Postcolonial Catan

Bruno Faidutti

I would rather discover one truth than gain a kingdom in Persia.
–Democritus

In Fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. **–**Oscar Wilde, The Decay of Lying, 1899

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there. **–**Leslie Poles Hartley, The Go-Between, 1953

It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated. **–**Salman Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, 1991

I am not a scholar, though I considered becoming one at some time and, twenty years ago, wrote my PhD about the discussion on the reality and the image of the unicorn from the late middle-ages to the XIXth century. Then I gave up historical research to spend more time designing boardgames, of the kind now called Eurogames. I incidentally read Edward Said's *Orientalism*[1] and *Culture and Imperialism*[2]. in 2012 or 2013, long after they had been published, and was immediately stricken by his description of orientalism, because it was a beast I had already encountered twice. In the true and false travel stories from the late middle-ages and the Renaissance—Ludovico Barthema saw two unicorns in Mecca in 1503—I had seen the beginning of the modern fascination with the Orient. Later, when designing boardgames such as Silk Road or Isla Dorada, I had made heavy use of good old orientalist clichés. Orientalism felt like the missing link between my two experiences.

Postcolonial Catan 1, 2, 3

The first version of what has become this essay was a largely improvised seminar held in 2014, at Gen Con, the biggest US boardgame convention, which takes place every summer in Indianapolis. I basically took the orientalist paradigm from Said and transposed it, mutatis non necessarily mutandis, to modern boardgames. It was fun and superficial, and more a big witty joke than serious reflection. What made especially ironic this take on orientalism is that, while

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1. Edward Said. *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage Books, 1978.
2. Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993

postcolonial novels are often extremely humorous and ironic – think Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Hanif Kureishi, Naguib Mahfouz—postcolonial theory mostly ignores or even sometimes opposes irony.Fun is desperately lacking in Edward Said's books, which may be his biggest methodological difference with his mentor Michel Foucault.

I had great fun improvising from a half page of notes and mocking my fellow game-designers but, when flying back to Europe, I regretted this had not been recorded. So I tried to write down most of what I said, removing the most stupid jokes and adding a few reflections I had after the more serious discussions ending the conference. This tended to make my point more clear, more structured and more documented, but it remained a bit lampoonesque.

Anyway, I published this article on my website, and it caused huge reactions in the small boardgaming world. I was accused both of wanting to impose political-correctness to the whole boardgaming community, which had never been my intent, and to cowardly stop short of condemning exotic settings, which was a deliberate choice but not, I think, a coward one. Since these days, this article, a shorter version of the one below, is still by far the most visited on my website. The polemic started again one year later, when my game Waka-Tanka was announced and I got some remarks about my double language, condemning exoticism on one side and practicing it on the other. This was also the time I was contacted by the editors of Analog Game Studies who asked me if I would be interested in editing my blogpost into something a bit more weighty. It sounded like a good occasion to read some books, to make some points clearer and to develop a few ideas I had had since.

One of the reasons for these relatively strong reactions in a boardgaming world usually calm and soft-spoken is probably that the boardgames milieu and business is being globalized relatively late, and as much from Europe as from the US. Twenty years ago, modern boardgames were still largely a German thing. The cultural references in these games are still very European, while there are more and more gamers all around the world. This is another kind of exoticism for American gamers, who were the most reactive to my original article. This might explain the romantic and somewhat nostalgic feel of boardgames for many US gamers, and therefore their recent commercial success, but it also explains why some topics and representations are not exactly the ones to which Americans, and now people from the whole world, are used in other western medias.

Settlers and natives

It all started twenty years ago, when I first played Settlers of Catan. One of the

first remarks made by a fellow player when going through the rules was the ironic "where are the natives?" This might have been more a striking issue for French players than for German or English speaking ones because the French language has only one word, Colon, where English has two with very different meanings, Settler and Colonist (Siedler and Kolonist in German, the original language of the game). So, the game is known in France as "Les Colons de Catan," which can mean both "Settlers of Catan" or "Colonists of Catan."

Les Colons de Catane, recently renamed Catane, a more politically correct title. The abstract looking wooden roads and settlement tokens have also been replaced with plastic ones which have a deliberate European medieval style.

Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism was published in 1993, more or less at the same time as Catan and Magic the Gathering, but I read it only twenty years later. I was struck by the similarity between our initial reactions to Catan and what Said says of XIXth century European novels, and specifically of Jane Austen's Mansfield Park, where he thought slaves, though nowhere to be seen, are always in the background. Of course, the stakes are lower, and Said's analysis of XIXth century novels cannot be simply pasted on contemporary boardgames. Times have changed, agendas have changed, European countries have no colonies any more – and by the way Germany, from where modern boardgames originate, never had that many, and didn't keep them long. But this striking similarity must mean something.And, indeed, natives are nowhere to be seen in Catan, except may be as the lone black robber bandit who is not really resisting invasion, since he is hired on turn by the different players. I remember my first idea for a Catan expansions was a new resource, magic mushrooms used to cast spells – this was also the time when I was discovering Magic the Gathering. The second one was to add a native resistance player. I didn't finalize either one.

This goes farther than the naïve politically-correct euphemization of historical issues that can be found in some games. The problem in Puerto Rico is not that there are slave tokens, it is that they are called colonists. The problem with Saint Petersburg is that one of the worst episode of forced labour in modern European history is treated as a good spirited competition between hardworking craftsmen. The same is true of fantasy worlds, which is why I was less bothered by the slaves in Five Tribes than I am by their replacement with fakirs – and anyway, one cannot complain both of the absence of natives in Catan and of the presence of slaves in Five Tribes. But I'll be back to this, since we're now doing a very similar move with my changing the cover for the US edition of my upcoming card game Waka Tanka.

