

Counter fictions from the margins

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, I embarked in an Art & Games World Tour in order to decentralize myself and my curatorial and artistic practices to promote voices and creations that have been placed on the margins of the hegemonic West. By choosing to travel, meet and interview game developers with a queer, feminist and decolonial focus, I wanted to go to the edge of the margins, to hear and make heard voices from the margins of their society in Global South countries. If marginalized populations are not looking for representations in the media according to Adrienne Shaw, it is often because when these representations are present, they are only caricatures and it is up to the content producers to take in charge the representation issue by offering more diversity. My Art & Games World Tour on the margins plans to focus on content producers who offer counter-fictions to elaborate a "counter-hegemony" in the face of the dominant powers.

Keywords

Margins, counter fictions, people of colour, queer, feminism, decolonial, African futurism

INTRODUCTION

Only the study of the "margins" leads to an understanding of what is occurring at the "center". These precepts, drawn from the teaching of Bruno Etienne, sociologist of the margins of modern society, pointing to an anthropological vision that observes what is at stake in distant societies in order to better understand our own (Levi-Strauss, 1955), resonate with the reading of Feminist Theory from the margins to the center by bell hooks.(2014) The notion that the center cannot think of itself, nor be aware of its own privileges, runs through bell hooks' thinking when she reminds feminists that the feeling of fighting all together, against one common enemy, the male, is actually pure fiction.

This is what I realized when I decided to embark on a journey "outside the American and European beaten paths", (Acker, 2019) to meet digital artists and independent developers and to come back with a more nuanced overview of the different ways gaming communities across the world are exploring the issue of diversity, with an emphasis on female, queer and decolonial practices. To be able to make a comparative study although not exhaustive of the different emerging markets of video games and digital in the countries of the South, I wanted to cover all the continents and chose to go only to countries that are not "white" and find countries where the independent video game is emerging and where there is digital art and potentially artists who use the game as a medium. What determined the choice of countries was first the significant presence of game studios and digital artists, a sector that is more or less helped by local institutions, video game fairs, an interesting geopolitical situation, or the presence of an activist, queer scene. The post-colonial dimension also

played a role in the choice of countries visited in order to give a contrasting vision of this notion. Then, on the African continent, after having inquired with various studios, I selected the countries according to the emergence of a video game market and the presence of digital artists and favored Nigeria and Kenya as well as Ghana.

If Western countries have recently realized the need to promote gender, sexuality, and race diversity in video games and in the contemporary art world, with the organization of events such as GaymerX or Rainbow Arcade, to name a few, I wanted to better understand the situation of marginalized populations in Global South countries.

It is thus necessary to assume multiple points of view to look at the world through different prisms, through texts conceived by the populations themselves, and to deconstruct as many norms as possible: feminine/masculine, as well as boundaries between natural and artificial, animal and human (Haraway, 1991) and the hegemonic center and all its peripheries. The space of the web and its less hierarchical structure can allow the hatching of previously invisible and unheard voices. Djamila Ribeiro (2017) refers to blogs, podcasts, and forums, that allow the emergence of invisible words, a word that is not that of the expert.

To operate these "steps sideways" made it possible for me to apprehend the center from the margin in a more complex way and to analyze the interrelationships between the different systems of oppression at work in society and to deconstruct fictions such as that of an essentialist feminist identity or a national identity. These institutionalized fictions are « Imaginary communities » according to Adrienne Shaw quoting Stuart Hall describing the process of nation building as:

« To put it crudely, however different its members may be in terms of class, gender, or race, a national culture unify them in one cultural identity, to represent them as belonging to the same great national family » (Hall, quoted in Shaw, 2014) Fictions imagined by the hegemonic center to arouse the adhesion of the crowds, without allowing deeper reflection about the complexity of identity and representation matters.

