In *AOE III*, these stages are known as “ages”. Each age is an in-game equivalence of actual stage in European colonial history. Therefore, this analysis is important in establishing a pattern of European colonialism re-imagined within the mechanics of the game.

**Initial stage of European colonialism** During the early years of European colonialism, discovery and exploration for a new trade route, rather than establishing global hegemony was the emphasis of European powers. This is often retroactively referred to as “the age of sail”. Trading posts and trading harbors were built as the center of trading European goods with native luxuries such as coffee, black pepper and gold. Most colonial factions did not seek hostilities from the natives, they utilized skillful diplomacy to invite the natives to cooperate with them for raw precious materials and continental exploration. Early period of European colonialism also featured settler colonialism in the America continents. Settlers here can be understood as people who are immigrants coming from the Old World, Europe, to a new continent in order to establish a new life and to escape religious persecution. In most occasions, they also migrated with military assistance from homeland authorities to colonize and claim new territories for their homeland. Settlers established colonies in a tranquil manner, rather than with violent strifes, unlike previous forms of colonialism that involved massive armed forces plundering and enslaving the invaded nation right at the first encounter. Unlike other forms of colonialism which only aimed for power, human and natural resources, settlers additionally sought religious freedom, survivability and land to build settlements. They would usually receive warm welcome and support from the native inhabitants, who have the knowledge of the land they dwelled. This was usually the early part of colonizing a new land, as colonial powers generally upheld the sovereignty of indigenous tribes to gain their alliances during wars with other colonial powers (Wolfe, 2006). After continuous occupation, the new population would eventually create a new society which would oppress and replace the society of the native population, usually ended in the total displacement, or worse, the elimination of the indigenous people.

**Exploitation of colonized territories** Similar to previous territorial expansions committed by various empires, European colonists extensively exploited raw materials and human labors from colonies. Massive amount of precious materials, such as gold, silver, coal and exotic plants native to colonies such as coffee, pepper, sugarcane were mined and brought back to the home countries of colonizers, so as to fund wars and economic build up. There was an improvement in the complexity of harnessing the economical potential of colonized nations compared to previous attempts of exploitation, however. Before the Industrial Revolution, European colonists had a penchant to raise countless plantations to grow tobacco, sugarcane and coffee for profits, due to the high demand of exotic ingredients by European aristocrats. Cheap labor from native Americans and slaves imported from Africa were utilized in order to maximize the profit margin from mining and agriculture.

After the Industrial Revolution began, cotton, rubber, flax and other native plants of which harvests were useful raw material to emerging industries. Therefore, the restructuring and exploitation process became much more intense than before. An example of the unfair method of resources extraction was the British's rule in India from the 18th century to the 19th century. Rather than simply draining resources out of the native lands, British colonists built and improved the native economic infrastructure, incorporating their cultures and languages, while simultaneously exploiting the cotton production capability of India. Wages for Indians were low as those of native Americans employed in tobacco plantation in America.

**Colonial rivalry** During the first wave of European colonialism, competition between colonists were common. Due to the increasing global influence of European powers of that time, and the value that colonies brought to their homeland, the possession of multiple colonies became more valuable than ever before. Most war sparkled from the dispute of territorial possession, trade routes or economical privilege over another non-Europe countries in the case of India. For example by the end of the 16th century France, England and Netherlands made an alliance to compete with pioneers of colonization, Spain and Portugal, for colonial supremacy and control of maritime routes..

The most remembered instance of two large colonial powers put up a contention between each other was the British and the French. The influence of the Spanish diminished following the destruction of its Armada on the way to Britain in 1588, creating opportunities for other European powers, notably Britain and France, to establish their maritime dominance. In the 17th century, the British and the French found themselves collide with each other, as they started competing for territorial claims in the New World - the continent of America and trade routes. The Seven Years War was the culmination of the conflict between the British and the French, as this involved various other European colonial powers led by either side. The war was on a global scale, occurring throughout Europe and colonized territories. In the end, Britain came out victorious, paving the way for their global hegemony. The time of colonial rivalry also saw numerous colonies in America revolted, seceding themselves from the motherland. Notable examples were the secession of the United States and Mexico from the British and the Spanish, respectively.

### **2.3. Different systems of thought before and after decolonization**

The narrative of European colonialism in contemporary works of various media is mostly bound to a common narrative, which generally portrays the colonists as power-hungry, ruthless and resource-driven

expansionists. In the other hand, the colonized, while the colonized such as the native American tribes and Indians are depicted in a rather favorable light. They are peaceful, wise, spiritual, courageous and protective of their lands in the time of need. European colonialism has not always been perceived this way, however. An exploration of how the perspective of European colonialism morphed from the colonial era to the present day would serve as the basis of analyzing the representation of Native American and Indian during their time under European incursion in AOE III.

**The decline of European colonialism** European colonialism slowly ceased during the course the 20th century, when a process of forfeiting control over colonized territories initiated by the newly formed United Nations, called decolonization, took place after the Second World War. The extensive damage sustained by European powers after decades of global conflicts have weakened their grips of colonized territories. As such, various nations declared independence, or were given back sovereignty, as European global hegemony slowly ceased to exist, emancipating themselves from shackles and servitude. Civil wars and proxy wars ensued, however, as political and religious dispute among political factions and religions, particularly between nations allied with the Western hemisphere and the Soviet-aligned countries. Nonetheless, the ending of European colonialism was celebrated by most people worldwide, as the era of unfair exploitation and global conquest by European despots had come to an epilogue.

**Colonialism as part of nationalism** During the height of European colonial era, colonialism is directly tied to nationalism (Eagleton, Jameson, Said, 1990). Militaristic accomplishments and wealth acquisition in colonies were often hailed as heroic deeds for the pride of the nation. Treasures, loots, and exotic materials plundered from colonized territories were displayed in the hall of colonial museums, built to commemorate the achievement of valorous conquests and trophies collected through wars with native inhabitants of invaded lands (Sauvage, 2007). Pre-decolonization literature works also glorified colonialism as a noble mission to civilize savages around the world or

the glorious imperialistic triumph of a nation against the whole world. Young men, inspired by such romantic depictions of colonial deeds, would eagerly join the colonial forces to explore the globe and to escape the tedious life of their homeland. This was escalated during the New Imperial age following the first wave of European colonialism. Poems such as *White Man's Burden* (1899) by Rudyard Kipling considered the whole colonial process as the moral obligation of White people to deliver social and economic progress to non-white people around the globe. This poetic work was used by the United States to justify their imperialistic incursion of Philippines during the American - Spanish war.

