



# Decolonizing Gaming

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**Abstract.** Decolonizing gaming is not only about including more participants from the Global South to increase diversity among gamers and game designers. It is also about overcoming limitations that a colonial mindset continues to hold with regard to mainstream gaming and game design. This contribution explores new opportunities that arise from a decolonial revision of key aspects of gaming: Enriching the dominant hero's quest by including ambivalent trickster characters, replacing the logic of conquest, extraction and accumulation by exploring a logic of sharing, diversifying game environments by including ways of playful imagination and practice that are hitherto marginalized. In this process serious games play a particularly important role as they can have a decolonizing impact on gaming grounded in social science research on playfulness beyond "the West".

**Keywords:** Decolonization · Sharing · Trickster

## 1 Introduction: Why Gaming Needs Decolonizing

"Relooted" is a new game "against colonialism" in which "Blacks plan their heists into Western museums in order to steal back artefacts" (Drebenstedt 2025). The game was developed and produced in Africa and it seems to successfully invert the colonial logic of exploration, exploitation, conquest and occupation by settlers that is the backdrop of many other games. Developed by Nyamakop Studios, Johannesburg, it features a group of African superheroes taking violent action to speed up the slow response of many museums faced with African demands to return their artefacts, many of which were looted during colonial times. While this inversion can be considered a first step towards decolonizing mainstream commercial gaming, I claim that more serious steps can be undertaken in decolonizing gaming. Impact games and other serious games - which have more freedom to depart from entrenched narratives and consumer expectations - have great potential for pioneering decolonizing in much more fundamental ways than "Relooted". This contribution argues that by decolonizing serious gaming in three concrete ways we may advance the decolonizing efforts of game developers more generally. Firstly, decolonizing through the diversification of game contents beyond the cultural expectations of the Global North promises to enrich gaming ideas and practices. Secondly, making digital games accessible to a wider circle of users and developers is likely to have a positive effect not only on those currently excluded or marginalized but also on those who are currently shaping the field at large. Thirdly, there are some

very concrete features in today's game designs that are limiting the way we think about games. This is due to often implicit biases that can be uncovered through a decolonizing critique. In this contribution I shall focus on the last-mentioned aspect of decolonizing gaming but a few remarks on the first two aspects are also in order.

For as long as access to gadgets and internet infrastructure is globally unequal there will be a degree of exclusion and marginalization affecting those who lack easy access to electricity and the internet, including digital games. The initial hope that the internet and the growing spread of electronic hand-held devices would function as a great equalizer did not materialize. Access to the internet is much more "spiky" (unequal) than what many users want it to be, or assume it to be (see Friedman 2005, Florida 2005): Having worked in African countries over the last four decades I have seen rapid growth in the use of computers, mobile phones and web services for some privileged quarters of the population in those countries. At the same time, many of my local collaborators from underprivileged groups continue to struggle very hard to get connected and to stay connected. Obstacles are wide ranging, including frequent power cuts, the costs of purchasing technology, software and airtime. For many, the inclusion into global markets but also the threat of subsequent disconnection from global markets is tantamount to less opportunities to influence gaming. Ferguson (2001) and others have labelled this experience of being socio-culturally and economically disconnected "abjection". This is one of the first paradoxes when considering gaming through the lens of (de)colonization: There is ample anthropological evidence that pre-colonial and pre-capitalist societies were extremely rich in terms of their ludic capacities and potentials. Take hunter-gatherer societies as an example. While initially thought to be societies at the verge of permanent starvation and therefore devoid of any culture beyond necessity, it soon emerged that in fact humans living under these conditions worked less hours and spend more time on play than workers in the industrial age or their immediate predecessors, the pre-industrial agriculturalists (see Sahlin 1988). Not only was there more time for play, the ludic element also penetrated many fields of life that are now considered to be categorically distinct from leisure. Practicing skills for hunting, gathering, fishing etc. has as much a ludic dimension as a practical-utilitarian dimension. The same holds for story telling and the whole context that has been called serious, "holy play", namely ritual performance (see Lang 1998). In contradistinction to popular assumptions of ritual being necessarily a rigid and somber procedure very unlike games, ritual studies have shown the great dynamic potential of rituals, with room for maneuver and for playfully tampering with rules and authorities (see Chaniotis 2010, Grimes et al. 2011, Brosius et al. 2013). In other words, the current gaming industry, being based largely on Global North ideas and practices of gaming is currently largely disconnected from what arguably could be seen as the strongest traditions of human ludic ideas and practices in the Global South. The "Global North" in this context includes not only "the West" but also the technology-driven gaming industries of Japan, South Korea or India.

