

# COLONIZED PLAY

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## RACISM, SEXISM AND COLONIAL LEGACIES IN THE DOTA 2 SOUTH AFRICA GAMING COMMUNITY

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Video games, it has often been argued, are products of an unequal world in which the aftermath of colonialism continues to perpetuate inequalities in the global south.<sup>1</sup> From the production of computers in southeast Asia, to the mining of coltan in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to the narratives, rules and visual regimes of mainstream games, a link between past and present imperialism and video gaming has been made. Such studies have, however, paid less attention to the link between video games, colonialism and gaming communities in the global south. In South Africa, despite slow internet rollouts and disproportionately expensive computer systems, various lively gaming communities exist—particularly in the case of one of the most popular computer games, *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013). In a relatively new democracy, where the wounds of apartheid and colonialism are still fresh, it is perhaps unsurprising that some gaming communities in South Africa are plagued by racism and sexism. The extent to which this is the case in the *Dota 2* South Africa community, however, is staggering—female players are often belittled and ridiculed, while racial slurs, including words that are punishable by fine or imprisonment, are commonplace.<sup>2</sup>

Several essays in this volume have drawn attention to how the legacies of colonialism have shaped present-day video gaming. Mainstream video games, saturated with orientalist representations of the other, imperialist politics which take the nation state as the only legitimate political unit and rules which normalize colonial conquest have inhibited the development of postcolonial game cultures.<sup>3</sup> *Dota 2* in South Africa can be regarded as a part of this trend.

This paper thus differs considerably from Jerjes Loayza's analysis of professional *Dota 2* players in Lima, Peru. His ethnographic study, which focuses on gaming at LANs and internet cafes, finds social and ludic "interface between the physical and virtual worlds."<sup>4</sup> My study, contrastingly, shows how a virtual environment in which actions have no consequences has become a space where racism, perverse historical nostalgia, and aggressive masculinity are allowed to fester amid widespread national attempts to rid the country of such colonial legacies.<sup>5</sup>

To demonstrate this, I analyze the *Dota 2* South Africa community as a product of the close connection between gaming and colonialism, a history of colonial thinking in South Africa, as well as the visual regime, rules and narrative of *Dota 2* itself. Multiplayer video games are valuable historical sources:

1. See for example, Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2012); and Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
2. Reuters, "South African Woman Jailed in Landmark Ruling for Racist Rant," *The Guardian*, 28 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/28/south-african-woman-jailed-in-landmark-ruling-for-racist-rant>.
3. See Souvik Mukherjee, "Replying the Digital Divide: Videogames in India"; Bushra Alfaraj, "Arab Gamers: An Identity Inclusivity Study"; and Rhett Loban and Thomas Apperley, "Eurocentric Values at Play: Modding the Colonial from the Indigenous Perspective," in this volume.
4. See, Jerjes Loayza, "Ludic Solidarity and Sociality: The Impact of *Dota 2* on Lima's Youth," in this volume.
5. While this chapter focuses primarily on race, it also includes a brief discussion of gender dynamics among player communities.

their rules and narratives are traces of cultures and ideologies, but they are simultaneously spaces in which cultural and social interactions take place. Within their virtual environments, there are several levels at which social interactions play out, which provide the organizational structure of the remainder of this chapter. Firstly, there are broader *global, structural and generic factors*—ideological dimensions to video game genres and practice which influence which groups of people play video games, and why. Secondly, there are *regional historical and cultural forces* which mediate such social interactions. And thirdly, the *rules and visual regimes* of individual video games influence how players interact with them, and with each other.

#### GLOBAL, STRUCTURAL AND GENERIC FACTORS: GAMES OF EMPIRE

Claudio Fogu and Wulf Kansteiner have both argued that virtual worlds will fundamentally change the production of historical consciousness. Since, as many gamers can confirm, powerful and cherished memories are produced in virtual spaces, these worlds will not only produce new histories, but change the way we think about history.<sup>6</sup> Such thinking will, no doubt, be influenced by the fact that many video games remain saturated with colonial tropes which romanticize classification and conquest. As Henry Jenkins has pointed out, part of the appeal of video games is their status as new frontiers. In an era when physical space has been thoroughly explored, virtual spaces harken back to the romance of the colonial frontier—as new regions to discover and conquer.<sup>7</sup> Such conquest is not just psycho-symbolic, but also sensitive to the legacies of colonialism and underdevelopment. Since most mainstream video games are produced and disseminated in the “developed” world, they are spaces in which primarily ex-colonial nations can continue to “conquer” the “other,” even in postcolonial periods.<sup>8</sup> Such colonial narratives often promote a still widely prevalent Western brand of historical consciousness which depicts the history of colonialism as one of “white man’s burden”—as a benevolent process of taming the wild frontier through sword and scripture or, more recently, drones and democracy.