An illustration of cinematic representation of heroic European colonists is the British-produced movie *Sander of the Rivers* (1935). Set in British Nigeria, the film portrayed British colonists as daring adventurers against the savagery of African tribes. *The Drum* (1938), set in British Raj, represented Indian rebels as savage thuggees who kept severed heads as trophies. In this movie, British colonists were seen as righteous allies of an Indian prince who helped him in quelling the rebellion. The film sparked protests by the Hindu and Muslim community in Bombay when it was released. Books for children were no exception, as *an ABC for Baby Patriots* (1899), an alphabet guide for young Britons, whom the book referred to as young patriots taught the English alphabet system in a rather unsettling manner. To illustrate, some of the contents within the book were as follow: A is the Army, B is for Battles, and C is for Colonies.

**Reframing the Western narrative of European colonialism** When the process of decolonization took place following the Second World War, various colonized nations gained independence, and minorities from former colonies living in the Commonwealth countries started to demand for social recognition. The United States of America issued numerous laws regarding to the protection and the integration of the Native American. The common narrative about European colonialism also began to reconfigure itself in a progressive manner. The post-colonial interpretation of the colonial past was filled with criticism of atrocities and the unfair treatment of indigenous people by European colonists.

One notable example of the change in the perspective about past colonial doings was within the gallery of British Museum, constructed before the peak of the British Empire. It was the place where countless artifacts plundered from conquered indigenous tribes in America, India and other colonies were shown on exhibition. The museum became a popular tourist attraction for its highlight of spectacular trophies including sacred object, mummified human remains and exotic artifacts. After colonization is over, the museum is modified into the exhibition of criticizing colonial past, as an act of atonement.

Post-World War II saw a significant development in literary and cinematic entertainment world with regard to the portrayal of the colonizers and the colonized. The process of decolonization and growing anti-imperialist sentiment among Westerners significantly contributed to the change in the perspective of the colonizers and the colonized. In particular, the view of the colonized shifted considerably, from being barbaric and violent toward European settlers, to being benevolent groups of people struggling for freedom and independence. Take the movie *Dance with the Wolves* (1990) as an example. Indigenous Americans were portrayed in a positive light, while soldiers of the United States Army were nothing more than brutal oppressors. One scene in the movie portrayed Native Americans ambushing soldiers from the United States Army and came out victorious without any casualties, a step away from the stereotype of Native Indians charging in a bulk and getting mowed down by thousands musket shots. The novel *Raj quartet* (1965) highlighted the anti-imperialist movement which prompted the exit of the British in India. *The New York Times* praised it as the hallmark in postcolonial literature .

## CHAPTER 3

### COLONIALISM AS NARRATIVE OF STRATEGY VIDEO GAMES

Because of the fact that this study is chiefly concerned with the representation of European colonialism in strategy video games, this chapter will discuss the common narratives of the contemporary era in the system of a strategy video games. Specifically, it will analyze the narrative of strategy video games and fundamental concepts in this game genre from which ideologies can manifest, as well as the game elements within the game systems of strategy video games with European colonialism as the theme. The artificial characteristic of video games will also be taken into consideration, to explore the binary between the fictional world of video games and historical issues.

#### 3.1. Narratives in video games

According to Zimmerman (2004, p.162), akin to other established narrative forms such as movies, novels and arts, video games can also “represent narrative meanings, or signify through material and text, sound and image, representations of movement and space”. While it is not necessary that every game has to be packed with a storyline or historical background (Jenkin, 2005) such as simple sport simulations solely intended for graphical entertaining purposes like FIFA, Tetris or Spacewar!, storylines are indispensable fragments of every modern game, especially video games whose purpose is to allow players to act as a certain historical or fictional figures, such as a 18th century general in Cossacks series or a SWAT commando in Crossfire. Storylines also occasionally serve as a narratorial explanation of how and what players are doing in the games. This is comparable to reading a novel except the player has the chance to reenact the plot in a simulation created by computing technology. Storytelling narrative elements of a game also tap into the emotion of the player the same way a dramatic movie or a novel does, making the game more compelling to play.



Besides narratives represented by visual cues, as “explicitly interactive narrative systems of formal play” (Zimmerman, 2004, p.162), video games have another kind of narrative, to which Zimmerman (2004) referred as “game-story”. This form of narrative gradually unfolds as the player participates with the game system, explores its structure, recognizes and solves its pattern. Therefore, narrative in game can be understood as capable of manifesting from any action of players in the game as they interact with it. In other words, narrative is something that can be generated by most elements of the game, from objectives to the interaction with objects within the game spatiality, and it can be either intentional or not. The interaction of the player with the game is subject to rules established by the game system, therefore game-story narrative is only meaningful within the framework of the game.

Zimmerman (2004) took *Ms. Pac-man* (Midway Manufacturing, 1982) as an example to demonstrate game-story narrative format. The gameplay of this game is simple. The player takes control of the titular *Ms. Pac-Man* to consume every pellet on the screen and cleverly outwits the pursuing ghosts. While there is a backstory about how *Ms. Pac-Man* meets the iconic Pac-Man himself, the underlying narrative is radically different. Zimmerman (2004, p. 162) described the game-story of *Ms.Pac-Man* as “a narrative about life and death, about the consumption of power”. “Every character on the screen, every munchable dot and empty corridor, are meaningful parts of a larger system” (p. 163), he added. As the player becomes part of the story represented in the game, more and more storylines, or content generations in this case will occur spontaneously (Mahlmann, 2013). The interaction with the game spatiality and the gameplay of that game will make it impossible to avoid confronting the ideology that is manifesting through it. Players will either consciously or unconsciously generate contents that may be related to real life ideologies as well as re-enacting real life practices within a video game, which is seemingly solely designed for the purpose of entertainment. Most video games have an underlying element of conflict for power, according to Zimmerman himself, whether it is a single-player computer game, such as Minesweeper which relies on luck, or multiplayer video games involving one human player with an AI or

other human players. “Power” in video games can be represented as the triumph over all opponents, the completion of a stage, or the achievement of the highest scores ever recorded.

### **3.2. Playing as European colonist in strategy video games**

According to the framework of Chapman (2016) in his *Digital Games as History: How Video Games Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, in order to analyze historical digital games, the following elements of video games have to be considered: simulation and epistemology, time, space, narrative and affordance. Due to the nature of *AOE III*, only simulation and epistemology, space and narrative will be considered.

The space of the game can also be referred to as the game spatiality. The game spatiality is the product of the interaction between the player and the environment of the game itself (Garde, 2016). “Game mechanics” or “gameplay” of video games are features within the spatiality of video games, which are essential elements for the players to interact with, changing the space of the game to their will, or to the intended purposes by the game developers (Mahlmann, 2013). Simulation and epistemology is the way that the historical elements is represented through the visual and textual content of the game (Chapman, 2016). Analyzing the game systems is essential to explore the representation of European colonialism in strategy video games.