It should be clear by now that "decolonizing" gaming does not mean including more ethnic colouring when designing game characters or to design gaming scenes beyond the conventional cosmopolitan urban or rural imagery. It is also not simply a matter of giving other people elsewhere better access to these games (although this is a point of concern, too). Rather, decolonizing could shape the whole gaming enterprise, including

serious games, in a number of fundamental ways. Trammell (2023) has argued that the very notion of play as “fun” needs to be decolonized in the light of experience of Black Americans - for whom play is often toxic - since limiting play to fun is another means to erase them from public social life. He demands nothing less than a recasting of game as intellectual repairing or even healing instead of a power tool of subjugation: “Repairing play means tending to the painful as well as the pleasurable aspects of play” (Trammell 2023, 18). Gaming here is no exception from the more general realization that many of the features that we assumed to be universally human turn out to be rather special and Eurocentric, reflecting only experiences of some quarters of humanity, often those who colonized, dominated and subjugate others. More precisely, psychologists and cognitive scientists have labelled the bias as that of the W.E.I.R.D. people (Henrich, Heine, Norenzayan 2010). W.E.I.R.D stands for “Western Educated Industrial Rich Democratic”. Even though one can argue critically about each of these labels (see also Widlok 2014) the bottom line of this realization is still valid: Much of what we think we know of humans who were tested in their cognitive or economic (or indeed gaming) behaviour is limited to a rather small circle of people, often university students in the Global North with very peculiar backgrounds when considering a wider comparative perspective. This extends all the way to the manner in which we perceive things in our environment, for instance basic graphical conventions that we find in almost any game. For example, the Müller-Lyer “illusion” according to which all humans always think that a line between outward pointing arrows  $< \text{--} >$  is longer than the same line between inward pointing arrows  $> \text{--} <$  turns out to be limited to humans who happened to have grown up in a “carpentered” environment of ninety-degree joints. And what is true for spatial perception has also been demonstrated for concepts of time and causality (see Widlok 2017 for an overview): Most of what we find in globalized entertainment culture is a rather limited selection of a much wider human repertoire. This means that the games designed in the mainstream gaming industry may be read, understood and played in many more ways than we currently anticipate. In other words, there are enormous unexplored game worlds out there because we have so far not taken seriously the whole cultural repertoire of how humans have played games.

## 2 Decolonizing Playful Minds

This takes me to the central argument of my contribution. Decolonizing gaming is not only about being globally more inclusive, lowering thresholds that are continually raised by the industry through developing software that continuously requires us to buy new gadgets, as it needs more memory, greater bandwidth, more and continuous power and connectivity - assets that many people do not have. Decolonizing gaming is, beyond that, also all about exploring new ways of thinking about games, of setting up games differently. It is also about gaming that has so far been limited by a colonial heritage that narrows down the set of human cultural traditions included in the dominant global industry. Decolonizing gaming in this sense is not directed at some marginalized group at the fringes but at the ways in which the majority of us engage with games. At the same time, the segment of serious games, in particular impact games, can become the forerunner for changes in gaming more generally. I am using the label impact games for

those games that do not have entertainment as their main goal (and therefore are part of serious games) but that rather have a distinct critical and political agenda such as that of decolonization. I maintain that ultimately all games have a role to play in decolonization and that they all stand to benefit from this process.

