

Colonial Discourse and Cultural Memory in Eurogames

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Introduction:

In studying the impacts of cultural artifacts on critical social discourse, one of the most unexplored areas remains analog games, and specifically board games. Long one of the more popular forms of entertainment, board games experienced a decline in cultural relevance during the latter half of the 20th century. Today, however, they are experiencing a renaissance spurred by both generational preferences and design innovations. New “Eurogames,” based more on competition and resource management than direct conflict, have become the dominant type of game, with the most famous recent example being *The Settlers of Catan*. However, this type of competition often lends itself to colonial patterns of thinking. Especially when approached from a structuralist perspective, the theme and design of these games carry cultural and discursive implications for the generation of knowledge regarding indigenous communities and its translation into cultural memory.

This essay regards the intersection of postcolonial theory and game studies by identifying the formal features of games that contribute to colonial discourses within two board games: *Navegador* and *Archipelago*. First, I will discuss the implications of board games as artifacts of cultural memory through structuralist theory and will extend these implications by linking structuralism and material culture to Roger Caillois’ theory of games. The second section provides an overview of the rules of each game to give context for the mechanisms relevant to the analysis. The third section contains a comparative analysis of the games’ mechanisms, and posits that three primary features of these games embed colonial discourse in cultural memory: Orientalism in the textual discourse, abstraction worker placement mechanisms, and the semi-cooperative style of competition.

Structuralism, Material Culture, and Cultural Memory:

The field of structuralism provides a medium for analyzing the implications of Eurogames’ discursive effects. Applied to material culture such as board games, structuralism is based on the notion that patterns of thought are implied in the construction of interactive artifacts, and that

one's interaction with those artifacts forces one to use those patterns of thought with which the artifact was constructed (Prown qtd. in Begy 721). Because the aim of structuralist analysis of material culture is to reveal subconscious patterns of thought, scholars like Prown believe that objects made without the intent to express a viewpoint provide the best examples for analysis (Prown qtd. in Begy 722). Board games are intended for sale, not to make a statement. This makes them ideal subjects for structural analysis.

Scholars have supported these theories with studies surrounding the acquisition of knowledge, like David Olson and Nancy Torrance's observation that learning "is tied to activity and experience in the world before it is learned in the form of facts and information," as they write in *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy* (14). Board games serve specific roles within this real-world activity and experience which shape how we can learn. For example, they support the generation of what David W. Shaffer et al. call "situated understanding" by forcing us to make decisions as another person using the information they would have (106). Adam Chapman furthers this point, arguing that this situated understanding engenders the artifact's structural patterns of thought through the "approximation of experiential knowledge," which has the capacity to build empathy (qtd. in Begy 720). Board games can also serve to simulate historically situated structural metaphors; Jason Begy's cogent analysis of the metaphorical annihilation of perceived time and space in several railroad-based board games makes this clear.

When these structural patterns of thought are embedded in material culture like board games, they become part of what is known as cultural memory. Cultural memory concerns itself not with how the past occurred, but rather with how the past is recorded within culture (Begy 719); material culture is therefore both a recipient of and a driver of this cultural memory. When problematic themes like misrepresentations of colonialism are embedded in material culture, there are implications both for how that past is constructed in the present and for how those patterns of thought are transmitted to the next generation.

To more clearly understand the structural implications of discourse in board games, I here suggest extending Roger Caillois' theory of games to the concept of cultural memory and its intersection with material culture summarized by Jason Begy. Roger Caillois was one of the seminal scholars

in the field of game studies. In his book *Man, Play, and Games*, he outlines a theory of what constitutes play and some early frameworks for analyzing games, like the Paidia-Ludus continuum between games that involve improvisation and fantasy versus those that involve discipline and conventions. Though most of his work has been appropriated into more modern frameworks of analysis, one distinguishing attribute of his work was that he did not study games for their own sake; rather, he used games as a lens through which to view sociology, arguing that we play “games” even when we might not perceive ourselves to (Davenport 179). If, as scholars like Begy and Prown argue, board games impact cultural memory as a part of material culture, and, as Caillois argues, game structures are present in and applicable to other parts of life, then the structural patterns of thought altered by discourse in board games should carry through to games played in other areas of life. Thus, I propose that the combination of these theories confirms that patterns of thought engendered by games have non-diegetic impacts.