Starting from scratch

The Catan issue is different. The game action doesn't take place in a specific time or place, and the name Catan might even have been chosen specifically to sound bland and not too exotic—Catania is in Sicily, meaning south, but not too far south. The graphic implementation is very european, with no exotic resource—sheep, no lamas, bisons or antelopes. Settlers of Catan is colonization as we dream it, or as we would have liked it to be, colonization of a terra nullius, a new world which looks just like the old one and is void of alien presence. We all know it was very different and at least sparsely populated everywhere.
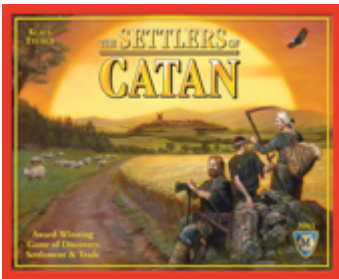
The new world looks insistently like the old one.

This can be explained without resorting to some western fantasy or complex, only with simple game system necessities. In most development games, players start from scratch – two settlements and roads in Catan, a spouse and a wooden shack in Agricola – and slowly build their production engine, competing with each other. The appeal of these games, and the original appeal of Settlers of

Catan because it was something relatively new in 1993, is that they are not about war but about peaceful competition in designing this engine.

With Archipelago, Christophe Boelinger tried to design a colonization and development game in which the natives were present and had to be dealt with, not necessarily through force. The players, however, still represent the rival European powers, and the game is very complex.

The colonial setting can nevertheless be an issue, especially when it's plain and obvious. I remember a gamer friend recently telling me that he felt a bit uneasy playing Endeavor (but he never had any problem playing a war game, which is not surprising but raises some interesting questions). That's why Catan's name doesn't sound exotic, and that's why other "start from scratch" games have less problematic settings, such as prehistoric times or deep space colonization expansion. Nevertheless, in space development games, players are usually alien rivals in a mostly empty space. In Ad Astra, a game partly inspired by Catan which I designed with Serge Laget, there are alien artifacts but they have been left by long forgotten civilizations.

Exploring Space.

This can be explained without resorting to some western fantasy or complex, only with simple game system necessities. In most development games, players start from scratch – two settlements and roads in Catan, a spouse and a wooden shack in Agricola – and slowly build their production engine, competing with. Anyway, the game designer wanting to avoid problems can always settle Mars, even when it needs a little terraformation before any efficient colonization.

And colonizing Mars.

As an interesting aside, there are also lots of game about industrial revolution. A designer like Martin Wallace has published dozens with rails or industry barons. Industry and railroad development games are all about riches getting richer, and there are not much more workers or navigators in them than natives in colonial development games. The Steampunk genre, which is an industrial revolution fantasy, is also becoming very popular with boardgames – more about it later. Once more, it's possible to find sound practical reasons explaining why game designers are so often using XIXth century economic growth, and its two main engines, industrialization and colonization, as a setting for games that are all about developing effective production engines. I should nevertheless set Said aside and reread Eric Hobsbawm's Industry and Empire.

Good old games

There might be technical reasons, but I think there's also something if not reactionary, at least romantic or backward looking in board games themes – much more than in video games themes.

The novel form has now been assimilated and transformed in the formerly colonized world, by postcolonial authors such as Salman Rushdie – but we're

still waiting for a postcolonial board or card game designer. Boardgame and card game design is not necessarily adverse to critics and subversion. The authors of cards against humanity might be the William Burroughs of game design—but there's no Salman Rushdie, and boardgames are probably still one of the most typically western cultural forms—more about how Japanese card games fit into this later.

There is something old-fashioned, charming and romantic, not only in the themes and settings of boardgames, but also in their graphic style. See the covers of Ticket to Ride and Settlers of Catan, probably the two most influential typical board game designs of these last twenty years. Playing games has become a powerful anxiolytic in a western society which probably feels less secure than it did a few decades ago, and probably more in Europe in the USA. This might explain why board game sales are countercyclical, why game designers are mostly old white males (I'm one), why game themes and looks sound so old-fashioned.
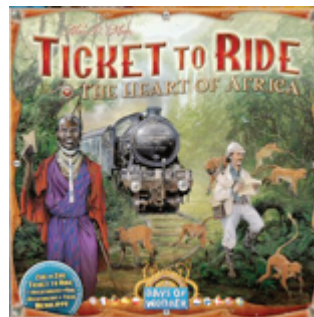
Notice that European countries such as Switzerland, Netherlands and even the United Kingdom

can receive an "exotic" treatment. There's no Ticket to Ride Scotland, Spain, Russia or Italy, but these are also often treated as exotic settings.

Most of my examples come from "eurogames," a style of games which originated in Europe and became really popular in the rest of the world more recently. Games designed in the US have more often fantasy settings, which also have some ambiguities – elves, dwarves and orcs can also be seen as way to simultaneously essentialize and defuse racial stereotypes – but this would need another article.

