The SEGA and Microsoft History of India: The British Raj in Videogames

Souvik Mukherjee
Presidency University, Kolkata
prosperoscell@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the treatment of colonial history in videogames, particularly in empire-building strategy games such as *Empire: Total War* and *Age of Empires 3*. The aim is to address the lack of plurality in the portrayal of history in videogames and also to bring up postcolonial theory as yet another point of departure via which it is possible to explore the potential of digital games as a medium for promoting diversity and a more nuanced and representative way to think through history critically. To do so, a framework of postcolonial historiography, which has been in place in other related Humanities disciplines for decades now, has been introduced and employed to challenge historical notions that promoted an orientalist mono-narrative to describe the histories of erstwhile colonies such as India. Through the portrayal of the British Raj in videogames, this paper makes a broader point about the need to reflect postcolonial and plural voices in historical commentary in games.

Keywords
Postcolonialism, orientalism, empire-building games, alternative history, plurality

From novel to film and now to newer media, the historical representations of colonized nations have followed a problematic pattern: ironically, one that both sees these colonies as an 'other' and at the same time tries to subsume them within the cultural apparatus of the (usually Western) colonizer. Seen from the lens of post-colonial studies, this phenomenon has met with much criticism on the grounds that such a historical representation is blinkered and limited. Recently, videogames have become one of the newest narrative media to offer historical commentaries and these pose a further conundrum: it is possible to 're-play' historical events and end up having very different alternative historical outcomes. Are these videogame representations of colonial history then to be seen as allied to post-colonial historiography inasmuch as they provide a counter-narrative to Empire? Alternatively, despite the potential for enhancing a broader historical representation, are these games still victim to the status quo of colonial historiography? This paper aims to explore and analyse both of these possibilities through its study of videogame representations of colonial Indian history.

As an early exploratory attempt in an area where not much previous research has been conducted, the paper begins by outlining how two popular real-time strategy games present the history of India. Addressing the lack of plurality in the history they present, the paper then goes on to discuss how although colonial historical accounts are being challenged and rewritten by postcolonial historiography, videogames have traditionally

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adhered to an orientalist and universalising narrative of history drawing on their influences from earlier media. The last section of the paper moves on to recent games which are increasingly opening up to the voices of diversity and plurality and how this could be the way forward for videogames as a medium for presenting and researching history, in its broader sense.

Sega's *Empire: Total War* (Creative Assembly 2009) and Microsoft's *Age of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties* (Ensemble Studios and Big Huge Games 2007) expansion are two of the popular real-time strategy (RTS) games that address Indian history. Both start their narrative in the period of the Mughal Empire in India but have varying levels of accuracy in the portrayal of historical events. *Age of Empires III* constructs a history of India that borders on the fantastically 'oriental'. Brian Reynolds, head of Big Huge Games, lays out the basic historical context:

> During most of the historical period covered by Age of Empires III, much of the territory covered by present-day India and Pakistan was controlled by the Mughal Empire. This was also a time of greatly increased European contact — once Vasco de Gama discovered the route around Africa, European nations such as Portugal, France, and especially Britain soon arrived bringing opportunities for trade but also for conflict. (Butts 2007)

This, largely, is historically correct although contact with Europe had been established slightly before the onset of the Mughal Empire (in 1526) when Da Gama landed in Calicut in 1498. Reynolds's other descriptions of the game mechanics are, however, more problematic: 'one other fun detail [...] you may be aware that for religious reasons Indians do not consume cows and so forth, and so indeed they do not in the game' (Butts 2007). Now, although the Hindus do not eat beef, there are many other religious communities in India that do (the Mughal rulers who were Muslim would be a case in point) and there is already an oversimplification going on here. Further, the game has units such as the Sepoy, the Rajput and the Gurkha and it seems to treat them as watertight ethnic categories whereas sepoys are not so and in fact, both Rajputs and Gurkhas could have enlisted as sepoys. The Sepoy (from the Persian *Sipahi*) was the generic name for the soldier in the British East India Company. Although the game features the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 in one of its early missions and hints at the discontent against the East India Company, the colonial history of India is presented in a sanitised uniformity that views exploitation of resources in colonial India in the same light as perhaps one would see mining or farming in one's home region. The *Age of Empires* series has already been criticised for its 'digital orientalism' by game studies researchers. Vit Šisler compares the depiction of the Middle-East in *Age of Empires 2* (Ensemble 1999) to 'orientalist discourses of European novels and nineteenth century paintings' (Šisler 2008). Similarly the blog 'playthepast' comments that in the game, 'the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean buildings use the same sequence of visual development, erasing distinctions between these East Asian cultures, as do the buildings for the Britons and the Celts' (playthepast 2013).