This becomes particularly relevant when considering the history of discourse in colonial contexts. Colonial discourses were created to legitimate the oppression of foreign peoples (Nayar 5). Ipso facto, they have always arisen *before* colonization as opposed to simultaneously. Regarding the British colonization of India, for example, discourses surrounding the purported tyranny of local monarchs and the so-called pathetic state of subjects arose as a way to legitimate British rule establishing order (Nayar 5-7). However, to view colonial discourses as purely historical is to reject the vast literature of postcolonialism. Because iterations of colonial discourses continue into today, these current colonial discourses therefore serve to legitimate continued oppression into the future. As such, these discourses embedded in cultural memory through board games – and extended to other areas of life through structural patterns of thought – have implications for the future of marginalized communities.

Summaries of Game Mechanics:

In order to comparatively discuss the features of *Navegador* and *Archipelago*, it is first necessary to describe their mechanisms in order to contextualize the analysis. These sections will briefly describe each game’s features, to the extent that they are relevant to the following analysis.

Navegador

Navegador invokes both area-control and resource-control core mechanisms in its gameplay. These mean that the strategies of the game revolve around both controlling space on the board and managing in-game resources in the most economical way (Mayer and Harris 12-15). The easiest way to measure these aims is through the endgame: in *Navegador*, this occurs when one player has either explored the last region or run out of available buildings.

In the game, each player controls ships, workers, and buildings. These buildings can be either shipyards, factories, or churches. Using a combination of workers and ships, players have the opportunity to establish new colonies designated for gold, spices, or sugar. Ships are used to sail into new waters and transport resources, workers are used in both resource collection and building construction, colonies are used for the extraction of resources, shipyards are used for the creation of new ships, factories are used for the processing of resources, and churches are used for the creation of new workers. Resources can be exchanged for money, which can then be used to create new ships or workers.

The turn structure is controlled by a rondel, a wheel of sorts, which contains a list of possible actions: sailing, [creation of] workers, market, [creation of] colony, [use of a] privilege, [creation of] ships, market again, and finally [creation of] buildings. A marker is used for the current turn, and the next player can either place the marker on one of the next three options on the wheel free of charge or pay one ship per space past those three. So, if the previous player had chosen the action "sailing," then I could select "workers," "market," or "colony" for free, or pay two ships to select "ships."

When either all regions have been explored or all of a player's buildings used, one final round is played before victory points are calculated. Exploring regions allows a player to collect explorers, which give victory points. Cash and resources are also translated into victory points. While the specific calculations are not relevant to this analysis, it is sufficient to note that the player with the most victory points wins the game.

Archipelago

Archipelago is based on region tiles, resources, workers, and a rebellion level. The region tiles are hexagons, which players have the option to draw from a pile and add to the map. Resources are extracted from the regions upon discovery and can be extracted during a player's turn. Workers are used to perform actions and construct/control buildings. The rebellion level is determined by a combination of factors; if the rebellion level surpasses a certain threshold, the game is lost for everyone.

Each player draws an objective card at the beginning of the game, which remains secret throughout. On each card are end-game conditions and procedures for calculating victory points. When any player's end-game conditions are met, the game is over and players are assigned victory points based on the conditions of the card which triggered the game's end.

Each turn of the game is played in six phases, which I shall briefly describe here. In the first phase, all units are disengaged from their previous activity, rebels become active citizens, and evolution cards (which carry specific effects) on the card market are turned 90 degrees clockwise, which assigns a different price to them. In the second phase, players bet florins, the game's currency, for who will determine the order of play for that round. In the third phase, worker and rebel populations change. Having enough resources will increase potential workers, which can be recruited into the game for money; having too many excess resources and idle workers will increase the rebellion level. In the fourth phase, all citizens are temporarily laid down as rebels, and players must give up resources to stand citizens back up; citizens not stood back up at the end increase the rebellion level until the next disengagement. In phase five, players can perform a variety of actions, which will be described hereafter. Lastly, in phase six, players can purchase evolution cards, which have special impacts on the game.