Let's go back to Steampunk, a new romantic, retro exotic and relatively harmless setting. Steampunk is interesting because it's mostly a gaming (and sartorial) universe. There's almost no steampunk music, there are few steampunk movies, there's little steampunk literature (even though everyone should read Thomas Pynchon's Against the Day), but there are lots of steampunk boardgames (and rpgs, and larps). Steampunk is not only victorian esthetic with shiny bronze and iron, it's also a reassuring world, in which good old european powers are still vying for control of the solar system – and natives on Mars, if any, can be ignored as Bruno Cathala and I did in Mission Red Planet. Well, I just added a "Native Resistance" discovery card, but it's an afterthought I had while writing this article.

Onward to Venus and Mission : Red Planet, steampunk colonial games.

Minimalism

So what happens when "orientals" start designing card and boardgames?

A few months ago, I wrote an article about the many Japanese card games

designed and published in Japan these last years, the best known probably being Seiji Kanai's Love Letter.

Two Japanese games.

My article was titled "Japanese Minimalism." I suggested that some Japanese cultural atavism might be responsible for the specificities of these designs, mostly their simple rules and few components. I made some comparisons with literature – Soseki and Kawabata – then added unwisely references to Japanese food and zen gardens, stuff I don't really know much about. I stopped just short of haikus and bonsais.

My Japanese readers were if not shocked, at least amused. I was answered that Japanese Minimalism doesn't really exist, or at least is not an indigenous characteristic of Japanese culture but a western invention aimed at objectifying it—exactly what Said calls orientalism in his eponymous book, even when he never tells anything about Japan (for interesting reasons, which might be the same reasons why his books are immensely popular in Japan, but that's another story). Of course, this critic was spot on, as a quick experiment can show: type "Japanese Minimalism" in Google, and you get mostly links to Californian architect studios and furniture stores.

Anyway, I was told the reasons for the minimalistic components of Japanese games were more trivial, due mostly to high printing costs and small markets, or may be even purely contingent, due to the personality of the first popular Japanese game designers. These designers claim to have the same references as mine – Settlers of Catan (again), Magic the Gathering, etc – and not to make anything specifically Japanese. Actually, Seiji Kanai once told me that my Dragon's Gold was one of the games that lured him into game design, and I'm quite proud of this. On the back of the box of the most minimalistic of

these games, Jun'Ichi Sato's Eat me if you Can, is even clearly written that it's a "Eurogame."

So much for the Japanese minimalist school of board game design. Of course, the fact all these designers don't intend to design specifically Japanese card games, but just small card games doesn't subtract anything from their talent.

The question of "Japanese Minimalism", however, is at least debated. The main reason why I didn't come across it when typing "Japanese minimalism" is that academic circles prefer to call it "Japanese reductionism". The reference book of those who claim that such a thing really exists and is really Japanese is Compact Culture, by O-Young Lee (a Korean), just to make this a bit more intricate. This book doesn't really come from the western world and, though it's slightly too old to enter the discussion of postcolonialism as it was started by Said, it is in part concerned with similar issues. Interestingly, O-Young-Lee doesn't reproach Japan as a colonizer with objectivizing Korean culture but with plainly ignoring it—and conveying this ignorance to the West. Indeed, Europeans have a very orientalist image of China and Japan, but don't have any image at all of Korea, which is also largely ignored in boardgame settings

Koryo, a card game from a Korean designer and a French publisher, with a very vaguely Korean-steampunk setting. And, just to make things more intricate, The King's Pouch, a Korean game which is probably not really "occidentalist", but just trying very hard and quite successfully to look like a German game.
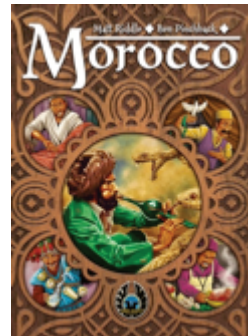
Oriental Dream

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said showed how the orientalist discourse, which he studied mostly in XIXth century novels but can be found in other cultural

domains, created its own object, how a fantasy Orient became a part of the real Orient, and how this was embedded in the colonization ideology and process.

As I said earlier, world literature has largely become postcolonial, and the same could probably be said of music (rap is something like postcolonial rock) and movies. There's nothing like this in games, and the image they show of the Orient is plain orientalist exoticism, of a kind that has disappeared from literature, movies and even comics – though it's still present in a few other very specific domains such as cooking or music.

Istanbul and Five Tribes, two recent "1001 nights" games. Notice the fonts.

This one has a good accumulation of clichés, with a half veiled and sexy girl, dice players who seem to be bartering, probably a slave on the front right, and even a leopard – I doubt there were many in medieval Spain, where the action is supposed to take place.

Charles Chevalier presents his game Sultaniya at the French game festival Paris Est Ludique. He looks exactly like the guy on the Istanbul cover.

Have a look at the boxes of the hundreds of "oriental themed" games published every year. They usually look directly out either of a Guéricault painting, either of a popular geographic encyclopedia from the fifties. The Arab world has camels, sand dunes, silk or spice merchants, sometimes a djinn. Timeless India just has elephants instead of camels and the occasional tiger.

Racing camels in Egypt, racing elephants in India…

The most striking is probably Egypt, a really popular setting but with basically only two narratives, building pyramids and exploring pyramids (by the way,

Kheops, by Serge Laget and me, has just been republished). As for modern Egypt, or even modern Orient for what matters, it is totally absent from games. Of course, one of the reasons might be that contemporary orient is extremely complex, when boardgame settings have to be clear and simple – but isn't the "Complex Orient" another orientalist cliché ?
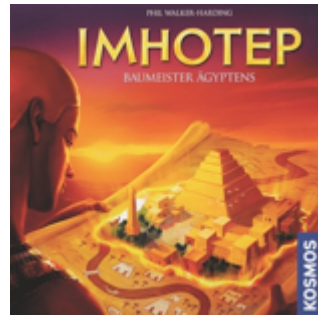
Two new games about building the Egyptian pyramids. There are already hundred or more.

