Cursed: A Ludic Genealogy of the Myth of El Dorado

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INTRODUCTION

Every time a story is retold, its meaning, message and origin can be redefined. This is also true when the narrative is presented in game form. Inspired by Focault's (1977) insistence on accounting for power in all forms of historicity we offer a critical reading of the ludic genealogy of the myth of El Dorado as it pertains to the tomb raiding trope of board and video games. By following Foucault's suggestion that the genealogist can recover history as series of interpretations, we attempt to capture significant substitutions, displacements, and reversals in the remediation of the El Dorado myth as it has traveled from the fifteenth century to contemporary games.

Through an approach strongly informed by interaction criticism (Bardzell 2011), our readings delve into the interactive and reciprocal relationship between participants, cultural artifacts, and cultural context.

ORIGINS

The El Dorado legend, traceable to the early diaries of Christopher Columbus and further revisited by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, ignited European exploration and colonization in the Americas (Ainsa 1986). Its promise of gold inspired ambitious expeditions, like those of Pizarro and Almagro. These pursuits could spiral into extravagant delusions, as evidenced by Lope de Aguirre's reckless adventures in the Amazon and Pedro de Orsúa's presumptuous claim to governance over El Dorado.

SUBVERSION

Cobo Borda (1987) asserts that the El Dorado myth was a collaborative creation by both the Spanish and Indigenous Peoples, designed to enchant and misguide European explorers. Originally portrayed as a tranquil blue lagoon in the Andean

highlands, teeming with golden wildlife, this myth captivated numerous adventurers seeking wealth and fame.

Embedded into the myth itself, we find mechanics of deception and hidden information; a *game* molded by the pressure applied by the invading oppressors. By utilizing the myth to lure the conquistadors deep into the treacherous jungle, the indigenous communities engaged in something akin to *dark play*, which is signified by involving participants who are unaware that play is taking place, subversion, and sometimes treacherous outcomes (Linderoth and Mortensen 2015).

More generally, there are numerous examples of play being the locus of resistance and subversion by the subordinate classes (eg. Sutton-Smith 2001, Sicart 2014). The theorizing of these instances of play is, however, usually done through a Western lens. Game studies has largely, but not completely (see eg. Mukherjee 2017), ignored subversive play originating among the subaltern, just as this reading of the early evolution of the El Dorado myth has largely been drowned by speculations about what or where El Dorado actually was among Western historians.

TRANSFORMATION

The Quest for El Dorado is a board game where players take the roles of expedition leaders racing to reach El Dorado, here depicted as a real city of gold (fig. 1). Judging by the illustrations, the game is set somewhere around the nineteen-forties. Players buy cards that allows their expedition to move quicker and traverse obstacles. These cards represent different experts that join the expedition. The experts are all White people except for the scout and the "Native."

Figure 1: Three explorers have reached El Dorado.

The game transforms the mythical city of El Dorado into an actual city signifying both endless riches and the winning condition for the players. The rulebook makes it clear that these riches belonged to a *lost kingdom* justifying why the expedition getting there first can claim the gold, jewels, and precious artifacts as theirs.

There is no mention of Colombia, the presumed location of the city, having any legal claim to the loot, despite having been an independent nation for over a hundred years when the game takes place. Here, the developers rely on the trope of any previously colonized exotic location serving as the playground for Western adventurers (Smith 2016) to do what they please without any consequences.

ITERATION

In Uncharted: Drake's Fortune (Naughty Dog 2007), players control Nathan Drake, an American adventurer on a quest to find El Dorado. Initially believing it to be a city of gold, he soon discovers that El Dorado is, in fact, a cursed golden idol carrying a dangerous mutagenic virus. Players encounter various characters, primarily greedy Europeans and Americans, who aim to exploit El Dorado for their own gain. In contrast, Nathan and his ancestor, Sir Francis Drake, are portrayed as heroes striving to protect the world from the idol's curse. The main antagonist, one of the few mestizo characters in the game, harbors malevolent intentions for El Dorado and must be stopped. The Drakes recognize its inherent danger and are committed to containing it, demonstrating their respect for its power and their role as guardians against the indigenous curse.

Uncharted mixes and matches a number of colonial tropes like imbuing artifacts with magical powers, casting the environment as a dangerous contrast to the Western metropole, and White saviorism. Left unsatiated by the El Dorado myth alone, the game adds tomb raiding tropes seen in everything from comic books to movies creating a colonialist Gesamtkunstwerk of sorts.

CONCLUSIONS

Discussing the rhetoric of play as power, Sutton-Smith describes play "as a way to fortify the status of those who control the play or are its heroes" (2001, 10). Our reading shows that Western developers use games to completely transform history into narratives where they become the heroes. The seemingly endless chain of games produced in the tomb raider genre, of which we have played over thirty and cataloged many more, highlights the importance of iteration as a way to legitimize. While the raison d'être of the El Dorado myth was that there is no actual golden city, we have played it into existence, similar to how myths of White supremacy can win elections.

Flanagan & Jakobsson (2023) describe board games as instruments of enculturation, instilling cultural values, norms, and practices in players. They emphasize that colonial narratives in games are not without consequence. As an illustration, Gutierrez-Gomez (2017) points out the continuous expansion of the mining industry in Colombia. This growth, spurred by government policies aimed at attracting international investment, has led to substantial environmental and health risks. In this regard, the curse from Uncharted has become reality.

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