For example, in many popular action-adventure or FPS games, the European or American white male avatar is thrust into a realm of chaos and disorder, and tasked with bringing civilization to the land—either through ridding the “noble savage” of evil and depravity, or through intervening in conflict on foreign soil.<sup>9</sup> In sandbox-building games such as *Minecraft*, the player arrives, like Robinson Crusoe, into a *terra nullius* and encourages him to “improve” this land—by clearing jungles, draining marshes, building infrastructure and mining minerals. Its inhabitants—hostile monsters or local villagers—appear simply as obstacles in the path of development, or as resources to exploit. In the map-based interfaces of strategy games, entire regions are transformed into dehumanized tracts of land and resources, ripe for exploitation.<sup>10</sup> Cartography, in the history of European colonialism, has been argued as a means by which to render land “legible”—that is, to point out its essential resources, enable their exploitation and minimize any competition to this supply of resources, such as the local

6. Claudio Fogu, “Digitising Historical Consciousness,” *History and Theory* 47 (2009): 103-121; Wulf Kansteiner, “Alternate Worlds and Invented Communities: History and Historical Consciousness in the Age of Interactive Media,” in *Manifestos for History*, eds. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, Alun Munslow (Routledge, 2007): 131-148.

7. Quoted in David Leonard, “An Untapped Field: Exploring the World of Virtual Sports Gaming,” in *Handbook of Sports and Media*, eds. Arthur Raney and Jennings Bryant (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006): 433.

8. Jules Skotnes-Brown, “Redrawing the Magic Circle: Video Games, Imperial Conquest, and Shifting Concepts of Play,” Honours Thesis, University of Cape Town, 2015, 34.

9. Ryan Lizardi, “Repelling the Invasion of the ‘Other’: Post-Apocalyptic Alien Shooter Videogames Addressing Contemporary Cultural Attitudes,” *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3.2 (2009): 295-308; Johan Höglund, “Electronic Empire: Orientalism Revisited in the Military Shooter,” *Game Studies* 8.1 (2008), <http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hoeglund>.

10. See Rhett Loban and Thomas Apperley’s chapter “Eurocentric Values at Play” in this volume for a more in-depth analysis of this. See also Rebecca Mir and Trevor Owens, “Modeling Indigenous Peoples: Unpacking Ideology in Sid Meier’s Colonization,” in *Playing With the Past: Digital Games and Simulations of History*, eds. Matthew Kapell and Andrew Elliot (Bloomsbury, 2013): 92; and Shoshana Magnet, “Playing at Colonization: Interpreting Imaginary Landscapes in the Video Game Tropic,” *Journal of Communication Enquiry* 30.2 (2006): 143.

population.<sup>11</sup> Many strategy game maps operate under the same logic. Last of all, in most role-playing games (RPGs),<sup>12</sup> playable characters are created based on biopolitical constructs of race through the linking of *physical* and *intellectual* attributes with racial types.

Take, for example, the discursive strategy visible in the following two descriptions. The first is from *Baldur's Gate II* (Bioware, 2000):

Half-orcs are born from the union of human and orc parents. They are as tall as humans, but a little heavier due to their muscular builds. Their greenish pigmentation, sloping forehead, jutting jaw, prominent teeth, and coarse body hair make their lineage plain for all to see. In the Sword Coast, half-orcs are tolerated, as unlike in the north the local people haven't had centuries of warfare with orc kind. Half-orcs are known for their great strength.<sup>13</sup>

Compare this to an account of an African skull cited in Josiah Nott and George Gliddon's *Indigenous Races of the Earth* (1868):

The front of the head, including the forehead and face, is compressed laterally [...] The bony substance is denser and harder; the sides of the skull thicker, and the whole weight consequently more considerable. The bony apparatus employed in mastication, and in forming receptacles for the organs of sense, is larger, stronger, and more advantageously constructed for powerful effect, than in the races where more extensive use of experience and reason, and greater civilization, supply the place of animal strength [...] the intellectual part is lessened, the animal organs are enlarged.<sup>14</sup>