The far east can be very vaguely historicized, with seven or three kingdoms in China, with Daimyos and Samurais in Japan. Since most players – meaning western players, which are still the large majority – have no idea what this really means and cannot place the game's setting in a clear historical timeline, this is akin for them to fantasy worlds


Antoine Bauza and Bruno Cathala's games look more Japanese than Seiji Kanai's ones. The three publishers and illustrators are also French.


And Japanese games can even be "re-orientalized" for the western market, as in this US edition of Love Letter in a popular Japanese-style fantasy setting.

In the twenties, the young André Malraux was arrested while smuggling antique bas reliefs stolen from a lost Khmer temple, and imprisoned. He later got involved in the anticolonialist movement in Vietnam, then in the Spanish war, then in the French Resistance during WWII, and ended as the unsackable minister of culture of Charles de Gaulle. I would have liked my friend Pierô to represent the young Malraux fleeing from Angkor with some Khmer statue hidden under his gabardine, but unfortunately, that's what he had already made for Antoine Bauza's game Bakong. While orientalism was not an issue, it was impossible to represent Malraux with his unmovable cigarette, and this not only the US market but also now in France and most of Europe.
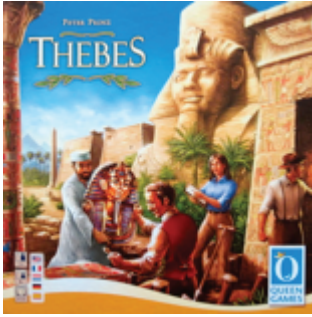
Exploring pyramids, discovering a lost temple, these are orientalist clichés allowing for a representation of the westerner, as adventurer or archaeologist. It's a trick also much used in movies.

The exotic doesn't need to be very far away – for German game designers, the nearby Italy is almost Africa, and the most exotic about Italy is its cooking, and especially pizzas. Spain also sometimes receives a similar treatment
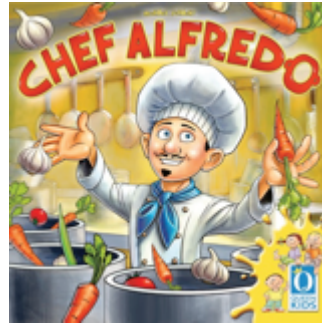
The game derives from carom, so it must have an Indian setting. It is, however, themed about cooking, so it should also have an Italian sounding name. The result is confusing…

An interesting aside here is the impressive number of games about Venice, either the historical one or a fantasy one like Cadwallon or Tempest. There are probably more games about Venice than about all other Italian cities together. Once more, there may be some trivial and technical reasons, mostly that the canals allow for a simple and clear division in districts, for nice rules about bridges, for different movement rules on land and water, carnival masks make for mysteries and secret identities, etc. But there's something more – the fantasy Serenissima, if not the real one, has long been half oriental, the place where ships left for Constantinople, the city of Shylock and Othello, and the venetian dream is, in the literary tradition, an euphemized version of the oriental dream.
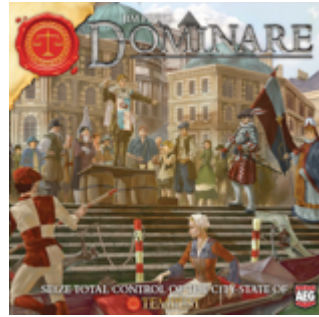
Fantasy and even more fantasy Venice.

There's also something like Septentrionalism, but it's less prevalent and systematic.

Abstract exoticism

Even abstract games often have a setting, which is little more than a nice name and a graphic style, and these settings are usually exotic. It's not a new thing. When, in XIXth century Germany, someone had the great idea to adapt the Halma game to a star shaped board, he called it Chinese Checkers. It is still known by that name, even now in China…
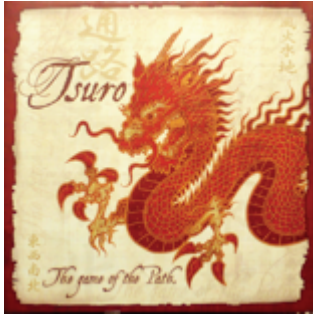
Abstract Asia is full of dragons, but it's not always easy to decide if they're Chinese or Japanese.

Now, we're clearly in China, and these games, though not totally abstract, could have had many other settings.

China and Japan are still the most frequent exotic theme for western abstract strategy games. There also a few Vikings—runes have a nice abstract look – and sometimes American Indians, especially in games from the seventies and eighties.

Organic and ironic orientalism

You may have noticed that I've discussed Japan twice. So where exactly is orientalism? What are the true orientalist clichés, Samurais and geishas, or minimalism, robots, cosplay and giant lizards? There is a big difference, which I think has been often missed by Said, between old orientalist clichés which have become an organic part of western culture and are often referred as such, sometimes even ironically, and more recent ones which are more likely to be taken at face value. When using the word orientalism, we usually refer to the

former ones, when the most problematic is probably the latter. Samurais and geishas, like pharaohs or maharajas, like indians and cowboys, have become a kind of organic orientalism, always more or less ironically self-referential. When using these images, the reference is not really to the other, but to the cliché itself. The mockery, if there's one, is more of exoticism itself than of the supposed exotic. Things are much more ambiguous when using more recent clichés, like robots, giant lizards and high school girls in skirts, or supposedly "timeless" features, like minimalism. Clichés, like other ideas, must never be considered ex abstracto, out of historical and cultural context. The same graphic style doesn't have the same meaning on contemporary boardgame boxes and in popular encyclopedias from the fifties. It can also have different meanings in Europe and in the US, as we will see with American Indians.