When Šisler uses the phrase 'digital orientalism', he refers to the term 'orientalism' as used by literary theorist, Edward Said; for Said, the definition and the misfortune of orientalism are the same:

> [T]he "Orient," that semi-mythical construct which since Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in the late eighteenth century has been made and re-made countless times

> by power acting through an expedient form of knowledge to assert that this is the Orient's nature, and we must deal with it accordingly. In the process the uncountable sediments of history, which include innumerable histories and a dizzying variety of peoples, languages, experiences and cultures, all these are swept aside or ignored. (Said 1979, xviii)

In *Empire: Total War,* too, there are historical oversimplifications and anachronisms. Again, India tends to be understood as a Hindu nation (which, although convenient for certain current political factions, has never been the case) and the places of learning are 'the great ashrams', which are associated to Hinduism usually. Nevertheless, the diversity of kingdoms in India is still much better reflected as is there are individual states in the Indian subcontinent instead of one 'India' faction. The Marathas are the only playable Indian faction (unless one uses mods) while the others such the Mughals and Mysore also play an important part in the early stages. European powers may also arrive on the scene depending on how long one has played the game. Historically, there were many other players between the later period of the Mughal Empire and the formal takeover by the British Crown but the game at least recognises the complex political situation somewhat. The imperial ambitions are fairly clear as the game is based on capturing land and resources. There are, again, some historical inaccuracies like the game showing tea plantations before tea was discovered in India by the British - of course, the conditions in the plantations (for example, the exploitation of workers led to the Indigo Rebellion) are nowhere mentioned. The game, however, does have scenarios of rebellion and dissent; in the scenario of European colonisation of India this is still representative of the plurality of voices and the confusion of the times.

A comment on the 'playthepast' blog post says, 'I understand your need of accuracy and compliance with history, you worry much about the influence of theses [sic] historical narratives and the campaign mission ones. […] You must take it for what it is, just a game, despite that you're right with the tokenism, and some labels or names that could have been more accurate' (playthepast 2013). This is a sentiment that this paper may also evoke in readers. Another reader of the same blog, however, importantly counters this comment stating that 'accuracy and compliance aren't really the issue here though: it is the replacement of a plurality of histories (and points of view) with a single narrative, and the items that do not fit with this narrative get scant attention' (playthepast 2013). The games' representations of history may not be accurate (after all the events of the game are, to an extent, driven by player-action) but they posit a 'sense' of history; more often than not this corresponds to Western colonial historiography. The British Empire is like neat patches of red on the world map - symbolic of order, modernisation and benevolence. Other histories are but parts of an overarching Hegelian world-history as reflected in Karl Marx's comment 'China and India lie, as it were, still outside the World's History' (Avineri 1969, 11-12). In his classic *History of India,* James Mill writes that Indian history is 'a highly interesting portion of British History' (Mill 1848, 2). Even Edward Thompson, writing in the early twentieth century, said 'Indians are not historians and they rarely show any critical ability' (Gregg and Kale 1997). Indian historian and one of the founders of subaltern studies, Ranajit Guha, states that against the Hegelian transcendence of world-history as something truly moral, 'it was up to the Indians themselves to try and recover their past by means of an Indian historiography of India' (Guha 2002, 1).