Between these two depictions, we see similarities with regard to the treatment of racial physiognomy—both “races” are described as having sloping foreheads, flat faces, prominent jaws and enlarged teeth. Similarly, half-orcs receive a penalty to intelligence, and a bonus to strength. This makes a sense of Foucauldian biopower tangible within the game, as such classification controls the way each race can interact with the world: Half-Orcs by virtue of race are incapable of studying magic, but can excel as warriors.<sup>15</sup> Because the genre, in many ways, remains indebted to Dungeons and Dragons, and classic isometric-perspective RPGs of the 1980s and 1990s, like *Baldur's Gate* itself, such is the same in many other RPGs as well. In *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011), for example, the Khajit receive racial bonuses to stealth, lock-picking and pick-pocketing—making them racially apt thieves—in what almost seems to be a silent citation of the notorious British “Criminal Tribes” Act (1871) in India, wherein the British developed a penal system to control people believed to be hereditarily prone to crime.<sup>16</sup>

The effect of all this is that many game narrative and rule systems remain influenced by nineteenth and twentieth-century European visions of race, land and conquest. In such games, the white man is needed to liberate the “native” from her “primitive” lifestyle, land exists primarily for resource exploitation and development and racial classification is not only a biological norm, but certain races need to live according to their strengths—whether intellect, or bestial power. It is perhaps not surprising then, that video games tend not to be particularly inclusive with regard to protagonists. For David Dietrich, because many role-playing games do not “allow for the creation of avatars with a

11. James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998): 3.

12. The role-playing games I have in mind are those that allow the player to construct an avatar from a multiplicity of fictional (or real) races, all with different physical and intellectual attributes.

13. James Ohlen and Ray Muzkya, *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware, 1998), Character Creation Screen.

14. Joseph Nott and George Gliddon, *Indigenous Races of the Earth* (Trubner & Co., 1868): 325.

15. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. Graham Burchell (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999): 317-325; Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended,” in *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fortana, trans. David Macey (Picador, 2003): 239-263.

16. For a good discussion of The Criminal Tribes Act, see Andrew Major, “State and Criminal Tribes in Colonial Punjab: Surveillance, Control and Reclamation of the ‘Dangerous Classes,’” *Modern Asian Studies* 33.3 (1999): 662.

non-white racial appearance,” this results in the construction of all-white virtual spaces, “contributing to the creation of a virtual ‘white habitus.’”<sup>17</sup> The repeated attacks from “hardcore” gamers launched against those who attempt to diversify game communities—exemplified by the #Gamergate scandal of 2014—seem only to confirm such observations.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, there is a structural problem associated with “hardcore” gaming as a hobby: many communities seek isolation and the maintenance of spaces of imperial nostalgia.

REGIONAL HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL FORCES: RACISM, SOUTH AFRICAN IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE  
*DOTA 2* SOUTH AFRICA FACEBOOK GROUP CONTROVERSY (2014-2016)

As Penix-Tadsen has argued, video games both create culture, and draw upon culture as a narratological, visual or ludological resource.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the *Dota 2* South Africa gaming community is influenced both by game environments and by broader South African national political, cultural and economic identities. The current state of South African identity politics and cultural problems of racism is strongly reflected in the *Dota 2* community. Having only emerged from an institutionalized racist police state in 1994, South Africa is still battling with the historical legacies of apartheid. In mid-2014, the South African Human Rights Commission reported a spike of cases of racism, with over 500 cases in court in that year alone. From 2013 to 2014, 45% of the commission’s complaints were race-related.<sup>20</sup> This problem both coincided with and culminated in the 2015-2016 Rhodes Must Fall Student Movement, described as a reawakening of the radical youth.<sup>21</sup> This movement, which has now split into smaller groups, aimed for the decolonization of knowledge production, and the transformation of instruction to promote greater black visibility and participation.