#### **3.2.1. Colonist gameplay of strategy video games**

First and foremost, I will introduce the concept of gameplay in a strategy video games. The gameplay occurs when the interaction between the player and the game takes place, such as issuing orders for a character, or in the language of strategy video games, a unit to move, attack, harvest, or to kill that unit prematurely (Aarseth, 2013). Gameplay has a pivotal role in enabling the player to reenact battles, economic activities, expanding geographical control over the environment and change the game spatiality. Players in a strategy video games can be referred to as the commander, the general or the colonist. The task of the player is to manipulate the game spatiality through the

gameplay of strategic planning and tactical maneuver in order to become victorious (Rolling, Adams, 2003). In most empire-building games, the player usually starts with a small ownership of land and several civilian units, then slowly grows in strength in time through resources exploitation, units generation and military presence.

### **3.2.2. Rules in strategy video games**

Games have rules which players have to conform to when engaging within the environment of a game. Zimmerman (2004, p.160) asserted that “playing a game is a voluntary interactive activity, in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behavior, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome”. The rule of a video games provide a solid structure which confines the players’ behaviors. Players can only arrange existing elements, rather than being able to freely produce anything (Chapman, 2016). Strategy video games are no exception. For example, the player can only create a fixed set of units and have a fixed set of technologies enhancing the economic and militaristic progress based on the faction that player chose. A unit has pre-determined statistics such as the amount of damage it can sustain and deal. A game of this genre can only take place in a limited space, usually a squared map with blackness beyond the boundary lines where no unit can pass. The flaw of being bound to the set of rules can be seen in the case of *Age of Empires II* (1998). When the player plays as a Native American faction (Aztec, Inca, Mayan), he or she still needs to cling to the logic of colonialism, such as gathering resources (food, wood, stone, gold). While the first three seems logical, the idea of Indigenous Americans value gold as a form of currency is counterfactual.

### **3.2.3. Game spatiality as colonies in strategy video game**

Lastly, and most importantly, I will discuss the game spatiality of a strategy video game. Game spatiality in general is “produced by the player’s interaction with the possibilities of space offered by the game and the space of possibilities considered by the designers as well as by the players.” (Garde,

2016, p.2). By giving inputs through interactive devices connected to the screen, players subject themselves in the virtual space of a game, where they make decisions to accomplish objectives given by game designers or to create the environments in accordance to their needs. The space here can be either 2D or 3D. For example, the game spatiality of a First Person shooter game such as *Cross Fire* would have a limited space in the form of a virtual 3D environment. Another instance is the square surface with top-down perspective as seen in most Multiplayer Online Battle and similar strategy video games such as *League of Legends* or *Dota*, in an environment of hybrid characteristics of 2D and 3D. Game spatiality in strategy video games is generally divided into two elements: objectives and maps.

Game objective is an aspect within the spatiality of the video game, as defined by Mahlmann (2013). In a strategy video games, objectives are also a staple part of the genre. Unlike many other video games, such as *Tetris* and *Lines 98* which do not have a clear objective and players just keep playing until they lose and achieve the highest score compared to previous attempts, strategy video games have clear conditions which have to be met in order to archive the ultimate victory. Failing to accomplish objectives given by the game usually synonyms with defeat. Games dealing with historical past will inevitably offer the player objectives related to the acquisition of geographical space, just like European powers did in history (Mukherjee, 2017). He took *Europe: Total War* (Russell, The Creative Assembly, 2009) to illustrate the geopolitic of spatial domination. One victory condition in this game demands the players to take control of 23 regions including real-life former British colonies such as Hindustan, Florida, New France, etc. In *Colonial Conquest* (Cermak, Strategic Simulation, 1985), the player is offered 130 regions to be captured for the homeland, and in order to fuel the ongoing war, the player has to exploit as much resources as possible while maintaining superiority in military power so as to compete with other factions. In the *El Dorado* expansion pack of *Europa Universalis IV* (Andersson, Paradox Development Studio 2013), the player, as a Spanish conquistador, is asked to conquer the entire landscape of the

mythical city of El Dorado located in the continent of America. *Sid Meier's Colonization* (Meier, MicroProse, 1994) allows the player to govern the colony the same way a colonial authority did in the past, by expanding the colony, extracting raw resources with the help of Native Americans, whom the game only saw as a tool (Mir, Owens, 2013). Speaking of geopolitical discourses in Real-time Strategy games, Nohr (2010, cited in Mukherjee, 2017) established a clear connection between these games and classical geopolitics from the 1920s to the 60s. He considered that 'expansion as an act, however, does not only aim at space as the moment of politics, but can also be financed by or out of space'. Conflicts within the space of the game, according to Nohr, can also be seen as the war for resources to remedy scarcity. This is represented in most strategy video games in the way resources on the map are allocated. Only a limited amount of various resources is placed in proximity with the initial base of the player. Should the player craves for more raw materials, he or she has to utilize the limited resources in the early game so as to create an army. The army will assist the player in extending further beyond the map. The place where most resources lie are usually near the center of the map, where players in that game will take part in a contention for the raw materials. Who manages to control the vast amount of material will consequently generate an even larger army. The conflict for resources and lands is a recurring theme in the common narratives about European colonialism in the popular culture.

In some scenarios, it is not necessary about the total annihilation of the opposing forces in order to achieve victory. For instance, in *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios, 1997), a civilization may opt to build a large building called Wonder, as the symbol of cultural superiority. After holding the structure for a certain amount of time set by the rules of the game, the player may achieve victory without engaging in simulated military conflicts. It can be seen that objectives in game can be diverse, ranging from building diplomatic relations, to establishing military and economic ties with other factions presenting in the game, to tracking down and assassinating a specific figures, usually the leader of another faction, and to sabotaging an enemy structure in

order to destabilize their economy or their military might.

Another feature of game spatiality of video games is the map. Geographical map in historical strategy video games can either be default maps modelled after actual territories in real life by the game developers or custom-made by the players should the game permits. Other objects in the map, such as trees, gold deposits or animals are realistically represented in accordance with the region the map is modeled after. For example, the single-scenario map based on Yucatan in *Age of Empires II* (1998), contains Tapir - an animal from the New World which used to be hunted extensively for food, along with tropical trees. In the left or right corner depending on the option of the player, there is a minimap, which is basically a miniaturized map of the game space. It tells how much land players have explored, and portion of lands colonized and put under their control are in brighter color. It can also serve as an early warning mechanics, which players can utilize to spot incoming enemies. In order to have more space of the map, and the minimap, a scouting unit is sent to uncover the initial darkness of the map. The minimap is basically the representation of colonial cartography where players, acting as colonizers, plan where to conquer next, and to observe how much of the territory is under their control (Lammes, 2010). For example, in *Cossacks: European Wars* (2001) or the *Heroes of Might and Magic* franchise (1995-2005), players usually begin with a map with vast undiscovered areas, and they have to move their units in order to explore the map. Usually in the beginning, the relation of the player and the game spatiality is akin to that of an explorer and an uncharted area in the world. The rate of map revelation to the top-down perspective players is usually depending on the line-of-sight and the speed of the unit they send to gather intelligence. Players may risk losing those units since ambushes or other hazards may ominously surface at times. The map is usually limited, there are lines where units cannot go across, all areas within those lines are where the game takes place. Also, many kinds of terrains and water bring impactful meaning, gearing players toward making decision on how to properly place their buildings and to navigate the army through rough terrains in order to

reach the enemy bases.