To grasp the question of representation in video games, Adrienne Shaw sets out to meet people on the bangs of the dominant video game culture built around a stereotypical image of the player: the heterosexual white male American cisgender. "To find out what people who are seen at the edges of this constructed market think about representation and identification with game characters. Using online survey and fliers posted online and throughout various neighborhoods in Philadelphia, I sought out interviewees who were not male identified not solely white identified and/or not heterosexual identified." (Shaw, 2014, p. 42)

What Adrienne Shaw first demonstrates is that the interviewees, on the edge of a default gender or a default heterosexuality, do not necessarily identify with one or more of these identifiers. Adrienne Shaw deconstructs the different identities to which a human being can relate to and she demonstrates that being part of a group does not mean that you can identify yourself with all the identifiers that appear within the group. To go beyond, they point out that just because you identify yourself as part of a marginalized group, it does not mean that you can identify with a character in the game who is supposed to represent that group. Like, not all black men and women are the same, not all the queer people behave in the same way, and not all women want the same things or identify to one or several of these identifiers. Especially because of gender, race and sexist stereotypes,

"A femme woman of color... will probably not be recognized as lesbian, first because she is not white, and then because she is not butch" (Walker quoted in, Shaw, 2014, p. 16)

If for their interviewees, the representation issue in games isn't "that important", it's first because representation is intrinsically linked to the identification issue for them. Adrienne Shaw explains that they will more likely identify with life experiences and emotions than with characters who are "like them" or who are potentially supposed to represent them by "a kind of carefully regulated segregated visibility". (Hill, quoted in Shaw, 2014, p.19) Beyond an essentialist vision of identity that suggests that our race, our gender, our sexual orientation defines us, the process of identification is much more complex and will depend on our background, our encounters, our life moments.

"In her essay *Travels in Nowhere Land*, Bird argues that "we must try to see how media use hits into the entire complex web of culture, understanding how it articulates with such factors as class, gender, race, leisure and work habits and countless other variables" (Shaw, 2014, p. 47)

HYBRID IDENTITIES

It then raises the question of hybrid identities that do not conform to the class, gender or sex stereotypes proposed by most of the texts contained in the media, whether books, films, or video games. They denounce community marketing attempts to attract different minority communities by targeting them in a very stereotypical way and gives the example of the market for girls' games, which, in the lineage of Barbie games, perpetuate a binary vision of gender. What Judith Butler has conceptualized as gender performance and gender role assignment by the dominant culture. The two authors thus set out to challenge a stereotypical view of gender, sex, and class identity and show how each human being is a very particular mix of all these identifiers, and that depending on education, cultural background, and environment, these identifiers are likely to evolve and change. Each one speaks of a different place and time, Adrienne Shaw defines herself as a middle class American queer woman. Identity, like gender, are not rigid or immovable concepts, but to be understood in their interrelationship, their transformation, their fluidity.

In my first machinima video « I is an other », I addressed the question of multiple identities based on the premise that what founds us are all those others we have inside ourselves, our roots, our ancestors, our social interactions. (Arvers, 2012) And rather than thinking of the other as external to myself, I assume that I am someone else and that the more I meet others, the more I learn about myself, and the more I am able to understand the other inside me. We are all strangers to someone, somewhere. Our difference is what allows us to be with others and to interact with the world. The other is not one that should scare us because it is different. It is not necessarily an alien, an enemy, a zombie, a terrorist, or a villain; like in most of the games. The other can be a collaborator, a friend, a stranger who helps us, who dialogues with us and hears us, sustains us, accompanies us. On the web and in video games, our identity is based on our interactions, on what we produce.

« As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction »¹¹ (Turkle, 1996)

¹ Turkle. Sherry (January 1996). "Who Am We? : We are moving from modernist calculation toward postmodernist simulation, where the self is a multiple, distributed system," *Wired Magazine*, Issue 4.01, January 1996.

As highlighted by A. Giddens, the identity of an individual is based on its ability to create and maintain a narrative on what s/he thinks of themselves. (Giddens, 1991) Our identity is then defined by the discourse that we make about ourselves for the others. This is where the work done through the détournement of game engines in machinima reformulates and plays with these identity questions. Adrienne Shaw points out, that there is a need to rethink issues of identification and representation in the light of critical identity theory and move beyond an intersectional approach. As an example, they cite the words of one of their interviewees:

“I look white-ish and I don't speak Spanish, so I was always the gringo in Miami. And then I come up here and I've had people say that I am not white. And I'm always confused. (...) As Davon articulated, however, he did not see himself as at the intersection per se. He was both and neither, which resonates more readily with Homi Bhabba's notion of “third space” than it does with intersectionality.” (Shaw, 2014, p. 44)

This “third space” notion reflects the possibility in a human being's life to endorse multiple identities depending on cross cultural contexts and on the interaction with others. It deals with hybridization of cultures and the apparition of an “in between” space, at the interstice, built upon the fusion of disparate identities. “...the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and , a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.” (Bhabba, quoted in Rutherford, 1990)

Which resonates with my personal childhood and teenage-hood. Being French and white, I was born in Paris, raised by two descendants from different cultures. My father was born in the deep Tunisian south in a Maltese family, my grandfather on my mother side was a Jewish Ukrainian. I built myself with narratives from different contexts, environments, with migratory social, political and psychological specific issues. The inner meaning of the machinima « I is an other »² is related to these personal experiences of cross cultural identities built upon time, meetings, life experiences that shape ourselves along our lives.