It is a wide-spread misunderstanding that “decolonization” is an issue that is by nature of primary or sole relevance to people living in previously colonized countries, the argument being that colonial structures of dependency, domination and marginalization continue to be effective long after European colonialism has ended with the independence of most formerly colonized territories. But colonization also affects the colonizers and their descendants, their mental states, imageries and social practices as much as it affects the colonized and their descendants. This has been convincingly shown by Heinz (2023) for Western ways of conceptualizing the mind and for dealing with mental processes including mental disorders. Heinz argues that the dominant medical understanding of cognition as being governed by a cerebral center (the brain) and a subservient body is largely informed by the way in which colonizers (and their descendants) have become used to think about the global order, the dynamics of empires, and the global division of labour into the “civilizing” centers on the one hand and the countries in which manual labour and the provision of raw materials are situated on the other hand. Independently of the question as to whether our mind-body dichotomy is a direct product of colonial history, it is convincing that the (post)colonial set-up of the world at large has deeply entrenched the ways in which we consider our own bodies, minds and personhood - and continues to do so. It has taken the cognitive and the educational sciences long to realize that “learning” does not take place in isolated brains but is a matter of embodied minds and performative agency. Digital games in particular had to come a long way from being biased towards seemingly “disembodied” operations of signs to the realization that cognition (in gaming and learning, too) is distributed across minds, bodies, tools etc. This process began with early research on “distributed cognition” (see Hutchins 1986) and has now reached applied work on embodied game experience (see Freyermuth et al. 2013). There is now considerable literature (too much to cover here) that seeks to diversify gaming contents and gaming formats. The emergence and promotion of collaborative games are a case in point (see Berland and Lee 2011, Zagal et al. 2006). But decolonizing is more specific than developing alternatives to the dominant competitive gaming formats. “Decolonizing the mind” involves no longer characterizing receiving units and entities as “slaves” and the sending entities as “masters” both in computer communication (modems of the past) and in game settings (e.g. in the case of multiple digital command controllers of toy trains equipped with decoders). But there are more fundamental changes at stake than getting rid of colonial labels, as I would like to illustrate in what follows.

### 3 Decolonized Play Characters

The main characters of most games - digital or analogue, serious or non-serious - are “heroes”. Typical contents taught to people wanting to delve into game design is to teach them the script of “the quest” (“*Heldenreise*”, hero’s adventure, see Campbell 1949). It is someone venturing out to carry out adventures, solve tasks etc. and to return

with riches - or at least with good stories to tell. It is easy to see here how this is merged with - and mutually amplified by - the imagery and practice of colonial empires that send out explorers to overcome obstacles, conquer foreign lands and seas, exploit faraway resources etc. There are problematic aspects to the hero narrative, for instance the “winner takes it all” attitude, the limited good imagery (“whatever I have someone else cannot have”) the purposeful ignoring of the fate of the “others” in the hero encounters, the hyper-individuality of many heroes, a rigid friend-foe distinction and the good/evil dichotomy, or the lack of any strategy of dealing productively with failure, unresolvable problems etc. What is worse, though, is that often the hero and his travels is considered the only possible way of designing the main role of characters in any game. By contrast, and comparatively speaking, the main character in much of human playful thought and practice is not necessarily a hero but more likely a trickster character.