Historical strategy video games are different from other “colonist” games in that they do incorporate historical elements, so while other video games with conquering objectives are not necessarily the intended representation of colonialism, historical strategy video games are obviously the continued relevance of imperialistic policies in modern popular culture (Mukherjee, 2017). However, Mukherjee also asserted that, for the entertainment purpose, which is the inherent characteristic of video games, European colonialism is to be mutated into a deviation from factual history recognized by historians.

### **3.3. The binary property of the simulation style and epistemology of European colonialism in strategy video games**

Simulation style of historical video games in general can be broken down into two categories and epistemological approaches: Realist simulation, which is the reconstructionist approach to history, and conceptual simulation, which is the deconstructionist approach to history (Chapman, 2016). Owing to the fact that *AOE III* is classified as conceptual simulation, using a heavily deconstructed version of history as the narratorial and ludological foundation, this section will only look at how history is deconstructed in historical strategy video games.

Due to the fact that historical context in strategy video games is often drawn upon the contemporary perception of historical issues and gaming convenience, the characteristic of being binary in strategy video games is seemingly unavoidable. This form of deconstructionist history is rather common among commercial video game developers. Video games with deconstructionist history may still conform to the primary and iconic elements of historical issues in the related era, but the omission of controversial content and real-life elements which may impede the pleasure of the game is usually taken with great consideration by game developers. Video games are not exclusively focused on representation since the representation is always serving the primary purpose of gameplay (Borries, Waltz, Boltger, 2007). While in

early video games of the 1980s only took history as a narratorial rather than ludological aspect, later game has sufficient complexity to do so, although implementing which historical elements into the system of the game is rather problematic. In the process of designing a historical game, designers have to choose what elements are sufficiently appropriate to be applied in the fictionalized world of the game in accordance with common contemporary historical view and the feasibility in-game (Juul, J, 2011). The recreation of history in the popular culture, though obviously referential, is still a fictive construct, generated in part by formal and ideological pressures, along with subjective ethical and aesthetic choices (Munslow, 2007, cited in Chapman, 2016). Crogan (2003, p. 282) stated that “historic video games are played in and with a reconstruction of historic temporality drawn from the narrative modes of more traditional media such as historic discourse, historical archives, war films and documentaries”. The interactive and abstract nature of historic video games play can then be used as a site for a wide “range of interrogations” (Uricchio, 2005, p. 330). That being said, common perspectives of the past, even meticulously written academic forms of history, are still susceptible to limitations, concerns, and social pressures put on the content writers themselves (Chapman, 2016). This signifies the importance of content analysis in video games, as commercial game developers usually allow players to engage with the past within the acceptable range drawn by the contemporary perception of that past. Game designers generally prefer a styled approach of real-life activities, rather than an authentic one (Juul, 2011) in order to create a more meaningful game environment. Game designers can be seen as unconventional historians who share the same perspective of history with the popular audience (Chapman, 2016). This is the reason that causes video games to be limited to the cultural reflection of the history, rather than the actual reenactment of the history itself.

Referring back to chapter 2, European colonialism in historical video games are unequivocally influenced by the contemporary common perspectives of colonial issues from the bygone era, rather than the factuality of the history



itself. Postcolonial spatiality of maps in games is identified as of hybrid nature by Lammes (2010) in her *Postcolonial Playgrounds: Games as postcolonial cultures*. Players, according to Lammes, are cartographers making out new maps for themselves from conquered territories so that they can translate world histories into personal stories . Thus, they can create their own personalized stories. This can be seen in the way that most strategy video games with historical theme allows player to create his own history. In a single scenario of historical strategy video games, players can choose various historical factions and engage with a fictional engagement simulated by the game engine, on a map based on real geographic place in the world. Mir, Owen (2013, p. 92) regarded *Sid Meier's Colonization* (Meier, Reynolds, Microprose,1994) as being “mixed the idea of glorified conquest with a range of dull, mechanical components that in turn undermine that glorification”. The quest for the mythical city of gold “El Dorado” in *Europa Universalis IV* (Andersson, Paradox Development Studio, 2013) is an alternative history concept of European visiting the New World for gold in order to avoid the representation of genocide by European colonists and human sacrifices done by Native Americans. Also in this game, slaves are not represented as units working on the field or factory, they are measured as another resource to be exploited and to be traded with other colonial factions. Kerri (2017) stated that game designers think the best way to deal with political and consequences of a historical issues is to concentrate on the war itself. Any form of normally offensive ideology, symbol, political view will be ignored, or replaced with something else less important to the content of the game in order to focus on the recreation of fighting. Ford (2016) assumed that the system of *Civilization V* (Briggs, Firaxis Games, 2010) offers every civilization with similar formidable technological capabilities so that every civilization is capable of bringing out the policy of colonialism, including the former colonized such as India, Sioux and Aztec. In the campaign mode of *Age of Empires II* (Ensemble Studios, 1998), the predecessor of *Age of Empires III* (Ensemble Studios, 2005), the Aztecs are the protagonist of that story mode. The outcome of the

campaign is the final triumph of the Aztecs over the invading Spanish conquistadors. The narrator, who is in turn the leader of the Aztecs resistance force against the Spanish, tells the players that the people are rebuilding the Aztec Empire. This is obviously counterfactual to what happened, since the Aztecs did not survive the initial onslaught of the Spanish conquistadors.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE COLONIST GAME SYSTEM OF AOE III

In this chapter, I will analyze the relation between the components of this game and European colonialism. This chapter will utilize the game description framework from chapter 3 in order to prove that *AOE III* is by and large a video games perpetuating the policy of European colonialism. An analysis of this colonist manifestation will serve as the basis to analyze the ideologies in the portrayal of the colonial era in the next chapter.

**An introduction of *AOE III*** *AOE III* is a strategy video games with the setting in the first wave of European Colonialism during the Early Modern Period, from the 15th century the late 19th century. The game incorporates different gameplay mechanics so players can recreate a vision of empire and conquer all enemies on the map. Typically, two or more players will start their empires on a territory representing actual landscapes in real life, but is limited to the point that is indicated by total blackness. Units and players' camera perspective cannot go beyond that line. Another interactive feature of the game is exploring the minimap, which is basically a minitured map of the game space, telling how much land players have explored, and portion of lands colonized and put under their control are in brighter color.