As evident from the historical (mis)representation and the specific take that they have on colonialism, the standard videogame version of Indian history also seems to follow the normative Western narrative similar to that of the historians of Empire. This is not new or unique to videogames. Board games such as *Puerto Rico* (2002) or even *Settlers of Catan* (1995) involve a narrative of colonization: even here, somehow the voices of the people native to the colonies, or the 'subaltern voices' that Guha speaks of, are wiped out by the game mechanics. Sid Meier's original *Colonization* (MicroProse 1995) videogame involves this assumption and in the later version, as one of the players works out the strategy, the relationship with the 'natives' seems ever so simple and comfortable:

> Natives money are quite limited, but if you go for small empire, it should be not [sic] problem. Especially look for villages that demand guns, horses, trade goods and tools. […] I'm not sure what change Natives attitude toward you, but they never attacked me at all. Of course I send many missionaries, live among them, trade with them and give them few gifts. Being French also help [sic] and to be sure I go for one or two FF that improve relationship with them. My only concern is REF, I really don't want mess with natives. With good relationship [sic] they start giving you villages instead of fighting if you surround them. (CivFanatics.com n.d.)

The consciousness that has permeated about other discourses of diversity has, unfortunately, not yet entered the treatment of colonial history in videogames. There is, however, a unique other possibility encoded within the mechanics of some of the games themselves. This is the possibility of playing against the grain, as it were. Also, in games such as *Empire: Total War,* there is the opportunity of playing as the Marathas, for example (or even, the Pirates if you use mods) and creating alternative history that goes counter to the real historical narrative of Empire: players write about how they destroyed other nations such as Persia or conquered Europe with the hugely powerful Maratha armies. Is this an expression of voices that challenge Empire, then? The question might be raised as to whether this 'playing against the grain' cannot be likened to the postcolonial historians 'reading colonial and nationalist archives against their grain'.

Speaking about the postcolonial historians' enterprise, Gyan Prakash states that their historiography involves 'focusing on their blind-spots, silences and anxieties, these historians seek to uncover the subaltern's myths, cults, ideologies and revolts that colonial and nationalist elites sought to appropriate and conventional historiography has laid to waste by their deadly weapon of cause and effect' (Prakash 1995, 88). The Maratha Empire's possible conquest of England in *Empire: Total War* may be a counter-historical narrative but is still one that subscribes to the main imperialist world-historical agenda that Mill and the historians of the British Raj espoused. This is the logic that validates Empire and nationalism but only with the players changed.

Postcolonial theorists do not entirely eschew the idea of the nation: Franz Fanon declares '[e]very native who takes up arms is a part of the nation which from henceforward will spring to life' (Cheah 1999). Fanon, however, understands the state as 'merely the corporeal incarnation of the national spirit, for the nation-state is only a secondary institutional manifestation or by-product of national consciousness' (Cheah 1999). This is not how the nation-state functions after the end of colonialism, as Said warns:

> Nationality, nationalism. nativism: the progression is, I believe, more and more constraining. In countries like Algeria and Kenya one can watch the heroic

> resistance of a community partly formed out of colonial degradations, leading to a protracted armed and cultural conflict with the imperial powers, in turn giving way to a one-party state with dictatorial rule. (Said 2007, 303)

In a sense, then, as Partha Chatterjee argues 'in the Third World, anticolonial cultural nationalism is the ideological discourse used by a rising but weak indigenous bourgeoisie to co-opt the popular masses into its struggle to wrest hegemony from the colonial regime, even as it keeps the masses out of direct participation in the governance of the postcolonial state' (Chatterjee 1986, 168-9). As Said and Chatterjee point out, such nationalist agenda effectively replicates its roots in imperialist notions of the nation-state. Replaying Indian history as an alternative history where the real-world colonisers are in turn exploited in a virtual scenario (such as the Maratha conquest of England) also ends up presenting yet another monolinear history of the nation-state. The outbreaks of rebellion in *Empire: Total War* are, instead, more like the expressions from within the blind-spots and anxieties of empire. Taxes, resources, religion, armies and a slew of factors are responsible for keeping the colonised populace at bay. The game indicates its awareness of the liminal spaces that Guha and other postcolonial historians want to look at in their historiography. In the game, as in the post-independence struggles of the nations described by Said above, the rebels, however, sometimes manage to wrest control of regions and establish their own nation-state and return to the status quo.