Since 2014, the South African press, public and courts have increasingly targeted racist individuals to make an example of them in an attempt to eliminate visible forms of racism. In contrast to a series of shocking examples of physical violence,<sup>22</sup> one of the most highly publicized of these cases was an offense that took place in a closed, somewhat private space—real estate salesperson Penny Sparrow’s Facebook profile. In early January 2016, Sparrow referred to black people as “monkeys” in an inflammatory Facebook post about litter on beaches. She was tried in court and fined, what is in South Africa an incredible sum of R150,000 (\$12,500, or slightly less than a school teacher’s yearly salary) for hate speech.<sup>23</sup>

This cultural and political anti-racism campaign, emerging in the face of widespread national discussions about systemic racism and the myth of the South African “Rainbow Nation,” is thus alert to transgression in both virtual and physical spaces and seems to have had a degree of success

17. David Dietrich, “Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters,” *Sociological Enquiry* 82.1 (2013): 82-105.

18. For an interesting analysis of #Gamergate and the necessity of cultural campaigns to disrupt hyper-masculine gaming culture, see Sarah Evans and Elyse Janish, “#INeedDiverseGames: How the Queer Backlash to GamerGate Enables Nonbinary Coalition,” *QED* 2 (2015): 125-150.

19. Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (MIT Press, 2016), 1-26.

20. “SAHRC: Spike in racism-related incidents in SA,” *News 24*, 31 August 2014, <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/SAHRC-probed-over-500-racism-cases-20140731>.

21. Rebecca Hodes, “The Rhodes statue must fall: UCT’s radical rebirth,” *Daily Maverick*, 13 March 2015, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-03-13-the-rhodes-statue-must-fall-ucts-radical-rebirth/#>.

22. See for example, the case of Djavan Arrigone, who urinated on a taxi driver: Sue Segar, “I Don’t Care if I Pee on a Black Man,” *IOL News*, 15 November 2014, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/i-dont-care-if-i-pee-on-a-black-man-1780859>; Tammy Peterson, “Ex-Model Gets 200 Hours Community Service for Urinating on Taxi Driver,” *News 24*, 30 September 2016, <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/ex-model-gets-200-hours-community-service-for-urinating-on-taxi-driver-20160930>; Tammy Peterson, “Model Should Be Jailed for Racist Comments, Urinating on Me – Taxi Driver,” *News 24*, 30 September 2016, <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/model-should-be-jailed-for-racist-comments-urinating-on-me-taxi-driver-20160930>. See also the case of Tim Osrin, who assaulted a domestic worker: Masa Kekana, “Assault Victim Not Ready to Testify Against Swimming Coach,” *Eyewitness News*, 13 October 2015, <http://ewn.co.za/2015/10/13/Assault-victim-not-ready-to-testify-against-CT-swimming-coach>; Kieran Legg, “Tim Osrin ‘Ready to Plead Guilty,’” *IOL News*, 28 November 2014, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/tim-osrin-ready-to-plead-guilty-1787632>.

23. Taschica Pillay, “Penny Sparrow Ordered to Pay R150,000 for Racist Facebook Rant,” *Times Live*, 10 June 2016, <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2016/06/10/Penny-Sparrow-ordered-to-pay-R150,000-for-racist-Facebook-rant>.

in asserting that both violent actions and racist comments in digital social media speech are unacceptable and will be met with consequences.

#### RULES, RACISM AND *DOTA 2*

Before proceeding with a discussion of racism in the *Dota 2* South Africa community, a brief description of *Dota 2*'s game rules is necessary. Described as a hybrid of soccer and chess, *Dota 2* is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), a game which pits two teams of five players against each other.<sup>24</sup> These players can choose from more than one hundred heroes—units that grow progressively stronger as the game goes on, each taking on a different role. The goal of the game is to destroy the enemy team's "ancient"—a large, fortified structure. In this chapter, I am less interested in the game infrastructure in and of itself, and more focused on how the game's design impacts player communities. However, it is beyond this chapter's scope to analyze the *Dota 2* South African gaming community in its entirety, which would be a colossal task. Rather, my research is derived from interactions within the game's infrastructure (for example, game-developed chatrooms) as well as news articles and exchanges recorded on two similarly-named Facebook groups, "DOTA 2 South Africa" and "Dota 2 South Africa."<sup>25</sup>