There are various colonist factions, as well as Indigenous American tribes, which players can choose to play. They are major European colonists (Britain, France, Prussia, Ottoman, Russia, Spain, Portugal, Netherland), Native American Tribes (Iroquois, Sioux, Aztec) or Asian Dynasties (India/ Mughal Empire, China/ Qing Dynasty or Japan/ Tokugawa Shogunate). Minor native tribe settlements also appear in the game. They are Apache, Cheyene, Carib, Cherokee, Comanche, Cree, Inca, Lakota, Maya, Nootka, Seminole, Tupi, Huron, Klamath, Mapuche, Navajo and Zapotec. As this study only concerns with the representation of the colonizers and the colonized, only European colonist civilizations and Native American tribes will be taken into

consideration.

**The colonist game spatiality and gameplay of *AOE III*** The rule of this game is as follow: The game rules of the entire franchise are simple: explore the map, collect as much resources as possible, create a large army and reach the ultimate goal, which is to vanquish all other players in the game through sheer numerical advantage or cunning strategies. Besides eliminating all opponents present on the map, establishing monopoly on the trade route is another option that leads to the triumph of a player. Corresponding to common historical narratives of how the colonization process conducted by European powers evolved into different stages mentioned in chapter 2 of this thesis, *AOE III* employed them as the status of a colony. They are: Discovery Age and Colonial Age (the early settlement in a colony, in Colonial Age the players have access to military units), Fortress Age, Industrial Age (the equivalence of the time during the Industrial Revolution), and Imperial Age, when Europeans massively expanded their influence around the world.

**Early spatial exploration and settlement** The game usually begins at Discovery Age, the allegorical game time of the exploration era. The player starts with a Town Center in the selected region, which is in turn based on the geographical representation of an actual colony. For example, if the player selects New England - a colony of the present day the United States of America - a map modelled after the actual geographical features of its real-life counterpart. This includes scattered Huron and Cherokee native settlements to be allied with, along with environmental features such as deers, whales, red oaks, sugar maples and copper mines. Surrounding the Town Center are a small number of civilian units (settlers) and an explorer unit, who can be either a colonial explorer, a monk or a Native American warchief, depending on the faction chosen by the player. The primary function of the exploring unit is to explore the region, locate the available resources and the positions of the opponents around the map. Areas of the game region that the player has not yet been explored, are blackened by so-called "fog of war", which are not visible to the players. Even explored area is represented only in its general appearance if it is not in the line-of-sight of a unit or a building belongs to the player or allied

factions of the player. This means that the player still has to keep up with the theme of exploration and spatial dominance in the form of continuous surveillance with a defensive structure or a unit with a greater than usual line-of-sight. Speaking of the exploration of the landscape, native units can be recruited to accomplish such task, as they have greater knowledge of the land, also represented by the greater line-of-sight, a game mechanic allowing the unit to see further through the fog of war. This reflects the way European colonizers used indigenous American as a means to their ends, in the same manner as European colonists in *Sid Meier's Civilization* (Meier, Reynolds, Microprose,1994) .

**Building a sustainable economy for the colony** The next step in constructing a colony is building up a sustainable economy. This can be accomplished primarily by moving settlers to work. Settlers are civilian units that can be recruited from the Town Center or shipped from the Home City (the term for the capital of the respectable chosen colonial powers, or in Native American civilizations, the teepee of a Warchief). Settlers are the backbone of the economy of every colony, no matter what game mode is chosen. Their menial activities include extracting raw materials in the colony (wood, coin, food). Such resources can be used to spawn more settlers to accelerate the economy, to construct more structures, to generate armies, to build ship, to distribute them to allied factions, or to trade for different kinds of resources at the market and Trading Posts. Resources can also be acquired through treasures of unfortunate travelers left behind scattered on the map, representing the hardship of early colonizers when they faced the hazardous nature of unfamiliar lands. The faster players collect resources, the quicker a massive army will be generated, and players will have more technological advantages sooner than their enemies on the map, giving them a clear upper hand to quell their rivals. Therefore, resources surrounding initial bases will become more scarce. While wood is the most plenty resource out of the three and food is renewable, coins (extracted from copper, silver and gold mines) are rather limited surrounding the initial base. The game entices players to explore more

to seek remote mines for coin. Opposing factions will do the same, thus, players are compelled to do what is intended by the game developers of Ensemble Studios: expand and conquer, transforming the environment of the game. This kind of activities is inextricably linked to the reenactment of colonist policy (Mukherjee, 2017). The more control of the map players have, the more resources will be available for those players, speeding up their economy as well as the creation of their military units. As an European colonizers, the player can build a Trading Post next to a miniaturized native tribe settlement, which can be one of the following minor native civilizations depending on the map: Apache, Cheyenne, Carib, Cherokee, Comanche, Cree, Inca, Lakota, Maya, Nootka, Seminole, Tupi, Huron, Klamath, Mapuche, Navajo and Zapotec. Forming an alliance grant the player the ability to acquire native “technologies” and to recruit native units for scouting, fighting.

**Advancing through ages and military actions** As the game progresses, players will advance through ages and slowly develop unique technologies and military units depending on the civilizations they chose. Each new “age” will grant players new technologies, economic bonus and military units. This symbolizes the development in the magnitude of global colonization. Starting from the Colonial Age, players will be granted access to military units development. Units development consists of creating units and upgrading them with specific technologies for each different civilizations. This perpetual cycle continues until there is no room for them, represented by the population limit, usually at 200. Further advance through ages will pave the way to fulfil the colonial fantasy of the players as more combat options will be available to them. As other players would also create more military units, players will find themselves competing for wealth and power with opponents controlled by either AI or other players depending whether the game mode is single random scenario in skirmish mode or multi-scenarios in campaign mode. To illustrate, in the Fortress Age (representing the fortification of the colony) and the Industrial Age (representing economical and technological major breakthrough), the Portuguese will receive more unique gunpowder and naval units, the Dutch will gain more accesses to economic bonus affecting

plantations, which reflect their wealth from plantations run by Dutch colonists enslaving black people in India, the British will get their iconic “Red Coat” - the name of the infamous uniforms of British soldiers during the colonial era, and the French will have their unique cavalry units wearing cuirassier, in addition to more gunpowder and sophisticated weaponry. In the economic aspect of the game, economic building capable of indefinitely generate numerous resources, such as plantations and factories (only available to European factions in the Industrial Age) at a slower rate, but can be remedied with “upgrades”. Upgrades are in-game references to the renowned breakthrough during the Industrial Revolution (Cigar rolling, steam engines, etc.). The development of technological warfare during the course of the 18th century, including the improvement in muskets, explosives and cannons, was the primary factor for the global presence of European colonists, leading to the age of early imperialism. This either leads the player to advance toward the Imperial Age where he or she gains access to the entire arsenal of the respective civilization. Another option other than advancing to Imperial Age is to revolt from the mother country. This results in a new country such as the United States, Mexico or Chile, based on the chosen politician (such as George Washington for the United States and Miguel Hidalgo for Mexico).