The Japanese themselves can use orientalist clichés, like Seiji Kanai does in Mai Star. It's certainly ironic here, but there is also an ambiguous trend towards "self-orientalism" in contemporary Japanese culture, and not only for export. Of the Japanese and US edition of Mai Star, I don't know which one looks the most orientalist.

Kota Nakayama's Hanamikoji is even more complex –the designer is Japanese, but the publisher and illustrator are Taiwanese. As for Lost Legacy – Hundred years wars, it's pure Occidentalism. It has a yellow haired medieval knight next to a hobbit like character and the statue of a siren.

Anyway, when dealing with Japan, this is the true orientalism…. And it can even be exported into Japan!

Interestingly, the German game publisher which makes the most systematical use of oriental settings and orientalist graphics, with lots of ochers, yellows and oranges, the publisher of Shogun, Maharani, Sultan, Alhambra, Thebes, Kairo and many other is Queen Games, whose head, Rajiv Gupta, is not exactly your typical German.

Though it didn't sell that well, Isla Dorada is one of my favorite designs. It has all the orientalist clichés, and more. My original prototype had a rather bland theme, with mediaeval merchants traveling through a vast country, buying here and selling there. The publisher found this a bit bland, and we decided for something more exciting – an orientalist mishmash with deliberate exotic clichés in a Tarzan comics style. The published game is Victorian steampunk, and the action takes place on a remote island where we can see the ruins of no less than four old civilizations – so we have Egyptian pyramids, and places with names ending in is, a mix of Polynesian villages and Pascuan statues, with names such as Wahi-Waha and Vanu-Tabu, Mayan pyramids with Aztec sounding names. The only reason why the last civilization sounds vaguely Indonesian is that it made for more funny names ending in ing or ang, but the monuments look more like Khmer. For gameplay reasons, the names of the places had to suggest immediately to what cultural area they belong. No China or Black Africa, but we made for it through event cards, with killer pandas and black savage tribes roaming the island, and we a Baron Samedi for the Caribbean Voodoo. However, I remember that we considered a long lost cut

limb of the Roman Empire for the fourth culture, and that at least one prototype version of the game had places with funny names in us and um instead of ing and ang. This was not very different.

Isla Dorada, and another kind of irony – Hamlet and the crystal skull.

Orientalism as described by Said is an ideological discourse which gets his strength from the fact that it's supposed describe the reality, the truth, of the Orient it invents. Boardgames, like French comics such as Asterix, or Iznogoud if you want something "orientalist", are not scholarly works. They don't have the slightest aim or pretense at "truth". Klaus Teuber, the designer of Catan, didn't want to tell us that the New World was empty when Europeans arrived there, and no gamer ever thought it was so. I know quite well that there are not daily elephant races in Indian cities – well, may-be there are some here or there, I didn't even check because I tried to be true to the cliché, not to the reality. In a way, exoticism in boardgames, like in comics, is always more or less ironical – though may-be we should sometimes make this more obvious.

Colonizing the past

There's indeed an obvious and apparently valid point against most of what I've said so far – there are many games about the timeless Orient, but there are even more about some specific periods of western history, like ancient Rome or the Middle Ages.

The fantasy idea we have of some historical periods is not very different from the fantasy idea we have, or had, of other parts of the world. Far away times are like far away places – naive, simple, vaguely perverse and, of course, backwards. Orientalism and history, or at least history as it was invented in the XIXth century, were very similar fields of study, inspired by romanticism, and

characterized both by a fascination for the alien and a necessity to objectivize it in order to construct it as a field of study, and to assert western, or modern, superiority. In France, as in many European countries, history and geography are still taught together in school, by the same teachers, as if past and foreign were interchangeable. The XIXth century painters singled out by Said for their orientalism, such as Gérôme and Géricault, were also much fond of mythological and historical settings. In 1904, Victor Segalen started his reflections on exoticism by noting that there is a parallel between far away in space, exoticism, and far away in time, which he called historicism. Since this word now has a different meaning, let's talk of "historical exoticism."
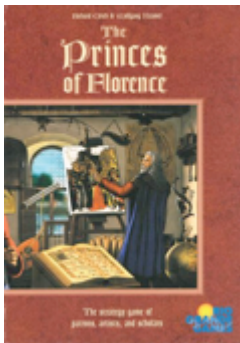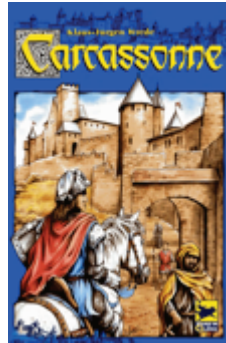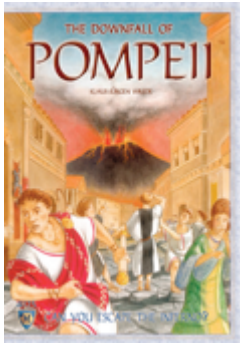
Pompei, Carcassonne, Florence – the place tells the time.