To some extent, the South African anti-racism campaign has spread to the *Dota 2* South Africa community, however it has failed to serve as a deterrent to racism. The frontier-like virtual environment has become a space in which normal social rules, norms and etiquette do not apply: games' virtual worlds have offered socially unacceptable racism a "safe space" in which to fester. My personal experiences with the game plainly testify to this fact: during my seven years of playing the original *Warcraft III* (Blizzard, 2002) mod (*DoTA: Allstars*) and four years of playing *Dota 2* in South Africa, I have witnessed countless examples of racism and sexism, and I am not alone in such observations.<sup>26</sup> Chat logs including racial slurs, as well as graphic descriptions of gendered violence have been reproduced on numerous occasions in the two Facebook groups, as well as on other websites.<sup>27</sup> With only one exception, this use of banned hate speech has drawn very little press-publicity. In January 2014, player RapingNinja hurled racist insults at player Strider, on account of his partner being black.<sup>28</sup> Unlike the Penny Sparrow affair, whose monkey insult is light relative to the language used in this case, there was no trial, fine or forced apology. In fact, despite some players claiming to have discovered his identity, nothing happened beyond a few concerned writers penning their opinions.<sup>29</sup>

In the wake of this 2014 incident, serious, concerned discussion began in the first Facebook group, "DOTA 2 South Africa," with players detailing their experience of racism and the problems within the community. Some players considered the discussion to be somewhat productive, but within a few hours, the entire thread was deleted by a group administrator: *Dota* was "just a game" and the online

24. Valve Corporation, *Free to Play* (Documentary Film), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjZYMI1zB9s>.

25. As of December 2018, "DOTA 2 South Africa" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/dota2southafrica/>) has 4173 members, and "Dota 2 South Africa" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/dota2sa/>) has 1646.

26. I have agonized over whether to include examples of such racism and sexism in this paper or not, and in the end, decided against it. To reproduce the unacceptable speech characteristic of the *Dota 2* South Africa gaming community would be to perpetuate second-order violence.

27. There is, for example, a dedicated website for naming and shaming such racists. See "SA Gaming Racists: Name & Shame," *Youth Inspired Ascension*, <http://www.yialife.co.za/2013/12/sa-gaming-racists-name-shame/>.

28. Gavin Mannion, "Racism Continues in the Local DOTA 2 Scene," *Critical Hit Gaming*, 29 January 2014, <http://www.criticalhit.net/gaming/racism-continues-in-the-local-dota-2-scene/>.

29. See Gavin Mannion, "Racism Is a Real Problem in Local eSports," *Critical Hit Gaming*, 27 January 2014, at <http://www.criticalhit.net/gaming/racism-is-a-real-problem-in-local-esports/>. This problem has continued to plague the community until present; see "Radical Racism in South African Gaming" (reader-submitted think piece), *My News 24*, 17 April 2015, <http://www.news24.com/MyNews24/Radical-Racism-in-South-African-Gaming-20150417>. In 2016, the issue reached mainstream media, but has still not commanded a great deal of attention; see Alex Michley, "Racism Alive in Online Games," *The Citizen*, 22 January 2016, <http://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/956306/racism-alive-in-online-games-2/>.

world a hostile, offensive place, rendering the issue insignificant. Two years later, little seemed to have changed. In a poll conducted on 24 November 2016, seventy-two percent of the respondents thought that the issue should not be discussed on the group.<sup>30</sup>

In response, a new Facebook group was created on 28 January 2014 to enable productive discussions of communal racism.<sup>31</sup> Like in the physical world, players began posting screenshots of examples of racism on the Facebook group. While these well-meaning players were trying to discourage racism by asserting it as unacceptable speech, this strategy did not have the desired effect. Largely, the problem persists, with complaints about racism continuously cropping up online. Valve (the game developer) has implemented a system in which players are able to report other abusive players. Players deemed worthy of punishment are put in a ‘low-priority’ matchmaking pool until they win a certain number of games, depending on the severity of the offense. Valve does not appear to enforce a sufficiently punitive anti-racism policy and it is very difficult to identify people from their Steam profiles and prosecute them under anti-racism laws. Similarly, because video game playing (unlike Facebook use) is largely considered a leisurely and marginal activity, use of hate speech among gamers is not an issue that has been condemned by the broader non-gaming public.