When players in the game finished essential military upgrades, they start to engage in simulated colonial competition. The outcome of a battle depends on how much casualties inflicted to the opposing faction. Most of the time, winning or losing a single large scale engagement can decide the outcome of the game. Therefore, strategic thinking and tactical decision are valuable in whether going in aggressive or not. In *AOE III*, there is only two sides of engagement, a departure from *AOE* and *AOE II* which allow players to engage in more than two. In fact, mirroring most colonial conflicts from the 15th century onward, while there can be only two sides in a game, one side may be made up of numerous colonial factions. While the ludological narrative of *AOE III* is primarily centered around the claiming of colonies, issues in representing this aspect sprung from the gameplay of the game itself, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE REPRESENTATION OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM THROUGHOUT AOE III

This chapter will be an analysis on the representation of European colonialism throughout the game systems of *AOE III*. Also in this chapter, I will identify the influence of contemporary representation of history on *AOE III* within the spatiality and gameplay. My analytical framework will be the framework defined by Chapman (2016) to analyze the issue with historical representation in *AOE III*. This includes elements within the game system and game narratives featured in previous chapters.

#### 5.1. Selected elements of European colonial history in AOE III

For the purpose of making the gameplay of the game less complicated and more acceptable in the contemporary era of anti-colonialism perspective, the development team of *AOE III*, the Ensemble Studio included factual historical elements and excluded several historical elements which are considered politically incorrect for the narratorial textual background of the game or too complicated for the gameplay.

**Elements of European colonialism kept in the game** The set of common narratives about European colonialism as mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis play an important part in creating the game spatiality and formulating the gameplay of *AOE III*. As analyzed in Chapter 3, pattern and the rule of the game closely follow the historical development of European colonialism, and the colonial logic established within the environment of the game.

Firstly, *AOE III* players can start the game in Discovery Age with an explorer, a humble amount of resources and a small band of settlers to build up a colony. This reflects the initial stage of European colonization of America - settler colonialism. As intended by *AOE III*'s game developers, the player does not have access to military units, and no hostile activities can be orchestrated



during this stage of the game. The player then advances to Colonial Age to be granted access to a modest amount of combat units. The primary focus of the player in the first two ages is to explore the shroud of darkness covering the map and expand the initial base into a sufficient large base capable of sustaining the economy and military might of the newly established colony. The trading factor of European colonists can be seen in the Trading Post mechanics of the game. Players can build Trading Posts next to a Trade Route or a Native American settlement in order to trade with other colonial factions for resources or to ally with a minor Native American tribes for their assistance, respectively.

Secondly, the player can increase the scale of colonial exploitation and begin competing with other colonists. Advancing to the Fortress Age and the Industrial Age bestows the player with even more economic bonus and combat options. This allows the player to truly enact the colonist exploitation on the map, while enables that player to build a sufficiently powerful army to compete with other colonists (or major Native American tribes) within the colony. In the Industrial Age, the player can compensate the depleting natural resources with plantations and factories. Industrial Age in *AOE III* is the allegory to the era of industrial development, which is inextricably linked to the abuse of native inhabitants as slaves working in those facilities, although such details do not present in the game.

Finally, the player will eventually reach the zenith of a colonial faction - Imperial Age, correlating with the early development of global European Imperialism - deliver all technologies available to the respective civilization of the player's choice. The player can choose another option other than advancing to Imperial Age: seceding from the mother country. To illustrate, when the player revolt as a colony belonging to the British, the colony will transform into the United States, cutting ties with Britain, all settlers turn into colonial militias.

Overall, the colonial logic of exploration, exploitation and establishing hegemony is well-preserved and communicated through the game as the

medium. Other historical features of European colonial era such as establishing trading empires, maintaining diplomacy with the Natives and allied colonial factions are properly configured to fit within the game's system as well.

**Omitted historical elements of European colonialism** Besides historical elements incorporated into the system of the game as an effort to make the game an authentic simulation of European colonial era, Ensemble Studios' game developing team also excluded elements which they consider inappropriate. The first historical element that is a defining characteristic of European colonial era but is absent from the game is the employ of slaves in plantations and factories by European colonists. Unlike *Europa Universalis IV* (Andersson, Paradox Development Studio, 2013), the issue of slavery is completely removed from the game instead of only being reduced into a manipulable resource. Two structures capable of generating an infinite amount of resources are the plantation and farm. Instead of allowing the player to employ slaves as a cheap labor force like past colonists did, the game only let the player to command settlers to work on such fields. As a strategy video game with conceptual simulation and the epistemological deconstructionist approach to history as Chapman (2016) noted, the enslavement of Native American on the plantation is not included, to avoid any possibility of complaint and to simplify the game mechanics. Judging the texture of the character model of settlers in game, however; settlers with dark skinned and red skinned texture also existed within the game, perhaps they function as a slight hint to the issue of colonial slavery. This can be seen as black slaves working together with white settlers, but only in the graphic dimension. Such trivial details are virtually overlooked by the gaming community.

Much of the historical issues regarding Native Americans during the time of European colonialism were also removed from narratorial and ludological aspects of the game. The ultimate fate of native cultures is heavily removed from the gameplay, and is only vaguely mentioned in the history section in its extensively sanitized version, should the player has the interest to access the textual background of the game. One example of such sanitized

history written by Ensemble Studio about the Apache, a non-playable Native American tribe that can only be allied for additional forces:

The Apache nation consisted of several loosely knit tribes, including the Mescaleros, Chiricahua, and Coyoteros. The warriors of these groups were famed for their bravery and cunning. During the early 1800s, the Apache fought a series of skirmishes with Mexico along the southern U.S. border. They even sided with the Texans during their fight with Mexico, and maintained good relations with the Texans for some years after Texan independence. Unfortunately for them, the Apaches couldn't stop the inexorable westward advance of the U.S. in the 1900s, and after a series of hard-fought battles, were driven to reservations. (Ensemble Studio, 2006)

The studio removed the penchant of Apache tribe men for savagery and human scalps. The Apache, instead of being mentioned as a hostile faction against the United States, is rewritten as a friendly ally of Texans during their war for Independence, and had their lands unfairly robbed from the government. This is the typical portrayal of Native Americans in the cinema and literature nowadays, friendly, peaceful, spiritual yet unjustly treated by white people. The same applied to all historical section of most Native American minor and major civilizations of the game, with the removal of barbaric practices, and a vague description of their cultural practice and current status. The capital of the Aztecs in their history description, Tenochtitlan (present day Mexico City) is depicted as one of the largest and beautiful city in the world. The city is said to be much cleaner than early modern capitals in Europe. Human sacrifices, one of the famous atrocities done by the Aztecs are only vaguely referred as "prisoners to be sacrificed in religious ceremonies". Other atrocities committed by Native Americans such as human hunting by Mayans as seen in *Apocalypto* (2006) are not included in the game, as the overall ideological, game-story and historical narratives manifesting through *AOE III* is seemingly excessively influenced by the common portrayal of the indigenous people of the New World in the popular culture.