While plain orientalism as described by Said is probably receding, or at least is dissected and discussed in universities, historical exoticism is still strong, mostly because there can be no "post-medievalist" or "post-antiquist" backlash like there was a postcolonial one. Ancient Greeks and Romans were objectified, simplified, caricatured and analyzed, all for our amusement and comfort, but

they haven't been actually colonized, and cannot strike back at our present. I sometimes wish they could, it could be fun – like in Gore Vidal's great novel *Live from Golgotha.*
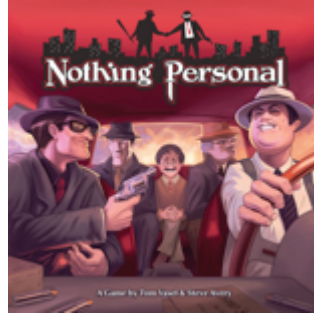
It works almost as well with American history.

As a historian, I'm always wary of the easy explanation for everything past and strange—"in these times, people didn't think like we do." Maybe "in these times" sounds a bit too much like "East of Suez" in Rudyard Kipling's famous formula – "East of Suez, best is worst and worst is best."

So the real issue is not orientalism, but exoticism as a whole, in geography and history, and why it is so prevalent in boardgames, much more than in books or movies, much more than in video games, and so insistently unsubtle. The setting of a novel is a complex world that has to be built or, more often, studied by the author. It can be false, it can be a caricature, but it needs some depth. For the game designer, India or China, Middle Ages or Antiquity, are not geographical places or historical times, they are just topoi, sets of standard references, which must not be more sophisticated than those mastered by the player. The game designer, like the painter, cannot enliven his work by complex and subtle storytelling, and must do it only by winks and nods – a camel here, a helmet there. As a result, he makes heavy use of orientalist, "medievalist" or "antiquist" clichés.

Cliché or exoticism?

This can be conscious, even deliberate, as it was for me when I designed Valley of the Mammoths, or Mystery of the Abbey. Valley of the Mammoths is just a collection of bad clichés about prehistoric times. It's assumed, it's second degree, but what is interesting is that I probably could not have designed a "serious" game about prehistory. I didn't have the necessary historical knowledge, and if I had this knowledge, the game would have had much more complex rules, would have been less fun to play, and removing the irony might have made it in the end more racist against Neanderthalians. Anyway, racial prejudice against Neanderthalians is not a pressing political issue, except in Jasper Fforde's novels.

The cover of the first edition of Valley of the Mammoths was plain exoticism

And then there are Pirates. Pirates have everything. They have adventure, deep blue seas, palm trees and teams mostly made of white bearded males, with the occasional black look-out or sexy adventuress. Pirates of the Caribbean – not those of the Channel, of course – are like a part of the fantasy history of Europe that happens to take place in a sunny and exotic – if not oriental – setting. No wonder Pirates have been from the very beginning of modern boardgames, the most overexploited setting.
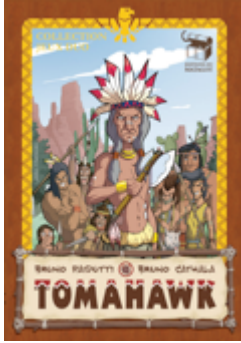
Pirates and the Exotic.

Simplifying and objectifying the past has obviously fewer social and historical consequences than simplifying, objectifying and even colonizing the rest of the world, but it's part of the same frame of mind. Orientalism and historical exoticism belong to the same intellectual discourse, and I find the prevalence of this discourse in games – even when it's more and more often in a distanced and more or less ironic way – impressive, and a bit unsettling.

If I were someday to write the scenario for a TV series, it would probably be about inventing time-travel and colonizing the past, about sending British governors, German hippies and American missionaries in Ancient Egypt or in prehistoric times. Well, I don't know any one in the TV series business, but may be I can make a game about it. Of course, a game full of clichés about British, German and Americans, because that's what make games fun.

Indians in Gaul and Germany

Americans visiting Europe are often surprised by the importance of American Indians, and specifically Plain Indians, in our collective imagination. This is especially true in France and Germany, which happens to be also the countries were most European boardgames are designed and published. I have designed two games with a Plains Indians theme, Tomahawk and Waka Tanka, the latter being due to publication in the coming months, and there are also cute bright red Indian meeples in Pony Express, and a sexy squaw in Boomtown – though her long legs are hidden in the US version of the game.

The image we have of Plain Indians is definitely exotic, but what makes it different from the US one is that it has more to do with historical exoticism than with orientalism, and this especially if, as Said wrote, orientalism emphasizes on otherness. Our imaginary Indians were designed as similar to us, not as other.

Native Americans and the Exotic.

Most Europeans don't really know, or forget easily, that there are still Native American people and living native American cultures – for us, American Indians are historical figures, not contemporary ones. Also, in France and in Germany, Plain Indians as described in the late XVIIIth and XIXth century were used as the metaphoric basis when inventing a fantasized history of our origins, before the Roman conquest. The mythical Gallic village of old history books, and of comics like Asterix as well, with its chief and its druid, is directly copied from the almost as mythical Indian village, with its chief and sorcerer. Dolmens are totems, wild boars are bisons. When playing Indians and Cow-boys, something they still do, French or German kids always identified more easily with Indians than with Cow-Boys. This means that gently mocking this image is also, in a way, a bit like mocking our own ancestors, something everybody does, but never in a really bad way. This might be different in Britain, where Agricola is as much the English hero as Boudicca.