There are a range of actions available to a player during the fifth phase: levy taxes, harvest resources, transactions, exploration, reproduction, recruitment, migration, and construction. Players use action tokens (of which they start off with three per turn) to perform any of these. Levying taxes gains florins from a player's citizens and buildings, but moves up the rebellion marker. Harvesting resources uses non-engaged units to extract resources from one of a player's regions. Transactions

allow players to buy or sell resources on the domestic or export markets. Exploration allows a player to take a new hexagon from the region deck and add it to the map. Reproduction allows a player to gain a new citizen, provided that he has two citizens in the same region. Recruitment lets the player pay to recruit new workers from the surplus workers board; this is like reproduction, but costs money. Migration enables the player to transport citizens across regions. Construction allows a player to build a port, market, temple, or town. These buildings require citizens to control them. Ports give the player access to two transactions on the export market without use of an action token, while markets do the same for the domestic market. Temples allow unlimited standing up of citizens in the temple's region during a crisis. Towns allow the control of all buildings in a region with only one citizen.

Comparative Analysis:

The following section will comparatively analyze the formal features of *Navegador* and *Archipelago* to identify the features' effects. The differences in the implementations of certain mechanics provide opportunities to draw conclusions surrounding their implementation, and thus form the backbone of this case study methodology. This section will discuss Orientalism in the textual discourses, abstraction within the worker placement mechanisms, and the semi-cooperative natures of the games as it relates to the differentiation of human processes.

Orientalism in the Textual Discourse

Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* gives a vocabulary with which to describe the construction of the identities of those outside the West. In this book, Said describes two spheres: the Occident (the West) and the Orient (everywhere else). Said's main thesis was that the Orient's identity was constructed in terms of the Occident, which contributed to a self-other dynamic that privileged the West as the default. He further argued that because of power dynamics, colonial discourse, which is simply the vocabulary we use to describe things as they relate to how we construct that knowledge and identity in our minds, flowed only from the Occident to the Orient (Said). Stuart Hall has extended Said's work in his book *The West and the Rest: Discourses and Power* to identify two primary features of colonial discourse: stereotyping and the creation of a good/bad

dynamic (205). Stereotyping involves the generalization of attributes surrounding the subaltern, while the creation of a good/bad dynamic positions attributes of the subaltern as good or bad in relation to their benefit to the Occident (205).

The very first sentence of *Navegador's* description sets the scene by explaining that Henrique o Navegador has ordered his best sailors and cartographers to "explore" the African coast. Even from this sentence, the use of the word "explore" connotes a *terra nullius*, a term in postcolonial discourse studies that describes when a place is viewed as empty by the colonizer even though it is inhabited by indigenous peoples (Ashcroft et al. 257). As Mills notes in her work *Discourse*, the first step in colonization is making the colonized seem subhuman (97); discourses using words like "exploring" to describe what was essentially trespassing presents the rights of the indigenous as nonexistent from the very beginning.

The text also repeatedly refers to distant seas using only the word "unknown." While this word connotes less activity than the word "explore" and hence is less intrinsically threatening, it certainly demonstrates how the territory of the Orient is constructed in terms of the Occident. After all, these areas of the ocean were certainly not unknown to the Oriental peoples who inhabited them; the fact that these areas are still constructed through the Occident's perspective in the game is telling of the structural patterns of thought that shaped both colonialism and the creation of this specific game.