It may be easy to assume here that this racism is only a result of a country battling with its own legacies of colonialism and apartheid—legacies which, under the shroud of anonymity, amidst the frontier-like virtual environment, bubble to the surface. Some psychological research has corroborated this interpretation, suggesting that since the internet is perceived as an anonymous, often lawless and hostile place, this promotes toxic behavior.<sup>32</sup> For some gamers, the more perverse or violent such behavior, the greater the psychological reward. It may also be easy to explain this problem as a result of general invisibility outside the player community and limited black visibility within the community. Perhaps because of economic and infrastructural inequality on racial lines, perhaps because of the nature of the community, there seem to be few black players by comparison with white players. No research has yet been conducted as to what these demographics are in the case of *Dota 2*, but Walton and Pallitt’s 2012 study on video games and inequality in South Africa suggests that, by and large, console and computer gaming platforms are primarily accessible in (predominantly white) middle class homes.<sup>33</sup>

Yet not all multiplayer gaming communities in South Africa have the same racism problem as the *Dota 2* community. Hence, it is essential to ask what it is about the game rules and environment of *Dota 2* itself that encourages such *visible* racism to thrive—especially given the strong connection between mainstream gaming, colonial tropes and racial discourse.

#### VISUAL REGIMES: AGGRESSIVE MASCULINITY AND THE NORMALIZATION OF WHITENESS

Several ludic features of *Dota 2* promote a toxic, aggressive space in which suppressed social prejudices can emerge. Firstly, the game is characterized by a highly stressful, hostile environment. Long respawn timers mean that when a player flounders and dies, the outcome can be disastrous and directly result in a loss. Hence, because teamwork is critical, one player’s mistake can cost the entire game. Psychological studies have argued such a social environment often generates extreme anger and frustration.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, the game promotes and affirms aggressive masculinity. Players are

30. Interestingly, this poll was conducted on the second Facebook group—which had originally been founded with the intent of facilitating productive discussions of race and racism.

31. The group’s foundational post is available here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/dota2sa/permalink/274043846086669/>.

32. John Suler, “The Online Disinhibition Effect,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7.3 (2004): 321–326.

33. Marion Walton and Nicola Pallitt, “Grand Theft South Africa: Games, Literacy and Inequality in Consumer Childhoods,” *Language and Education* 26.4 (2012): 347–361.

rewarded for killing other players through killstreaks, a booming, empowering kill announcement voice reverberates in all the other players' ears, and the more one kills, the more powerful one becomes. The game is thus a site at which players are psychically interpellated to exert coercive, violent power over one another. Thirdly, there is an abusive, militaristic hierarchy of roles within the game. Certain players take on subordinate "support" roles, who exist solely to serve "core," or "carry" players—to prevent them from being killed, to set up engagements in which they can thrive and to be their eyes and ears on the map. Ignorance of this, deliberate or not, can be extremely frustrating for players in core/essential roles, who believe they are entitled to subservient support. Yet, the game does not actively enforce any of these roles or rules. Rather, players take this task upon themselves and, in doing so, often resort to rage, insults or passive aggression. Valve has been battling since the initial release of the game to address this toxicity problem, and has had little success. The game infrastructure psychologically rewards individual excellence through kill to death ratios, and an economy based on claiming bounties for killed enemies. It punishes failure through monetary-penalties for dying. Yet it simultaneously requires teamwork to procure a victory, and this often involves support players sacrificing themselves for core players. Support players, who earn virtually no in-game money, and end up with poor kill to death ratios, and become an easy target for attack. Such an environment provides fertile ground in which suppressed social prejudices can manifest.

*Dota 2*'s visual regime contributes to this environment. Like many games, the avatars appear to be constructed with a predominantly white male audience in mind, and create a caricature of sexualized femininity. All fourteen female humanoid characters at the time of writing are conventionally attractive or sexualized in some way, with the exception of Medusa (whose backstory is, notably, about her loss of beauty) and Legion Commander, who will be discussed shortly. While some male humanoid characters are sexualized, there is a plurality of look—from plump Pudge, to veiled Sven or Dragon Knight, to conventionally handsome Omniknight or roguish Kunkka. Further, characters of color are woefully underrepresented. Out of twenty-five "human-based" characters (characters based on real-world races) only two are black. The first, Chen, is a support hero—a character that sits at the bottom of the in-game hierarchy, and is expected help the core heroes generate income. The second, Legion Commander, is a notable deviation from the game's racial and gendered norm.<sup>35</sup> This black female core hero, styled as a powerful front-line feudal general, was introduced on 26 January 2014. Interestingly, she is also the only hero whose gender was changed in the transition from the original *DoTA Warcraft III* mod, to the standalone *Dota 2*. This change was likely an attempt to diversify the game and bodes well for future development.<sup>36</sup> However, for now, there is still obvious racial underrepresentation, and most female characters remain highly sexualized. This has the effect of normalizing the white heterosexual male, and places diversity on his terms.<sup>37</sup>

In the face of a ruleset that generates anger, frustration and toxicity, a visual regime designed to appeal

34. Megan Hughes and Johann Louw, "Playing Games: The Salience of Social Cues and Group Norms in Eliciting Aggressive Behaviour," *South African Journal of Psychology* 43.2 (2013): 252-262.