Laziness and efficiency

This whole article is still half a joke. I took Edward Said's orientalism paradigm, originally applied to XIXth century novels and paintings about the Near and Middle-East, and copy-pasted it on contemporary boardgames about other parts of the world – but it's not that different from what Said himself was starting to do in Culture and Imperialism. Then I brought it to Mars and Venus, following a hint given by Victor Segalen in 1908, in his Essay on exoticism. Last, I brought it to the past, which won't be colonized until we design a time-travel machine. It can't be surprising that things don't always fit perfectly, as we have seen in some details with two examples, Japan and American Indians – I still have to design a Japanese themed game.

Nevertheless, the recurrence of exotic settings in board and card games can be unsettling. Understanding why we use such settings, and why they can be unsettling, is necessary, but I don't intend to condemn it and I don't think we, game designers, should stop making boardgames that caricature the Orient or Ancient Greece, no more than we should stop making games that caricature barnyard or jungle. I know for sure I will keep on doing it because it's easy, it's simple, it's fun and, most of all, it probably makes better games. When it comes to game design, being lazy is usually being efficient.

It makes better games because the setting of a game doesn't have the same function as the setting and theme of a novel or movie. When reading a novel or an essay, or watching a movie or theater piece, one does spend most intellectual energy in understanding what is told in the book or movie, and tries to get all the subtleties of it. When playing a game, most of the player's energy is spent in trying to use the rules, the game systems, in order to win. The thematic setting of the game must not detract from "the game itself", meaning from aiming at victory. It might even be, like in a math water tap problem, just a tool used to make the rules clearer.

The setting must therefore be extremely simple, and must be known by the players before the game even starts. In good novels and movies, the storyline is used to explain the meaning of a complex theme. In good games, the light theme is here to help the players create the story. A game's setting must be very simple, very light, and works best when it uses connections already known by the players, not when it tries to reveal hidden ones. Pop culture settings, such as science fiction or heroic fantasy, are great for this, but are not mastered by everyone. Plain exotic settings, be they historical or geographical, are even better, because they are understood by more people. Furthermore, boardgames are often played by adults and children together, and therefore require "childish" settings and imagery, and of a kind that is known by two or even three generations. That's why simplistic exotic settings, be they exotic, historical or fantasy come naturally to me, and that's why I'll keep on using them, though I'll probably be more careful now to use more or less systematically irony to defuse the issues that I highlighted in this article. And yes, I know, irony can be missed, but it's so fun when it isn't that it's worth taking some risks.

=========== **Game and History** ===========

In *Mombasa*, players acquire shares of chartered companies based in Mombasa, Cape Town, Saint-Louis and Cairo and spread their trading posts throughout the African continent in order to earn the most money.

Chartered companies were associations formed for the purpose of exploration, trade and colonization, which links them inextricably to a very dark chapter in human history: global colonialism. This period lasted roughly from the 15th century to the middle of the 20th century and is associated with exploitation and slavery.

Although *Mombasa* is loosely set within this time frame, it is not a historical simulation. It is a strategy game with an economic focus that roughly refers to historical categories and places them in a fictional setting. The exploitation of the African continent and its people is not explicitly depicted within the game play.

If you want to learn more about the underlying history, we recommend the following read:
History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present by Richard J. Reid. (Blackwell Concise History of the Modern World). Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.

The caveat historical introduction to the rules of Mombasa is certainly clumsy. The first sentences are heavily didactical and the last one sounds like "no animals were harmed in the making of this movie", but that's probably the way to go.

The video and boardgame industries are in many ways very similar, and many boardgame designers also work on video games. Surprisingly, orientalism, at least like I've described it here, is far less present in video games, Prince of Persia being the only example that jumps to mind (though the FPS games in Middle-East settings are another kind, probably far more problematic, of Orientalism). Historical exoticism also seems to be less prevalent. The depth and complexity required by massive multiplayer games and persistent worlds makes it impossible to use simplistic universes, and is much easier to deal with in fantasy. These complex games are also more and more devised by large teams involving designers in Europe and in the USA, but also in Japan and, more and more, in Korea, China or India. But this is also true of lighter games, may be because the video game industry is bigger and more globalized, both with gamers and designers. Of course, this makes for less problematic settings, but also for blander and, at first sight, less thought provoking ones. One can easily get bored of space travel, dragons, zombies and colored candies. But except may be for colored candies, fantasy settings are also a kind of exoticism, and in the end raise similar issues.The issue might be different if I were writing RPGs, which require a deeper and more subtle setting and are more akin to literature, but it's not even sure, or if I were working in the video games industry. I remember playing some really good and fun larps full of bad clichés, often about about Victorian England. These were, however, clearly ironic, and there are also very good larps and rpg dealing with historical topics in a more serious way – I'm just not very excited in playing them.

Racism and game imagery in the US and in Europe

Two times, with Isla Dorada and now with Waka Tanka, there has been

problems with the graphics in my games, which had to be changed by fear that they would be considered racist in the US. My friends at Days of Wonder also experienced unexpected attacks about the presence of slaves in their 1001 nights boardgame Five Tribes. I think there is something interesting in why some pictures or themes can be seen as racist in the US and not in Europe. When such an issue occurs, and it happens very often in various industries, the usual reaction in Europe is to mock American oversensibility and political-correctness, while the US point is to consider Europeans insensitive – which they are not – or provocative – which they might be. Another problem is that Americans are used to see attacks on political-correctness come mostly from the right, meaning from people who want the freedom to express problematic ideas, and don't realize that most European attacks are coming from the left, from people who think euphemizing language or representation is mostly an excuse not to deal with "real" social issues, and even to hide them. As a result, political correctness often harms the very cause it is supposed to defend.