Besides, there are additional elements which are not included in *AOE III* for being not feasible gameplay-wise. For instances, the fact Native American dying from bacterias spread by colonizing Europeans is not present within the

text or the game mechanics of *AOE III*, which is acceptable due to the simplification of the game mechanics - unlike *Sid Meier's Civilization* (Meier, Reynolds, Microprose, 1994) where players can have their native allies die from diseases for prolonged contact with their own European units

## **5.2. The representation of the colonized and the colonizers by Ensemble Studios in AOE III**

*AOE III*, has the issue of accurately representing history, due to the binary nature of the game. Narratorial and ludological aspects usually overlap each other, while the ludological side of *AOE III* allows the reenactment of colonialist policy, the narrative - including game-story narrative, has to conform to the current day common perspective of European colonialism, which is heavily leaned toward the anti-imperialist view of the infamous historical era. The game also has the tendency to disregard factual history and create new factions to take the place of colonizers to avoid recreating the scene of European colonizers being victorious over Indigenous Americans. As such, *AOE III* is rigged with alternative histories and overly positive portrayals of the colonized, the Native American. It should be noted that, the representation narratives will differ greatly in the skirmish mode and the campaign mode. While the skirmish mode allows the customization of factions and colonies, the campaign mode has a set of scenarios which strictly follow the pre-determined narratives and perspectives established by game developers with regard to the depiction of events that happened during the European colonial era.

**Ensemble Studios' representation of the colonized in AOE III** As the gaming world is a medium of communicating a mutated version of history, or "alternative history", *AOE III* offers the choice to modify what happened in the colonial era. The most blatant example is the fact that some of the Native Americans are playable despite their severe setbacks compared to European colonizers. In the original release of *AOE III*, Native American tribes were merely several additional contents in the game, which the player can interact with in multiple ways. In the expansion *WarChiefs* (2006), however; with

Native American civilizations as added contents, *AOE III* players can additionally choose Native American tribes as “empires” in the same vein as the eight major colonial powers in the original game. Those factions have outdated military weapons such as bows, spears, and slings, along with obsolete representation of economic bonus compared to the industrial advancement of European colonists. While this makes them seem archaic in terms of technological advantages in warfare and economic strength, the game developers boost up their strength up to a nonsensical magnitude. The aim of this adjustment is to give them the opportunities to stand against European colonizers in-game, providing game balance for the cost of historical accuracy.

Take a look at the civilization of the Aztecs in *AOE III*. Considering the historical era that is the setting of *AOE III*, the Aztecs should not be able to advance through the Colonial Age, let alone to the Imperial Age. Historically, the era when European colonists started to fortify their claimed territories in the continent of America from the late 17th century onward, the entire civilization of the Aztecs should have been long gone. The victory of the Spanish colonists over the Aztecs is largely attributed to the Spanish’s superior firepower, metallic weapons and the presence of mounted calvarymen by contemporary historians. In this game, however; the Aztecs is reimagined as a Native American faction that can progress through the Fortress Age, even to the Imperial Age, the in-game representation of the time when European colonialism was morphing into global imperialism. Although their military equipment are depicted as archaic weapons such as longbows, slings, clubs, javelins, spears, and armors made from fragile materials such as cotton, conforming to their accurate depictions agreed upon by the majority of historians, they are still (gameplay wise) capable of dishing out damage equal to that of European colonists wielding musket and cannon. It is even harder to take down an elite Aztec warrior in a meager jaguar skin armor than to kill an armored Spanish explorer. Lacking mounted warriors was a detrimental factor that caused the downfall of the Aztec at the hand of the Spanish Conquistadors. In *AOE III*, Coyote Runners and Eagle Warriors can make up for that downside

with their absurd running speed on foot. In addition, the Aztecs possess economic sustaining capabilities equals to that of European colonist civilization, who acquire industrial factories and plantations in the Industrial Age. Their naval presence is also formidable, even though their navy force only has simple wooden canoes and war boats with archers firing ignited arrow to damage gigantic war ships of European factions. The presence of Aztec civilization in this game is largely panned by the game community of *AOE III* due to the historical inaccuracy with regard to the historical timespan of the game. While the Iroquois and the Sioux were also inferior to colonizing forces from Europe and later, the United States, at least they were equipped with horses, muskets and reserve-engineered cannons, and their cultures and societies were not completely wiped, unlike the Aztecs. The two Native American factions' presence in the game is somewhat acceptable by *AOE III* players who are aware of the history.

While Native Americans in *AOE III* come with correct depictions of garments, customs, and their dialogues are even precisely based on their actual spoken languages, along with unique game features and play styles, their generic gameplay still follows that of European colonists. They still generally retain the same ludological properties as that of Western colonist civilizations. This includes harvesting resources (chopping trees wood, gathering, fishing or farming for food, collecting treasures and mining coins from gold, copper, silver mines). While the first three resources are understandable as valuable assets to the natives, the idea of Indigenous Americans need coin for the building of their bases and the production of their units make absolutely no sense. They utilized a barter system of exchange where goods or services are directly traded for other goods and services, rather than valuing a medium of exchange (coins). As native inhabitants, Native Americans still have to explore the map in a colonist manner. They could have been represented in the game as having a prior knowledge of their surrounding instead. Dillon (2008) gave an assessment about their erroneously revised gameplay:

Given these mechanics, the player is forced to enact the narrative in a

colonialist manner, concerned only with expansion and depleting resources. Once resources in your area are depleted, you are encouraged to defeat nearby enemies to take over their resources. In the "Trust" chapter of *Shadow*, you are tasked with earning the trust of the Sioux and gathering resources by destroying the moving wagons of the outlaws as they trek to their destination. In earlier chapters, you destroy existing trading posts to put up your own. (Dillon, 2008, para. 15)

Another unique aspect in the gameplay of Native American civilizations is the ability to receive additional economic or combat bonus through tasking villagers and priest to dance at the Fire Pit. This is based on the superstitious belief of the natives, for instance, the War Dance will increase the damage done by military units. The bonus is comparable to that of Western colonizers' superior technologies. It can be understood that the economic and militaristic bonus granted by ordering villagers and priests at the Fire Pit is not merely the representation of Native American being spiritual. It is a tool assisting the player in his or her colonialist policy when playing as Native American civilizations.