Looking from the perspective of the writing of history, even after almost seventy years of independence and over thirty years of postcolonial historiography in India, the dominant historical narrative in media tends to remain orientalist and monolinear. The remediation in as recent a medium as videogames is one of the older imperial notions of history. This is perhaps not the space to engage in a full-length discussion of how the nation-state develops within a postcolonial context, but it suffices to say that the concept survives from the earlier historiography of Empire, albeit in a different form. As such, the history presented in videogames tends to follow a similar trajectory: any rewriting of history in the RTS games discussed hitherto replicates the construction of world-history either as an orientalist discourse of the imperial nation-state or as a subversion of Empire that nevertheless retains the logic of the imperial history-construction.

There are many obvious exemplars of orientalist narratives in other videogame genres, which in turn might be influenced by similar attitudes to Indian history in other media. Consider, for example, Dhalsim in *Streetfighter 2* (Capcom 1991). Dhalsim is stereotypically exotic in that he is meditative, wears a necklace of skulls and conforms to the orientalist image of the Indian yogi. His wife, it seems equally unimaginatively, is called Sari (the garment commonly worn by Indian women). In a more current game scenario, in the 'Persona Non Grata' mission of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward 2011), players find themselves in Himachal Pradesh, which is an Indian state. The strangest part of the game, besides some English words transliterated in Hindi as part of the wall-graffiti, is that the entire level has no Indians in it. As the Russians and Americans battle it out for hours near the country's capital city, India's large standing army is nowhere to be seen. These examples are indicative of how India is viewed in videogames (especially triple-A games) across the world. The attitude is, however, hardly surprising. Think of television serials and films that provide popular representations of India in the West and some of the names that quickly come to mind are the British Raj story *Jewel in the Crown* (O'Brien 1984), or the recent Disney movie remake of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, which again, is a world of forests, tigers, elephants and magnificent ruined temples. Many novels set in India, such as Paul Scott's *The Raj*

Quartet (1976) or Kipling's *Kim* (1987) also involve similar assumptions about the country and its history.

These pointers are not new to studies of cyberculture. Speaking about race in an early essay, Lisa Nakamura addresses the imperialist logic of what she calls 'identity-tourism' in LambdaMOO in a useful comparison with *Kim*:

> The Irish orphan and spy Kim, who uses disguise to pass as Hindu, Muslim, and other varieties of Indian natives, experiences the pleasures and dangers of cross cultural performance. Said's insightful reading of the nature of Kim's adventures in cross cultural passing contrasts the possibilities for play and pleasure for white travelers in an imperialistic world controlled by the European empire with the relatively constrained plot resolutions offered that same boy back home. […] To practitioners of identity tourism as I have described it above, LambdaMOO represents an phantasmatic imperial space, much like Kipling's Anglo-India, which supplies a stage upon which the "grand dream of a successful quest" can be enacted. (Nakamura 1995)

Pramod Nayar, in attempting to understand how the postcolonial relates to cyberculture and expressing some concern about how English is the dominant language of the Internet and the computer game, states that for him the main concern is 'postcolonial studies' emphasis on race and Eurocentrism enables cyberculture studies to address the racialised nature of the age of information, of the unequal (racialised, gendered) social life of information and its technologies where Euro-American "sites" control the lives, labours, and identities of non-white races across the world and where "cybertypes" abound in virtual worlds' (Nayar 2010, 162). Radhika Gajjala (2012) has also made similar connections between the notion of subalternity and cyberculture. Finally, when Roopika Risam and Adeline Koh 'position postcolonial digital humanities as an emergent field of study invested in decolonizing the digital, foregrounding anti-colonial thought, and disrupting salutatory narratives of globalization and technological progress' (Risam and Koh, n.d.), yet another current strand of research on digital culture emerges that recognises the need for the same plurality of voices in digital media.