35. Some players have made efforts to discuss this problem. See for example the following thread, where the concern is dismissed as "Fuckin sjws": [https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/4i8qyq/why\\_is\\_there\\_only\\_black\\_hero\\_in\\_dota\\_serious/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/4i8qyq/why_is_there_only_black_hero_in_dota_serious/).

36. *DoTA Allstars* was originally a mod for *World of Warcraft III* (Blizzard, 2002), which became more popular than the game itself. Legion Commander from the original mod was a pompous moustachioed racist white man whose voiced dialogue exhibited a disdain for any non-human races. For a discussion of this, see "The Turn of the Tide: International eSports and the Undercurrency in *Dota 2*," in Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (University of Minneapolis Press, 2017).

37. *Dota 2*'s considerable and fast-growing support base in China also appears to be encouraging the game developers to diversify the game. In 2014, the game developers introduced a New Bloom festival in-game event in commemoration of the Chinese New Year. In the same year, hero "Ember Spirit" (although still somewhat fitting Said's discussion of orientalism) was introduced, and styled as a feudal Taoist "Asian" soldier. In 2017, Sun Wokong, a mythological Song dynasty (900-1279) character was introduced into the game as a new hero. Such attempts at diversity are a step in the right direction, which will hopefully in future include the African continent as well. I am indebted to Stephanie Boluk for this observation.

to a white-hetero-male player and affirm his agency, it is not surprising that the game in South Africa at least, remains a space of racism, sexism and colonial nostalgia.

#### CONCLUSION

To conclude, I argue that there are three factors that have created a toxic, racist culture in the *Dota 2* South Africa community. Firstly, a broader structural problem associated with online “hardcore” video gaming—that it is largely considered a white hobby, and many mainstream games affirm a colonialism-friendly conception of historical consciousness. Secondly, South Africa’s cultural and political history has created an environment in which racist attitudes exist and are largely suppressed in public. However, such attitudes emerge in the “safe spaces” provided by anonymity and the nature of online gaming as a wild-west-style frontier. Thirdly, the rules and visual regime of *Dota 2* appeal to white aggressive-masculinity and affirm unconscious desires for power in a country where certain communities feel disempowered and emasculated by the *perceived* loss of white minority power through affirmative action.<sup>38</sup> This constructs spaces of perverse historical nostalgia and discourages the formation of inclusive gaming communities.

Clearly, this points to a degree of feedback between game cultures, national identities and historical consciousness. Since other essays in this volume have treated virtual and physical spaces as porous or imbricated, the pertinent question is to what extent these game spaces translate suppressed racism into *visible* racism in physical spaces.<sup>39</sup> That is, does the creation and maintenance of virtual racist spaces encourage unacceptable behavior in the physical world? And lastly, given the vast temporal, emotional and financial investments the game demands, how many people who previously may not have held racist attitudes, or may have suppressed them, are being indoctrinated into this racist culture and perpetuating it in other spheres of society?

These are important questions, and it is essential that we keep asking them. With that said, and on a slightly more positive note, in an era when progressive forces appear to be crumbling under the vanguard of racism, sexism, islamophobia, homophobia and transphobia—as exemplified by leaders like Donald Trump—video games actually have the potential to challenge and subvert such ideologies. Since games are spaces that can mold historical consciousness as well as create and reinforce social norms, they are also spaces that can act as forces to re-forge such norms when game infrastructure is critically re-examined and the legacies of colonialism and apartheid are rejected. It is a dual responsibility of gaming communities to expose intolerant players, and for developers to reimagine the role they play in fostering such intolerance.

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38. Economic data does not support this perception. See Anna Orthofer, “Wealth inequality in South Africa,” *REDI3x3 Working Paper* 15 (2016): 20-21.

39. See Jerjes Loayza, “Ludic Solidarity and Sociality” and Verónica Valdivia Medina, “National Cultures and Digital Space: The Case of World of Warcraft,” in this volume.



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