“Selves - and their identities - are formed through relationships of exteriority, conflict and exclusion. Differences can be found within identities as well as between them. The Other, against whose resistance the integrity of an identity is to be established, can be recognized as part of the self that is no longer plausibly understood as a unitary entity but appears instead as one fragile moment in the dialogic circuits.” (Gilroy, quoted in Shaw, 2014, p. 77)

The influence of urban culture, media and global economy, as highlighted by (Canclini, 1995) is also blurring borders between an hegemonic center and multiple peripheries and create multiple temporalities and realities.

INTERCULTURAL STORYTELLING

Adrienne Shaw principally focuses on issues of representation and identification of their interviewees with one or more game characters, but questions rarely the notion of representation of the environments in which the characters evolve. As they explain, it is hard to identify with a “cursor” as characters are sometimes seen by players, but what about the environment in which they play, the sets, the vegetation, the urban architecture, the surrounding sounds? Very rarely, their book addresses the notion of

² I is an other, Machinima, Isabelle Arvers, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04l2tAgc7Hs>

representation of non-Western game environments, nor of stories with contexts that aren't related to Western history and imaginations.

It seems to me that scenery, music, spaces, cities, types of social or economic organization other than those imposed in most of Triple A games should also be addressed in terms of representation. Whether or not the games are a reflection of reality, they give a certain representation of it, unfold a morality, a vision of the world that is generally that of Europe or the United States. When I was in India looking for games and works that could help them discover the culture, history or politics of a country, I met game designers who were concerned about being able to play inside other spaces, other cultural representations, other ways of representing reality.

While in Pune, to give a Machinima workshop to MIT Cinema students, I interviewed the independent game studio Noddingheads in October 2019. Founded by three people, Ian Maude, Shruti Ghosh and Avichal Singh, Noddingheads aimed to create one of the most ambitious games in India around a tale rooted in the history of ancient India. The idea for *Raji*, an adventure and action game set in ancient India with many environmental puzzles and many "mandala" puzzles, came from a vacation trip to Jaisalmer in Rajasthan, in 2014. The medieval architecture of this small town captivated and inspired the team. They then began to dream of being able to play in a game that would take place in this type of setting. Because, as Avichal Singh declared:

"We feel that there is a definite need to represent Indian culture through *Raji*, which adds to the authenticity of the game. We don't want the game to be about India alone, we want the players to feel present, to marvel at the majestic splendour of both the environment and the culture. Another aspect of *Raji*'s universe is the original soundtrack, we think it adds another layer of mysticism that was designed using traditional instruments. Then there are the "Mandalas", they are unique mechanics to this particular universe, knowledge and mythological creatures take influences from epics like "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata"

In terms of representation, it also uses the shadow theater technics and the inverted sculpture to immerse more deeply into different ways of representing things proper to India.

Similarly, when I meet the studio Holy Cow Productions located in Bangalore, Goutham Dindukurthi one of its founders tells them about his need to be better represented as people of colour in video games but also in a more multicultural way and introduces them to their latest production. *Mystic Pillars* is a mathematical puzzle game set in the southern part of ancient India. With more than 100 logical puzzles to solve, the player embodies a mysterious traveler who travels through the kingdom of Zampi. The player's goal is to prevent a drought by solving puzzles and destroying pillars blocking the water. Available in over 20 languages - English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Russian, Chinese (simplified and traditional), Japanese, Korean, Portuguese EU, Polish, Turkish, Portuguese BR, as well as Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Arabic, Catalan, Hebrew. It should be noted that the voice-over is available in English but also in Kannada, the local language in Bangalore, in order to reinforce the immersive part in the narration of the game which is inspired by a traditional African game also found in South India: the *Awale* game.

I argue that the monopolistic use of English and occidental sounds and music in most of the texts needs to be decolonized as it doesn't allow an immersion in different types of environments and diverse cultures.