Besides having the same basic mechanics and spatial activities as the colonizing civilizations, the condition for victory or defeat when engaging the game as Native Americans remains the same: to conquer all enemies on the map or get conquered. When the player controlling a Native American faction loses, a white text "You have abandoned your colony" pops up. Whether the purpose of letting the Native American factions to receive the same notification as colonizer when defeated by game developers of Ensemble Studios is intentional or not, this is blatantly historically incorrect. This represents a major problem most historical strategy video games have: providing an unique identity for each type of faction in the game (Mukherjee, 2017). In order to diversify the game, game developers often allow subaltern (inferior civilizations) to be playable without regarding whether the civilization's affiliation is protecting the land (Native American civilizations) or conquering the colony (European colonist civilizations)..

### **Ensemble Studios' representation of the colonizers in *AOE III***

While the role of European colonizers in conquering the landscape of America

is highlighted and somewhat accurately represented in most random scenarios in skirmish mode, and the general gameplay of *AOE III* follows a colonist design as mentioned in the section 4.2 of this chapter, the history of European colonialism in the campaign mode of the game does not seem to follow factual history. It is beneficial to acknowledge that the campaign mode, unlike random scenarios in skirmish mode, is pre-designed to enforce the player to follow the pre-established narrative structure, whereas in skirmish mode, the narrative can be customized by the player. Unlike in *AOE II* where players can take the mantle of a colonizer from Portugal conquering the landscape of Africa, the campaign mode of the game strictly views the image of European colonists through the perspective of the colonized. This differs from the official tagline of the game from the developer themselves “Command one of eight mighty European powers and colonize vast, uncharted territory” (Ensemble Studios, 2016). That means this game has no room to play as European colonists in its campaign mode. The player will mostly face them as antagonists through the campaign scenarios, as either a third-party faction or a Native American tribe. One example of the use of rewriting history is the first campaign scenario of this game. The player will play as a Knight of St. John faction pursuing a fictional cult to the New World. During the pursuit for the aforementioned cult, their fates are intertwined with the Spanish invasion of the Aztec Empire. The game promptly asks the player to protect the three temples of the Aztecs from the destruction at the hand of the Spanish, while waiting for the reinforcement from the Aztecs themselves. By sabotaging Spanish supplying fleets and scaling down the Spanish fortress near the Aztecs, the player saves the Aztecs from the supposed elimination.

The British, the most powerful colonial power of the European colonialism era is exclusively portrayed as the antagonist of this game in its campaign mode. A campaign scenario focusing on a British colonist defending his colony from, surprisingly, the British. Although the character’s nationality is British, the playable faction in the scenario was Iroquois. While the majority



of assaults on his colony were done by the Cherokee, the British acted as the main perpetrator behind the attack. The reason why the British attacked their own colony in this story is that they were manipulated by an Illuminati-like cult (The Circle of Ossus). In a game review of AOE III, Dodson (2005) criticized the deconstructionist approach to history by Ensemble Studios:

We understand that dealing with *real* issues plaguing colonial America, like slavery and genocide, doesn't make for a very, uh, *marketable* game, but this weird fantasy plot isn't a good alternative. Europeans weren't over there to protect a sacred relic from Satan - they were there to escape their oppressors and eradicate the indigenous folk. (Now *that's* the stuff good video games are made of.) In any case, the single-player campaign tells a wimpy story and doesn't let you do any of the awful things you might be yearning to do under the pretext of harmless entertainment. (Dodson, 2005, para. 4)

The next campaign scenario involves a Native American confederation of tribes (The Iroquois) fending against British colonists, supporting the French in the Seven Years War and assisting an American revolutionary, George Washington in gaining independence. This scenario is actually the most accurate and less fictionalized out of the three mentioned, and is the only scenario in the campaign mode of *AOE III* that features colonists as playable factions, the United States of America, albeit this is not one out of the eight major European colonists. Even when playing as colonists, the player can only face the colonists and their allied natives as enemies. Thus, it is not feasible to provide the perspective of the colonization of America from European colonists themselves in scenarios based on real, non-customizable but modified historical events.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

In this graduation paper, I have examined the portrayal of European colonial era in *AOE III* by Ensemble Studios. In specific, I have formulated the framework of analyzing the common narratives in the representation of European colonialism era of the historical strategy video game *AOE III* by combining the typical representation of European colonialism across the mainstream media. The change in the common perception of European colonialism was also taken into consideration in order to provide a better insight on the current common narratives of the bygone era. For the analysis of components in the game which perpetuate the colonial narratives in *AOE III*, I discussed the framework of Chapman (2016), which includes simulation and epistemology, space and narrative within the system of a game. This consists of how European colonialism can manifest through the game spatiality and the narrative of the game, while the binary properties of the game hinder the complete and accurate representation of the colonizers and the colonized. By analyzing the system of *AOE III*, it can be seen that, while having the primary setting in European colonial era and the colonist game design, the colonizers and the colonized manifest in *AOE III* in a rather altered, sanitized and fictionalized way, a significant departure from their actual historical counterparts. Native Americans in the game is represented as peaceful, friendly and spiritual people, while having their in-game capabilities exaggerated by the developers of this game to the point that they are even matched with European colonists. This game also allows the establishment of the alternative history scenario where Native American civilizations can reenact the same policy of exploration, exploitation and colonization like European colonists, at least when playing in a random map in the skirmish mode. European colonists, on the other hand, are exclusively represented as evil antagonists, resource-hungry, warmongering and bloodthirsty expansionists, who are mostly

unplayable in campaign mode. In the other word, players can only create their colonial fantasies in explicitly customizable skirmish scenarios, while the historical narrative in the campaign mode of *AOE III* is restricted to the perspective of the colonized.

It is certain that my study has inevitable limitations. This research paper only contains one of numerous possible interpretations of ideologies in the representation of European colonialism in *AOE III*. Other ludological enthusiasts might find a better means to create a better version of this paper, with or without my framework for analyzing the contemporary ideological concept of European colonialism in the mainstream media . Furthermore, I only extract elements influencing the recreation of European colonialism of *AOE III* within the game system of the game (simulation and epistemology, space and narrative) and factors from the popular culture, without considering other possible aspects due to the boundary set for this study. This is not a comprehensive game study thesis for *AOE III*. I did not extensively analyze every single element in *AOE III*, outside those clarified in the framework of this thesis. I did not have the opportunity to interview with Ensemble Studios' development team or other *AOE III* players. The gameplay of *AOE III* is solely based on my personal experience playing the game. In the future, other researchers may conduct different studies on this game, asking the same question or a different one. They may do what I did not, and could not.

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