The Fakir (right) has one thing for him – the art is better.

Anyway, may be because I am a European, I still don't really understand what exactly was the problem with the presence of slaves in Five Tribes and, as I wrote earlier, I find their absence in Puerto Rico much more unsettling. Five Tribes has a fantasy and extremely orientalist setting, Puerto Rico has a more historical one, but both settings include slaves, and replacing them with so-called "colonists" or with fakirs, when there are hundreds of slaves but not a single fakir in the whole text of the 10001 nights, looks like a way to simply ignore, to erase, the problematic parts of our history. It's not getting

rid of orientalism or racism, it's not even helping to make sense of it, it's just euphemizing them in a very superficial, and some would say hypocritical way.

What happened to me, or at least to my illustrators and publishers, with the graphics of two different games is more interesting.

Isla Dorada is a compendium of orientalist clichés from several different – and often lightly mixed – cultures. Everything in its theme and its graphics is caricature. When Fantasy Flight Games decided to publish it in the US, they frowned at one of the pictures, a black savage of the Ovetos tribe, and asked the French publisher to change it because it bordered on racism. Actually, the only black boardgame designer I know, Eric Lang, who was working with Fantasy Flight Games at that time, didn't have any issue with picture, but he's also a Canadian, which means half a European.

The French publisher, and the artist, reacted in the usual way "OK, it's not racist, but Americans are a bit paranoid when it comes to these issues, let's change it." In fact, the problem for the US publisher was whether the cliché was politically acceptable, while the problem for the French artist was to be esthetically true to the cliché, which is the real theme of the game.

Where it becomes really fun, is that we first mistook what Americans thought racist in the picture – it was the fat lips of the character, when the artist first thought it was the bone through his nose. This shows that an exotic caricature is not racist per se – no one raised an eyelash when the game was published in the US with a thin lipped black tribesman sporting a bone through his nose – but that the codes defining what is racist and what isn't are not the same in Europe and in the US. For us, and for me, the bone was borderline, the lips were no more problem than fuzzy hair – well, the Ovetos is actually bald, but you see what I mean.
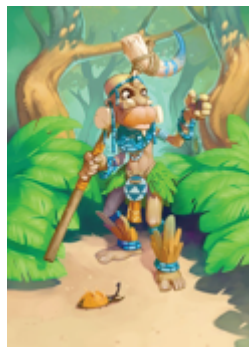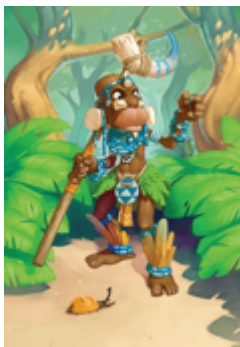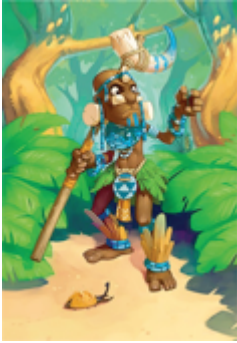
Three versions of the Isla Dorada Ovetos card: Naiiiade's original, a first reworking with white skin, and the final version with black skin and thin lips. The thin lips make him look more cruel.

A very similar story happened with the cover art for Waka Tanka. As I said before, we don't much care for stereotypes in the representations of American Indians in Europe. The main reason is not the obvious one, that we didn't kill them. It is that the exotic image we have of them is universally positive, and based as much on sameness than on otherness. Anyway, a Brazilian publisher decided to bring the game to the US, and was as surprised as me, the illustrator, and the French publisher when told the cover picture of the game was overtly racist. Of course, we first mocked the idea that it was impossible to draw an American Indian who looks like an American Indian, but after some discussions on game forums, it appeared that the issue was, once more, extremely specific. The problem was not the exotic and unrealistic setting, which is common in Eurogames and didn't create any problem so far, but the figure of the old chief in the foreground, which reminded every American of "Cigar stores Indian" – an image I didn't even know about.

For both games, the first steps in the discussion between European (and Brazilians) and Americans were trying to prove that the picture was, or wasn't, racist. Of course, this was vain, since the answer is that the same picture can be racist in the US and not in Europe, or the reverse, depending on what part of the representation of the other has become the accepted sign of racism, and whether the very act of caricature is considered insulting or not.

It is to emphasize this that, even when it means some added costs, the French publisher of Waka-Tanka has decided to keep the original cover in Europe, while the artist, David Cochard, was commissioned a new one that will be used only in the US. David even wrote a fun and clever, but also a bit angry, reaction on Facebook in which he explained that he was a caricaturist, and that not being racist meant caricaturing everyone in the same way, while refusing to caricature some groups would have been both racist and patronizing.

The French and US covers for Waka Tanka.

We also considered relocating the action in Polynesia, and replacing the totem with a tiki. This could have been fun in order, after the game had been published and raised no eyelash anywhere, to point at the irony that while there are far more Polynesians than American Indians, the latter were an issue and not the former. But changing all the graphics would have been expensive, and the animal spirit storyline would not have fitted as well in the new setting. And anyway, I have another game with tikis in the pipe, we'll see what happens…... But, indeed, such issues will cause more and more problems in a world where products and images are globalized much faster than ideas.