Representing members of marginalized groups is important, it leads to more diversity in representation and not to pluralism, as discussed by Adrienne Shaw. However I would argue that it is also important to offer more diverse stories representing other

cultures less visible because marginalized by American and European cultural imperialism or made invisible through colonial history. To tell stories from this "third space" by reappropriating one's history but from one's own point of view. And in this, I join Adrienne Shaw when they conclude:

“The goal in increasing representation in games is not expanding customization options but rather making more games that reflect more modes of being in the world.” (Shaw, 2014, p. 143)

Because they demonstrate that the issue of the representation of marginalized groups is usually put in the "hands" of the players, leaving them the possibility of representing themselves differently than the default heterosexual white man, and because sexualities on the margins also depend on the players' willingness to push the "gay button", to use Anna Anthropy's expression, it seems essential today to queer video game narratives. Also to avoid « identity tourism » or the temptation of blackface as shown by (Nakamura, 2002) To bring other visions of the world, not only by allowing players to customize their characters to make them similar, or to have same sex relationships, but by modifying the default criteria for character design and by offering stories outside of the hetero-patriarchy and Western hegemonic history.

COUNTER FICTIONS FROM THE MARGINS

This is what motivated my search for queer, feminist and decolonial games and artworks in the Global South. To find other stories told by those who have been the protagonists of invisibilisation or from their descendants. It started as a personal and curatorial project and became an exploratory research, action based, in an arts department at the Fine Arts Faculty of Lisbon. An exploratory research that aims to collect other stories, narratives, rituals, other types of characters representations and that is based on semi conducted interviews of artists who use games as a medium, curators, game makers, game professionals, teachers, event organizers, independent game festivals and meet up organizers, but also activists, hackers and makers who are shedding light on the technological, political, cultural, and social dimensions of their country, learning about gender issues, trans and queer identities.

For these interviews, I went through my networks of artists, women in tech and feminists. I leaned heavily on the international community of game developers. I was also able to encounter lots of people through social media. Each time I landed in a new country, I spent the first week looking for the right people and asking for interviews. Most of the interviews were led in bars, restaurants, clubs, or parties where the interviewees usually met with their people. Yet close to half the interviews were done in the studios in which artists were working.

In the highly globalized video game market, the countries of the Global South have often been confined to various forms of subcontracting, at the service of the major Western and Asian studios: creation of assets, animations, typefaces, or localization. But in the last few years, taking advantage of both the development of the mobile market and a rise in post-colonial demands, a new local scene is emerging in many countries. Studios and artists are thus reappropriating the forms and discourses of the medium, and producing games intended primarily for national markets. Afro-descendants, indigenous creatives are proposing counter-fictions and in many countries, post-colonial issues are at the heart of digital content.

The decolonial approach of this research led me to meet first native, descendants of enslaved people and people of colour affected by colonization working as artists and game developers.

And to start, games created by indigenous people, like *Ita*, a game created by Daniela Fernandez in Buenos Aires. Daniela Fernandez is a descendant of guaranis, indigenous people from North Argentina in Chaco. In the desire to go in search of their past, their culture, their traditions, and to make known their myths and beliefs, which have been almost eradicated by colonialism, Daniela Fernandez created *Ita*, which is the portrait of herself. During our interview in Buenos Aires in November 2019, Daniela explained:

“This project is an attempt to recover through play the stories I was told during my childhood. The magical world of the Eternal Night is a tribute to my ancestors, to the original Qom and Guarani peoples (former opponents), who inhabited the Gran Chaco and whose legends are still alive today in the inhabitants of their lands.” (Fernandez, 2019)

To spread these voices, exhibiting these silenced stories to be seen, heard and played, experimented and to join Gayatri Spivak's (1988) post-colonial thinking by highlighting knowledge produced by groups that were once the subordinates of Europe, I argue there is a need to decolonize art and video games through the promotion of diversity in gender, race and sexuality. To tell stories, but from another point of view, from a resisting point of view.

"What we are saying in short, therefore, is that we want and demand that the history of slavery in Brazil should be told from our point of view, and not only from that of the one who conquered, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin (...) I insist: in spite of the limits imposed, the dissonant voices managed to make noise and flay the hegemonic narrative." (Ribeiro, 2017, p.86-87)

These voices, these representations of the world, these points of view must also exist in video games. During my stopover in São Paulo, I met the Afro-Brazilian game studio Sue The Real founded by Raquel Motta and Marcos Silva, with the aim of creating experiences with emotional and social impact through games with Afro-Brazilian themes. They created *Angola Janga: Picada dos Sonhosi*, a 2D game based on the book *Angola Janga* by Marcelo D'salete. *Angola Janga* was a Quilombo. The Quilombos were settlements of former slaves or slavery survivors who escaped in the mountains and lived under their own government inspired by African laws. They founded *Angola Janga*, meaning, “little Angola” In the 2D game *Angola Janga*, we have to help Soares and Andala to find the long dreamed path to reach Quilombo de Palmares.