Trickster figures and tricksterish behaviour are human universals, they are found on all continents and in many different constellations. A polythetic definition of tricksters include the following properties: Trickster are (1) switching identity, (2) tricking others, (3) shape shifting, (4) inverting and overturning rules (5) moving boundaries, (6) re-arranging culture (Hynes and Doty 1997). The definition is polythetic in that not all of these features need to be present for people to recognize a figure as a trickster. Given the high prevalence of the trickster across indigenous cultures across all continents it is rather surprising that this character does not dominate gaming, after all it is the ludic person par excellence. Yes, there is a lot of shape-shifting, especially in graphically sophisticated digital games, but other tricksterish features remain underexplored. Tricksters are morally ambivalent. They often transgress rules, often for selfish reasons (negative) but at the same time they also challenge self-appointed and imposing authorities and provide weapons to the weak, if only through their (positive) example. This could become a key feature especially for various forms of serious games because they set out to allow users to learn about complexity and to train their tolerance for ambiguities. Bauer (2018) has shown how this tolerance towards ambiguity is at the heart of strategies to counter extremism and fundamentalism. Having more tricksterish figures (and actions) in games would not only introduce a greater social realism into games, it would also amplify the key message of many impact games, namely the need to train sociability, reasonability, an appreciation of complexity and adequacy of agency geared toward that complexity in dynamically changing situations.

Much more could be said in this context about the personality of play characters. I limit myself to only mention that comparatively speaking the individualistic person that is promoted by mainstream culture and entertainment is comparatively again a rather W.E.I.R.D. feature (see above). Characters need not have to have that monolithic and rather static personhood. Common other forms of personhood are the “dividual” (dominant in many Pacific cultures) but also “partible” personhood (described for India for example) but also other notions of “permeable” and relational persons (see Busby 1997, Fowler 2004). Instead of assuming that the characters of a game are by and large unchanging and come with a fixed set of properties, an orientation towards these other notions of personhood would mean that we recognize that persons can be made through ongoing social interaction, changing when relationships change and how the person itself can be seen as a bundle of relations with others (including non-human others) instead of

a bundle of fixed features. Decolonizing our cast of characters in any one game does not only mean to diversify the characters but also to change the ways in which the characters shift their shape, their goals, their mindset, namely through social interactions. Many serious games have as their goal that players learn to change their lives (by being better informed, experienced etc.). Decolonizing the available roles in such games therefore seems to be a particularly promising path towards this goal.

#### 4 Decolonized Play Actions

However, it is not only the shape of the play characters but also their actions that need decolonizing. Again, the dominant feature is that of accumulation. Play characters win a game by getting points, getting to higher levels, usually by outcompeting others, sometimes by pooling their forces and skills to jointly reach the points they need, for instance in escape games. In a decolonizing perspective this rather monomaniacal focus on accumulation needs to be challenged. The (over)exploitation of natural resources is inextricably linked to the colonial and imperial expansion (see Ghosh 2021). In other words, decolonizing also means realizing that there are limits to growth since there are social and environmental costs that make accumulation a maladaptive strategy. By implication, “the winner takes it all” and “to get as much out of this as possible” are goals that lead to colonial strategies and are in turn produced by them. Since they are not locally sustainable, an ever-increasing accumulation means expanding beyond one’s own territory, enslaving or disappropriating others in order to be able to secure their assets for oneself, something that is deeply entrenched not only in the capitalist West but more fundamentally in the Abrahamic religions (see Brody 2000). To break up this link between non-sustainable accumulation and dominating others would presuppose a game setting in which the overall aim of the game is altered. There are at this stage no examples of games that could be given here but at our university we are currently developing “*The Fair Share Game*” which is based on the logic of sharing, here understood as “extending the circle of people who have access to what is valued” (see Widlok 2017: xvii). If we turn this into the goal of the game, the efforts of the players shift from accumulating goods (at the cost of others) to striving for a larger circle of others with access to what is valued. But again, it is not simply a maximization by those who exploit a resource. Resources in this setup are not unlimited but potentially demands for access can be unlimited and mutually exclusive. Hence, the strategy of the players would be to act appropriately according to the situation by distinguishing “humbug” demands, i.e. out of proportion demands by others, from appropriate demands for a fair share. It would also involve learning to dodge the inappropriate demands without jeopardizing or cutting off one’s relationships to social partners. As we know from the ethnography of sharing (see Widlok 2017) this is by no means a banal problem. Indigenous Australians in precolonial and in contemporary settings spend quite some time discussing “humbug” demands and how to react to them (see Myers 1988). Among indigenous foragers in southern Africa, strategies of levelling outrageous demands without alienating others and without raising open conflict often involve a lot of talking, frequently moving away from others or hiding assets (Widlok 2017). Circumpolar ethnography suggests that it matters considerably what the assets (or “items of value”) are that are subject to demand sharing. Some “bulky”