Despite these departures in other aspects of cyberculture and indeed a general increase in awareness of issues related to diversity in gender and race in videogames (indeed the previous DiGRA conference was themed 'diversity of games'), there has been very little attention paid to how videogames represent colonial history. Adrienne Shaw's assessment of the treatment of native American history in *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft Montreal 2012) comes as an important early step in raising these important questions:

> AC3 maintains the series' effort to frame itself as offering a critical, well-researched history by allowing the player to see the American Revolution from the perspective of a Mohawk/Kanien'kehá:ka protagonist. The game never truly lives up to offering critique of history from his perspective, however. It is a historically and visually realistic game, yet realism is more often used to preempt criticism than it is to reconsider the *telos* of history. (Shaw 2015)

Shaw's essay refers to Machin and Suleiman's (2006) study of Arab representation in digital games and Sisler's critique of *Assassin's Creed 1* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007), to demonstrate how the assumed audience for such historical games is limited to certain geographical and ethnic groups. Even where historical games posit a counter-historical

'what-if' scenario that allows for exploring within and beyond the boundaries of known history, for Shaw 'it is clear that the constructed audience for the game limits the possibilities of the critical history' (Shaw 2015). Such criticism is equally valid for the portrayal of South Asian history in videogames and in this case, the history of the Indian subcontinent tends to be constructed for a similar audience and ends perpetuating the orientalist mono-narrative that has been consistently challenged in other Humanities' discourses since the very outset of postcolonial studies.

There are, however, examples from recent games that address the problem of the portrayal of Indian colonial history. One of the earliest first-person shooters from India, *Bhagat Singh* (2000)[1], which is based on an eponymous figure who shot a British police superintendent during the Indian freedom movement, appropriates the medium of the videogame to narrate an episode of history from the Indian perspective. *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec 2016) also addresses British colonial policies in India when together with famous Victorian personalities, it features Maharajah Duleep Singh, the deposed and exiled ruler of the Punjab. In the game, Duleep Singh is shown as negotiating with Prime Minister Gladstone and other politicians to secure permission to visit his former kingdom and his mother, from whom he has been estranged. Within the narrative of Victorian progress and squalor, the game also introduces the often ignored question of the colonies. In a subsequent DLC (downloadable content), called the *Last Maharaja* (Ubisoft Quebec 2016), the game has Singh attempt to wrest his birthright back from the Templars, the main opponents in the series, who are also shown as running the 'British Indies Company' (the game counterpart of the East India Company). One could argue that here is at least an attempt on the part of the developers to accommodate plural voices in their narration of history. *80 Days* (Inkle 2014), an indie title based on Jules Verne's famous novel, also features an alternate history setting where British India is part of a steampunk world and Verne's story gets an an intriguing twist:

> So, while "80 Days" has outlandish technology and, well, space aliens, Passepartout comes face to face with the very real-world racism and classism that Fogg's stature allows him to casually ignore. Oh, and the love interest in the original, the Indian princess Aouda, isn't a helpless victim to be rescued from being burned alive but is, rather, a no-nonsense heroine. (The Player 2014)

The game's writer, Meg Jayanth comments that as the original story is "about two white guys going around the world [who] almost never leave the British Empire" and as such its perspective is that of British imperialism. In Jayanth's rewriting/ replaying of the story '[I]t becomes really obvious to have more women in the game, to have more marginalized groups. On a purely selfish level, it's simply more interesting. It was also important to me. I'm Indian. I'm a woman. If you have the world available, it'd be nice to see some more people like me being heroes' (The Player 2014). She sums up clearly the postcolonial predicament and the need to allow hitherto unheard voices to express themselves.

As a medium characterised by multiplicity, videogames could likely present many alternatives that would represent plural narratives and many voices of history. The awareness of the plurality of history is a recent development in videogames. This paper has used the history of the British Raj as a case in point to illustrate the larger problematic assumptions that the SEGA and the Microsoft versions of Indian history, perhaps unconsciously, propagate. Instead of presupposing a Western audience position, these real-time strategy games could more effectively contribute to the representation of

historical events and their possible consequences by eschewing stereotypes and admitting a multiplicity of subject-positions in the narratives, they present. As games about empire, instead of merely perpetuating the imperialist notion of the colonisation being a salutary experience for those who are colonised, the parallel narratives written from the point-of-view of the colonised also need to be included so as to open up further possibilities of critical history, which keeps in mind the issues raised by postcolonial historiography and which also serves as a model for how videogames present history, in general.

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ENDNOTES

1 One of the earliest FPS made in India, no publication details are known for this game. It is still available for download on some of the retro-gaming websites.