"In our authoring games, we like to address introspection, representativeness and ancestry, connecting the player to simple premises, which can entertain, vibrate and raise awareness through the game. » (Silva, 2019)

There is therefore a need to reappropriate the narrative about slavery history and from the point of view of descendants who will present some strong resisting figures to colonialism and slavery as heroes and games protagonists. A strategy to avoid the stereotypical use of under-represented people in video games, that Adrienne Shaw evokes by studying *Resident Evil 5*, whose protagonist is a white man and in which all people of colour are represented in a hostile way, and not only when transformed into zombies. The plot unfolds not as Shaw mentions in an "African village" but rather in Kenya. I learn this when I was in Nairobi myself in November 2020, leading a machinima workshop around traditional Kenyan tales with Alumbe Namai, a

Kikuyu storyteller. In the desire to mix Kenyan stories and virtual play environments, we need assets of huts and local markets.

Dennis Mbutia, professor of game design at the Digital Media Institute in Nairobi, who participated to the workshop, tells me that we might be able to find them in *Resident Evil 5*. When we start playing it, I see the faces smiling as the characters speak in Swahili. However, to return to the issue of the representation of people of color in a game designed for the American market, *Resident Evil 5* gives a colonialist vision of a declining, poor and hostile Africa, that the workshop participants obviously didn't enjoy and finally didn't use as setting for their films.

“Focusing on the representations of the African zombies, through the eyes of a Western protagonist, and produced by a Japanese gaming company, Resident Evil 5 depicts the decaying African state characterized by the ruins of colonialism. The subaltern of African are already seen as zombies in many ways in that they are not only regarded but also depicted as disfranchised mobs, viewed in the West only in context of footage protests, and civil war.” (Geyser, Tschabalala, quoted in Shaw, 2014, p.179)

An imagery that Limpho Dee Moeti wants to change and reappropriate. Limpho Dee Meti is a game producer at Nyamakop, an independent game studio based in Cape Town, South Africa, one of the few studio mainly composed of people of color (the only one in South Africa) and in which half of them are women. During their presentation at the AGWT - Africa session that I curated for the AMAZE Total Digital Festival in August 2020, Limpho insisted on the imperative to give another image of Africa, the diversity of its cultures and its wealth through video games. Nyamakop is currently working on the production of an African futurist game where you reclaim African artifacts back from western museums. For this game, they take the cultures as they are and ask, what are these specific cultures will be like in 100 or 200 years with technology? How will this culture marry with certain technology? What are the beliefs of this particular culture, and then wonder how they could show that. How they could show the continent or at least the cities in which they want the game beset as a futuristic set?

“It is amazing to take our culture and to imagine it in a positive and in a futuristic light. I think that there is still the assumption to a degree, that African cultures are backwards or primitive or behind in some ways. So, for a game like this, it has been really interesting to break these ideas.” (Dee Moeti, 2020)

Inspired by the richness of the music, the fashion, and the culture, it intends to present an African futurist text that would represent a counter narrative to how the West sees Africa and even to show to the African diaspora that other narratives are possible. Discussing the difference between Afro Futurism and African Futurism, Limpho presents Afro futurism as a “African diaspora thing” that imagines the continent as if there was no colonialism.

“It has a tendency to what I refer to ”Wakandification”³² Wakanda, this imaginary country in Black Panthers that takes authenticity of more than one culture and blend them together to create a more futuristic sense of Africa. African science fiction is more tight to that thing of authenticity, to telling stories from the continent, with the

³ “It has its critics. Beyoncé's latest film, Black is King, was accused of “wakandafication,” reducing a diverse continent with a complex history into a simplified product, sold to a Western audience. In other words, positive stereotypes of Africa have replaced negative ones. But it is still fantasy, not reality.” 1 September 2020 Black Panther's legacy will 'live on forever' <https://theday.co.uk/stories/black-panther-s-legacy-will-live-on-forever>

perspective of the continent, but imagined in the future. And for me, it is not one that run away or that is shy from the past, but also it feels as more hope in terms of where Africa could be in the future. Sometimes, I find that the diaspora has not a lot of faith on the continent.” (Ib, 2020)