items (whales, fishing boats) have different “affordances” of how they can be shared as compared to nuts, berries and other items that can be easily gathered individually (see Widlok 2017). And cultural conventions and evaluations differ: Foragers in tropical African forests are happy to share many of their material goods but they are, by contrast, eager to sell and own dances, spirits and ceremonies (see Lewis 2015). Serious games could easily explore the complexity of these situations and the challenge of players would be to develop an appropriate and socially acceptable strategy of dealing with the specificity of each situation, the types of resources that need to be shared, and the type of group structure that allows fair demands for a share by those in need. Strikingly, in “real life” situations documented by ethnography much of this challenge is responded to not by following hard and fast rules or static principles but rather by a high degree of playfulness of tentative and dialogical “trying things out” which involves learning from responses as one proceeds. There is, therefore, a considerable overlap between what goes on in gaming and what goes on in real-life situations of sharing which makes games a perfect place for learning about the logic of sharing. Conversely, gaming more generally could be a perfect training ground for acquiring skills of dealing with sharing as an alternative mode of transfer geared towards an alternative economy more appropriately suited to a finite planet.

There is not only room for alternatives to the accumulation efforts that dominate many games today. Rather, and more strongly put, there seems to be a prominent role for gaming in breaking with entrenched but counterproductive practices of accumulation and by acquainting and training players in alternative practices such as sharing. As ethnography suggests these practices are not simply a matter of gaining moral high ground (or even of intellectual understanding) but these practices can be trained under changing and challenging social conditions, e.g. through play.

## 5 Decolonized Play Environment and Resources

It is another big asset of games (both analogue and digital) that they can simulate an amazing spectrum of resources, assets, and environments. One should therefore imagine that this is an aspect in which a decolonizing agenda could easily be realized. In many other contexts, decolonizing also affects the epistemological and ontological standing of the entities that we are dealing with (see Braidotti and Gilroy 2016 on the ongoing debates on posthumanism). To put it more simply: Animals, spiritual beings, material objects need not be “things”, as in the dominant “naturalist” Western discourse (see Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012) but all of these could become agents and social persons who can establish relationships with one another and who can interact with the players. And, of course, we already see this in many games, where animals and plants speak to humans, where things move and behave in an “animated” fashion and so forth. As a matter of fact, many games today already encompass different ontologies. Players are habitually being trained in learning about, and adapting to, different ontological environments, e.g. a world in which non-humans speak, have personalities, emotions and agency. This is, therefore, a very good starting point for decolonization. There is, however, still room for improvement because often the “alternative ontology” that players learn about in their game environment may be distinctly different from the everyday

