

Invisible at the Edge: Playing with the Geoglyphs of Occupation in Anglo-America

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INTRODUCTION

Maps are both a pervasive feature of a wide variety of board games and an important locus in postcolonial inquiry. In the words of Edward Said: “Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggles over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.” (1993, 7) We offer our analysis of board games telling spatial narratives of European settler colonialism in Anglo-American¹ through a critical reading of the way these games map the land and invite players to bring those maps alive through gameplay. The study expands on the tangential engagement with this topic in Flanagan and Jakobsson (2023). Our theoretical foundation includes Harley (1988), Scott (1998), Wolfe (2006), and Barnd (2017). We also build on video game research, especially that of Lammes (2003, 2010), Magnet (2006), and Mukherjee (2017). But it should be noted that all of these authors study *video* game. We have found the need to develop a parallel apparatus for the critical analysis of *board* games with their unique qualities in terms of materiality, player configurations, and role in the cultural discourse.

Our methodological approach is rooted in critical theory and builds on interaction criticism (Bardzell 2011). We have acquired over two hundred of these games and played over a hundred of them. By building a substantial collection of colonialist themed board games and dedicating time to play through and analyze them, we have found emergent patterns that remain hidden as long as the games are studied separately.

A CRITICAL LEXICON

We present the patterns we have identified in the form of a critical lexicon.

Geoglyphs

This concept lays a foundation for the subsequent analysis. When making maps playable, game creators let go of basic principles of coherence. When we reach into the

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past to play with it, maps cease to *map onto* anything. Instead, they serve a function akin to geoglyphs. A geoglyph is a large design produced on the ground that only can be perceived properly from the sky. Game maps, like geoglyphs, only make sense when viewed from a distance (fig. 1). Whenever we try to inspect that which supposedly is being mapped, the image dissolves into incoherence.



Figure 1: *Carcassonne: Gold Rush* (Wrede 2014) and Uffington White Horse (USGS 2008).

East-to-West

In accordance with manifest destiny² dogma, we often fill in the geoglyphs from east to west. The determinism of this ideology is occasionally underscored by mechanics forcing the players to keep up the pace moving west. (fig. 2).



Figure 2: *New World: A Carcassonne Game* (Wrede 2014) and *Go West!* (Colovino 2005).

Paths

In games depicting the early stages of colonization the westward movement follows paths determined by the existing geography. Players typically race to be the first to reach locations of historical significance for the colonizers such as Fort Clatsop or Oregon City (fig. 3).



Figure 3: *The Lewis & Clark Adventure Game* (Educational Insights 2003) and *Oregon Trail* (Kanterman and Ulberg 1981).

Zones

The next step after movement along the paths is to claim land and resources. The mechanics include area enclosure and racing to tiles (fig. 4).



Figure 4: *Oklahoma Boomers* (F 2014) and *The American Goldrush 1849* (du Poël 1985).

Lines

As the settler colonialist project nears completion, lines assert themselves over the geography dependent paths. Train games celebrate the expansion of the American rail network in general (fig. 5), and the completion of the connection of the two coasts with the golden spike³ that served as the coronation of the United States as the world's leading empire.



Figure 5: *1830: Railways and Robber Barons* (Tresham 1986) and *Empire Express* (Roznai 2012).

Optimization

Once the coasts are connected, the maps turn into optimization problems. The previous east-to-west expansion is replaced with west-to-east delivery of the spoils of exploitation (fig. 6).



Figure 6: Left: *Great Western Trail* with the *Rails to the North* expansion (Pfister 2017, 2018). Right: *Carnegie* (Georges 2021).

Palimpsest

Finally, these games almost always imply an empty void before the trails, homesteads, rails, and borders fill the map (fig. 7). This not only enforces the terra nullius myth (Foasberg 2016), but we also argue that the less we see of the pre-Columbian geography, the easier it is to not think of the land as occupied. The geoglyphs become markings of ownership and a process of slowly dissolving the underlying palimpsest⁴.



Figure 7: Left: *Days of Steam* (Lauster 2008). Right: *Homesteaders* (Rockwell 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

The construction and enactment of game maps by designers and players reinforces the messaging of a hegemonic occupier. In the vernacular of Scott (1998), we are invited to “see like a state.” But we also *act* from the perspective of the nebulous manifestation of an imperial force. Geoglyphs survive through regular maintenance, often with their original meaning and context lost (Pollard 2017). Similarly, the mythology and values of settler colonialism are maintained through the regular enactment of its stories. As we fill the suspiciously empty map board with paths, zones, and lines we continually marginalize the indigenous peoples until they are made invisible at the edge.

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ENDNOTES

¹ We use this term to denote the part of North America located north of Mexico regardless of time-period and dominant language in any particular region, fully acknowledging that it is a simplification.

² Manifest destiny was a cultural belief in the 19th-century United States that American settlers were destined to expand across North America.

³ The golden spike is the ceremonial gold final spike driven by Leland Stanford to join the rails of the first transcontinental railroad across the United States connecting the Central Pacific Railroad from Sacramento and the Union Pacific Railroad from Omaha

⁴ The term palimpsest refers to medieval manuscripts that have been multiply erased and inscribed with the overlapping texts of successive scribes.