Their next game will be an African fantasy game, a genre that also needs to be decolonized according to Limpho's words as they deplore the lack of diversity in fantasy genre. “We have very rigid ideas of how fantasy should look like and the kind of stories that are told. The kind of sets where they are told are quite limiting.” and points ironically: “Like, all the fantasy happens in middle ages in Europe! Of course, that's where all the magic is!” They also pursue on explaining to me that there is a push from the people on the continent to tell different stories to disrupt this tendency:

“Because there is still this push to present Africa as the dark continent to ripe for exploration, it is so deshumanizing! The big thing for me is that so many stories are about suffering and pain when there is so much more to tell than that! It is important to break away from the idea that what connects me with other people of color is just racism experiences or the stereotypes that we have to come up against. Especially on the continent, I think by just telling stories of poverty and pain, we create this image that this is the entirety of the black experience and it is not!” (Ib, 2020)

To challenge this approach, studios like Kiro'o Games in Cameroon and Leti Arts in Ghana are developing African Fantasy games based entirely on African mythology and traditions. *Africa's legend* is a franchise developed by Leti Arts based on the creation of superheroes imagined starting at archetypes from different parts of Africa and developed into comic books and video games. Characters include Ananse the West African god of wisdom, king Shaka Zulu the warrior of South Africa and Pharaoh, based on Egyptian rulers. These heroes are inspired by stories or traditional icons of African folklore. Eyram Tawia thinks indeed that it is highly important to help new generations of African youth to believe in their country, on the possibility to becoming someone, a hero, in their own country, to start to identify themselves with local heroes and heroic stories. That's also something that Eyram insisted on when we met, on the importance to promote more success stories coming from Africa. Leti Arts is currently producing *Africa's Legend Reawakening*, a massively multiplayer online AAA-type game designed for the pan-African mass market.

"I strongly believe that video games are the only thing that is really missing on the African continent and I feel that Africa could benefit from this and develop very quickly to be on par with the West, like the games made in Finland, USA. And that is something that I believe in very much.” (Tawia, 2020)

While *Aurion, legacy of the Kori-Odan* imagines an Africa that would not have been colonized, the game is inspired by different African cultures and traditions, but also by real stories. The battle gear is Maasai, the outfits are Yoruba, Tuareg. The voice over is dubbed in Bassa dialect. Kiro'o is a name derived from "Kiroho Maono", which means "spiritual vision" in Swahili.

“Auriona, the planet this fiction takes place upon, is made up of six continents each with their own ethnic group, all of whom are connected by a “horrible history.” Importantly, as with Africa’s history of colonization and slavery exportation, this trauma suffered in the past is something for the inhabitants of Auriona to overcome together. And so, the game focuses not on encouraging further cultural clashes but on uniting the people. Or, as the team put it, acting as “an ointment for [the peoples’] harmony.” It’s a fantasy that looks forward to a more positive future, rather than dwelling on the past.” (Priestman, 2015)

In terms of queering the narrative and decolonizing the inner structures of representation, the example of the upcoming MMO RPG game *The Wagadu*

Chronicles represents a significant moment in the history of blackness and queer representation in video games. Developed by Twin Drums, a studio based in Berlin with a very diverse team including afro descendants, queer and female members. Their website announces: “Twin Drums was born out of the desire to place diversity, and especially blackness and queerness, at the center. Eventually, we would like to explore other “non-conventional” (non-Eurocentric & non-patriarchal) forms of imaginary escapism.” This seems to have gone very well, after a very successful Kickstarter campaign and the back up of Riot Games, famous for *League of Legend*, who decided to support under-represented communities, following Black Lives Matter movement and the death of Georges Floyd, but when the projects are already quite strong.

The Wagadu Chronicles is an Afrofantasy entirely based on African mythology and has been extremely well received by Afro-American players who feel dispossessed of their ancestry, cultures and knowledge and for whom, to be able to experience a pre-colonial Africa has been a much appreciated experience. The game is inspired by the Yoruba culture in Nigeria and Maasai culture in Kenya and shows how notions of queerness, gender or even hunt can be seen differently in certain African cultures