Archipelago demonstrates similar Orientalism in its textual discourse. It, too, uses the specific word "exploration" to describe the activity of creating colonies, just as *Navegador* does, both in the rules and on the board. It also uses words that create a general positive impression of the era, calling this period in history "the Great Age of Discovery." The positive aspects of colonialism were felt by the colonizer, while the negative aspects were shouldered onto the subaltern, the term used in postcolonial studies to describe a colonized people (Ashcroft et al. 244). Thus, by describing the time period of colonialism as a "Great Age," there is also a clear self-other dynamic of Orientalism because the entire experience is constructed in terms of the Occident, which reaped the benefits, as opposed to the Orient, which was subjugated.

My prior analysis should be sufficient to demonstrate the Orientalist tendencies of these games' textual discourses. However, it does

not yet prove why the textual discourse as an element of game design is particularly important in ingraining colonialism in cultural memory. The reason the textual discourse specifically is important is because it relates directly to the second part of Hall's concept of colonial discourses: the creation of a good/bad dynamic regarding stereotypes of the subaltern. I would posit that the textual discourse within the rules and nomenclature sets the context for the game, and thus tells the player how to interpret the patterns of thought they gain from the game's mechanics, adding to the mechanics' intrinsic discursive value. As such, the textual discourse serves as the game mechanism by which that good/bad dynamic is established.

Abstraction within the Worker Placement Mechanism

Abstraction, in game design, is the amount of overlap between what the rules of the game govern and all actions that one could imagine to be possible in the game (Fernandez-Vara 143). It would obviously be impossible to fully simulate every possible aspect of a world in a game. Moreover, one of the strengths of board games specifically is that they abstract more than video games do, and by simplifying those strategies they can allow players to engage more intensely with the strategy. Thus, a vital decision in game design is which elements to abstract and why. *Navegador* and *Archipelago* abstract worker placement elements in different ways, but to similar effects. *Navegador* abstracts out the entire notion of native peoples, while *Archipelago* abstracts out the difference in compensation between native labor and indigenous slave labor.

Navegador abstracts the entire presence of the subaltern from a physical perspective. Despite the fact that millions upon millions of natives were murdered in the expansion of Portugal's territory, there is no mention whatsoever of the natives or the violence inflicted upon them in order to secure resources. What makes this abstraction, specifically, and not a complete erasure is that one can still extract resources from the colonies like sugar, which necessarily would have been harvested by the natives. As a result, I would note that the game deems the products of subaltern labor important enough to include, but not their bodies themselves; this ingrains the thought of subjugating existence to labor in cultural memory through cultural memory's link to material culture.

Archipelago's worker placement mechanism involves the recruitment of labor from the potential worker board, but does not

differentiate between native and immigrant labor in recruiting new workers. During the colonial era, immigrants coming to the new world would be paid, while native labor would be expropriated (Seed 1). In the game, however, all labor taken from the potential worker board requires compensation. This imbalance represents a historical inaccuracy to which players of the game are forced to subscribe when playing.

To interrogate the relevance of abstraction to colonial discourse, I again will turn to Hall's two elements of colonial discourse: stereotyping and the creation of a good/bad dynamic. Abstraction within the worker placement mechanism contributes to the concept of stereotyping in colonial discourse; to put it simply, the creation of generalizations. The fact that the only relevant purpose of the natives is their ability to create resources in *Navegador*, despite their myriad roles both in their own societies and relating to colonialism, is a testament that abstracting some of their roles necessarily leads to generalization and stereotyping, and therefore contributing towards colonial discourse, which is embedded in cultural memory.

One might ask, however, why only I only discuss abstraction in the context of the worker placement mechanism as a contributor to colonial discourse in the game. After all, if abstraction leads to generalization, would it not be accurate to say that the more abstracted the game, the more problematic it will be? Games with more generalizations with regards to natives, one might argue, will necessarily involve the removal of their unique elements at the expense of game mechanics in all areas of their culture.

The reason why abstraction is only a driver of colonial discourse within the worker placement mechanism is because in other areas, significant abstraction outside of worker placement can actually clarify some discursive elements at the same time that it erases others. I will use the church's representation in both games to illustrate this. Historically speaking, the church was purported to be involved in Iberian colonization for the altruistic purpose of saving the natives' souls; the expropriation of their labor was necessary for the repentance of their sins (Seed 3). This pretext justified the slavery on moral grounds.