A non binary option is available in one of the first lineage playable in the beta version inspired by Maasai, as Alan Cudicio, Twin Drums funder, half Italian and Ghanaian, wanted to show that queerness was part of African culture and has been partly erased by colonialism. A subject they develop in a thread⁴³ on Twitter, which also joins my research during my stay in Nigeria, Ghana, Togo and Kenya. In these countries where homosexuality is illegal, I met LGBTQ artists and activists with whom I discussed the evils of colonialism, Victorian thought and missionaries on the supposed Un-Africanness of queerness. Interviewed by Alan Wen for the Verge magazine Cudicio asserts:

“I’m not saying that Africa did not have patriarchy, but you also have many strong matriarchal elements. Women getting married to each other was a tool in many different cultures and had just as much value as marriage between man and woman. “

Questions of spirituality, collaboration and symbiotic relationships with nature make it possible to rethink the notion of combat in a game like *Wagadu*. Alan Cudicio even thought of making a non-combat mode. But they finally decided to opt for a non Eurocentric vision of combat or hunting itself. This is what I experienced in Togo, where we speak directly to the plants before they are cut, we thank them for what we are going to share with them. This spirituality and interspecies collaboration is present in *Wagadu*:

“A lot of games is nonconsensual killing and getting rewarded for it, whereas in *Wagadu*, and with nature, it’s about consent,” explains Cudicio. “That’s like traditional Yoruba hunters of the south of Nigeria. When they hunt, they chant a blessing and ask permission to the animal. In some cultures, you also ask for forgiveness or thank them afterwards. I think it’s important to rethink hunting not as something that’s very Western and capitalist — which is about the domination and destruction of nature — whereas in African societies it’s about balancing and respecting it.” (Wen, 2020)

⁴ “(1/15)Some people think that the West is the birthplace of LGBT acceptance. African politicians and clergy will very often say that queerness is un-African. Actually the OPPOSITE is more accurate and I'll show you why being black means originating from queer cultures #PrideMonth” black means originating from queer cultures #PrideMonth”<https://twitter.com/AllanCudicio/status/1278007673380900865>

They conclude this interview by arguing that they prefer to create their own fantasy rather than claiming more representation for people of color in the current fantasy landscape. And in this, they not only allude to the characters, but to everything that makes culture and that can be represented: spaces, architecture, rituals, beliefs, etc.

“Let’s look at what African weapons look like, what African armor looks like, what African magic spells look like, what African architecture looks like. That’s what *The Wagadu Chronicles* is, and it’s already more representation for Black people than 99 percent of fantasy or science fiction.” (Ib, 2020)

These are just a few examples of counter-fictions, but they show that new voices are emerging and being heard, and that they don't need others to be heard or to be liberated, but are taking care of it themselves : they speak up, become the subject of their creations.

CONCLUSION

"Europe is not my center. Europe is on the outskirts of Africa. After 100 years here, did they speak my language? I speak theirs. My future does not depend on Europe... Take the map of Africa, place Europe and America together and there's still room left. Why be a sunflower and turn towards the sun? If I am myself am the sun!"⁵⁴ Sembène Ousmane

You're always on the edge of someone, somewhere, at some point. The periphery is geographically variable but creates positions of speech from the “third space”, that of the non white woman who is the other of the other, or that of hybrid identities where cultures, struggles, personal and collective experiences mingle with economic, social, political and historical contexts.

New territories have to be explored under the layers of cultural and colonial imperialism, to provoke discussion around technologies and ancestral knowledge based on collaborative, collective and indigenous knowledge and practices. To imagine how oral cultures and digital can mix to reveal words from the past, rituals, ancestral knowledge, struggles. To resonate voices. To revive ancestry and oral culture through indigenous and digital collaborations.

At the origin of the Machinima virtual storytelling workshop project I held in Lomé in Togo, in 2020, mixing traditional Togolese tales and Machinima, there is Kantata, as a virtual memory project of the Togolese living art initiated in 2020 by Hodin Seynion, actor and author, which is inspired by the following observations.

"Dean Eklou-Natey Ablodevi, actor, renowned storyteller, precursor of the Togolese oratory art is no more. We keep in our hearts and memories his theatrical scenes, his tales and his radiant smile of happiness. But when you Google his name, you will not see the full extent of his creativity, a great loss of heritage to pass on to the new generation. » (Hodin, 2020)

By using digital technologies to document, distribute but also co-create, Kantata aimed to act as a virtual memory of oral traditions and cultures. In this text, written as a post in his blog to announce the restitution of our 2 weeks workshops, Hodin started to imagine the concept of the machinima Voodoo church. The idea came to his mind, as we were working in a garage covered with Voodoo masks. This workshop was so founded on exchanges that more and more people were coming to participate every day. So, he invented the « Machinima Voodoo church » : In a holy garage, there are

⁵ Interview of the film Maker Sembène Ousman, Youtube archive, source unknown, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahyewE92-Uw>

storytellers in front of PCs, inspired by voodoo masks to reach the virtual world thanks to machinima.

« To spread the good news of the digitization of Togolese living art, we decided at the machinima church to begin with an evangelization campaign of storytellers in the virtual world. To start this prophetic maneuver of never again letting the memory of Togolese living art die, we have called upon the Machinima voodoo priestess, Isabelle Arvers, who is white in skin but black in soul, for the great convention ever organized in our church. » (Ib, 2020)

We joined forces, skills, knowledges, beliefs, rituals, and collaborated on one of the most amazing workshops I ever held. It was a true collaboration and exchange experience, and while it was happening, it seemed to be the purpose of the project itself : to use digital media and their détournement to disseminate and spread the word. For this workshop, because I became the Machinima Voodoo priestess, I received a Voodoo name – Azongnike – which means in Ewe, the spirit without enemies. This name was given to me by Kokou Nouwaki, artist in charge of the cultural space La Case des Daltons. He told me that as a machinima evangelist, I needed to travel and meet a lot of people and couldn't have any enemies, that's why I would be called from now on Azongnike. The day I received this name, I was initiated to Voodoo in a protection ceremony.

Thanks to this workshop, it opened a new direction to my research and I realised that I was not only in charge of echoing voices from the margins, but I could help to document, co-create, distribute words and creations by the detournement of soft power tools. Because I agree with Adrienne Shaw when she argues that the need for representation doesn't have to be only put on the burden of the audience, but we do believe that we need to produce our own fictions. Trying to imagine how communities through digital media can offer other visions of the world, other possibilities of being together and to show this diversity instead of complaining that representation isn't present enough...

Adrienne Shaw demonstrates that while representation is not so important to marginalized groups, diversity of representation and content is, and Shaw adds that we need to go beyond this and rethink the way the video game industry operates. They call for a structural revolution because, as with racism, queering and decolonizing art and video games depend not only on the content but on who produces the content, who is trained for, through which modes of representation, through which language ?

That was the subject of the exhibition curated for the Overkill Festival which 2020 theme was *Dont Liberate ourselves, we will take care of it* : « More and more communities and minorities feel unrepresented by the media, the governments and the culture they live in. When online platforms offer to regroup, to socialize and organize themselves does it give these groups tools to express their ideas and opinions? We are wondering how these communities are/could transform these online social tools for their own reappropriation. »

After one year touring the art and games south world, we found out that today we have to speak of neocolonialism rather than post-colonialism in which “soft power” of digital texts plays a huge rôle to impose a monopolistic culture. But a new generation of artists and activists is doing its own decolonization: a new world is emerging and affirming its own voice, stopping working for, or like others, but rather recalling its own history, its roots, its beliefs. Networked culture and digital media facilitate the merging of these voices. Online platforms, crowdfunding and collaboration can be seen as counter-strategies to tactically use mass consumption objects, by hacking them, by operating a détournement, to turn them into means of expression.

These tendencies resonate with the feminist book : Don't liberate us, we'll take care of it (2020) by Bibia Pavard, Florence Rochefort and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel; and the quote from Felwine Sarr "Decolonization has to be done in both sides of the mediterranean sea." It is now possible to produce counter-fictions, strong enough to deconstruct and fight the soft power effects of cultural imperialism and send it back, by reappropriating the tools, resources and references. Making new alliances, new kin families alike, we can now reinvent discourses on ourselves. We will conclude with Natacha Tontey's words in their speculative fiction *From Pest to Power*:

"As the manifesto of xenofeminism argues, the future is not only for the child, but it is also a landscape for the nonhuman. When we start thinking less anthropocentric, we think more ecological. The future is cockroach. (...) Our parents may have beliefs, fictions - also called religions - but each religion has its own narrative structure. What would happen if we said that the structure we have to believe in is the fiction that is in our heads? »

Instead of demanding more representation in mainstream games, it is necessary to highlight contents produced in the South in order to better apprehend realities outside the hegemonic center and global cultural imperialism in digital content offering more diverse stories, representations of women, bodies, environment and nature. And to occupy the virtual space, it is interesting to mix ancestral and local knowledges to digital as the virtual allows different layers of realities and modalities of presence.

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