In *Archipelago*, the role of the church is much less abstracted than in *Navegador*. The church in *Archipelago* has an intimate relationship with the rebellion level, as churches are able to convert rebel citizens to active

ones (and therefore from bad citizens to good citizens in the game's discourse) both through their intrinsic function as well as through a number of evolution cards one can purchase. This role is very complex and involves more real elements than in *Naveagor*: the overlap between the rules and what the world permitted is greater. However, in the much more abstracted *Navegador*, no such altruistic purpose for the church exists. Rather, its sole function is to create workers. In this way, the game actually cuts through the colonial discourse of altruism and makes clear its true objective (the creation of labor), even if it still erases the element of indigenous slavery. This demonstrates how the erasure of some elements from the game design can actually necessitate that other elements be altered to reflect their true historical natures.

Semi-Cooperative Structure and Differentiation of Human Processes

The last major feature of the games that impacts their colonial discourses is the differentiation of the human processes of natives and immigrants, which relates to the semi-cooperative structure of the game. *Navegador*, since it does not include the presence of natives, is more difficult to address from this perspective. In *Archipelago*, however, the differentiation of human processes is apparent. Rebels, for example, cannot reproduce. They also are described as "lazy" people who "refuse to work," meaning that they do not pay taxes. Furthermore, they cannot own or use buildings in the same way that active citizens can.

From a game design perspective, the existence of the other (the subaltern) within a semi-cooperative or cooperative game design – meaning where there are scenarios that can result in positive payoffs for multiple players, incentivizing win-win cooperation (Zagal et al. 26) – necessitates the differentiation of human processes. Humans have complex decision-making processes within our minds which are very difficult to simulate, particularly within a board game as opposed to a video game. As a result, when some objects within the game are intended to be natives, it becomes necessary to simplify their characteristics rather than attempt to simulate such complex human processes.

What makes this context interesting is that the problem also hints at the solution. Rather than making a board game semi-cooperative, what if the game were instead competitive, where two players are competing against one another? This strategy of critical modification, or correcting

board games that are currently problematic by adjusting their game mechanics, could involve the inclusion of one player as the subaltern and the other as the colonizer. In this way, the human processes of each side would be equal in complexity and the subaltern would not be reduced to a figurine lacking agency. However, like all solutions, this comes with drawbacks. Board games are generally designed to involve many players; this is a part of their social value that makes them so appealing. Therefore, critically modifying a game to be competitive rather than semi-cooperative could decrease the group social appeal of these types of games.

Conclusion

I first contextualized this analysis through the concepts of structuralism and cultural memory, which scholars have linked to material culture. I then connected this concept of cultural memory to Caillois' theory of games to further situate the implications of colonial discourses in board games, arguing that if board games impact cultural memory as a part of material culture, and if game structures are present in and applicable to other parts of life, then the structural patterns of thought altered by discourse in board games should carry through to games played in other areas of life. After the case studies' game mechanics were described, I concluded that Orientalism in the textual discourse, abstraction in worker placement mechanisms, and differentiation of human processes between natives and colonizers drive the ingraining of colonialism into cultural memory.

Although the implications of this are rather extensively described through the connection of structuralism and cultural memory to Caillois' theory, they are worth repeating. The patterns of mind engendered by certain mechanics in games translate into games that we may subconsciously play in other areas of life. Because colonial discourses are used to preemptively legitimate oppression, these discourses furthered by games serve the roles of legitimating future oppression of indigenous populations.

While this analysis briefly described a critical modification strategy with regard to competitive versus semi-cooperative gaming, future research should aim to identify other ways that the mechanisms shown here to embed colonialism in cultural memory could be critically modified without losing complexity or appeal. Other research could choose to isolate

either mechanics or theme through case studies to determine their relative importance. Furthering Caillois' theory of games could be yet another area of future study, for example identifying game psychology in everyday life and applying these mechanics frameworks to those games to identify their relative strength and impacts.

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