ontology they live in (e.g. with animals and plants speaking) but in mainstream commercial games that new environment typically demands the same rigorous acceptance and standardized “normality” that a naturalist or materialist environment demands. The crux of the decolonial challenge is not only that things, the universe at large, can be very different. Rather, it is realization that we are not dealing with a homogeneous universe but rather with a “pluriverse” (see Widlok forthcoming). The decolonial challenge for games in this context is therefore not only to train players to learn a different ontology, to find their way into a strange new environment. Rather, the players need to learn that there is a *plurality* of ontologies, that they cannot trust that everything they have learned at earlier levels is still valid at other levels they reach. In other words, players need to train their flexibility, and to maintain their alertness and their perceptiveness to expect the unexpected from the game environment as much as from other characters. While this can ideally be simulated in gaming environments, the decolonial agenda also means breaking with some established habits in the gaming industry where many players are encouraged (and rewarded) for taking on their new game environment as “second home”, as a new normality. That new normality structurally often demands the same rigorousness in abiding to rules, conforming to values of the new world they are entering - including the habit to accumulate riches and to seek and gain status. Designing decolonized environments for games that can innovate the industry means nothing less than introducing new logics to gaming. Widlok and Stenning have discussed the role of different logics, in particular so-called non-monotonic logics (Widlok and Stenning 2018). Here it suffices to say that other logics exist that are unlike the inductive and deductive logics that dominate much of our problem-solving in games. Think of the “games of deduction” where the identity of the “werewolf” (or more conventionally “the murderer”) has to be deductively established. By contrast, much of the established gaming life follows an “abductive” logic, for instance when dealing with misfortune through oracles (see Widlok and Stenning 2018, Widlok 2014). Abductive reasoning of the type “where there is smoke, there is also fire” (see Agar 2013) contradicts linear, monotonic logic, of textbooks but at the same time much of everyday reasoning is abductive. It requires being prepared to readjust premises instead of “monotonically” building on existing premises. It typically involves delving into the changing details of a situation instead of pursuing everlasting underlying principles (Widlok forthcoming). Recognizing abductive logic is therefore part of a decolonizing effort not only in the sense of plurification but also of upgrading practical knowledge that is not canonized in abstract principles. This upgrading is important for a re-evaluation of non-western epistemologies (Widlok 2014) but also of subaltern ontologies of practitioners in “the West”. There is a final twist to this that has a particular relevance for gaming as a practice: While deductive and other monotonic logics privilege game designers and abstract planning, abduction underlines the skills and implicit embodied knowledge of the performers, the players themselves and the abductive reasoning skill that they develop through engaging with the game. To put it differently, the task of serious games, and impact games in particular, is not only to help unlearn standardized behaviour and to explore new forms of behaviour, it is also re-valuing the importance of performance of playful agency itself. It recognizes that problem solving can not only be improved through detached design but also by perfectionating the practices at hand.

## 6 Conclusion: Games Without Frontiers

Gaming has a great potential to playfully imagine and propagate “other worlds”, worlds with less inequality and less marginalization of subaltern practices and ideas. Impact games can play an important role in undoing past injustices and breaking up structures of domination that have been produced through the imperialist colonialism of the past and that continues to have effects on living conditions today. However, this potential is not as yet fully realized, we need more games designed towards that goal. To the contrary, there are not only traces of colonialism in gaming practice but the gaming industry, together with many other parts of mainstream culture, tends to amplify tendencies that are implicated in the colonial project. As shown, there is evidence for this to be found with regard to the way in which role-play and game characters are conceptualized and in the way in which the main characters are considered “heroes” typically on their quest to riches. The actions of these characters often emulate that of colonial explorers and exploiters of raw materials in the colonies leading to disaster for the ecology of the environment as much as in the social life of the indigenous population. Many game environments and their resources have striking resemblances with the colonial backwaters exploited by colonial centers but also more generally with the imperial capitalism that created colonial and racist structures as an inevitable ingredient of exploiting the planet. These colonial vestiges are very rarely actively embraced, neither by game developers or players. However, such colonial traces are unlikely to simply disappear unless gamers actively re-design and re-orient the games they play. Serious games are the one branch of the game industry and of gaming culture more generally, that have a paramount role to play here. Giving more room to impact games in serious gaming can help to change the way in which we design and play games reaching out into the wider entertainment industry but also into teaching and learning about the world at large.

The good news is that the process of decolonizing games does not need to rely on moralizing narratives, on prohibitions, or strict rules of conduct. It also does not exclusively need to be fed by moral utopias. Rather, there is sufficient documentation of the ludic character of pre-colonial societies and also of ongoing subaltern resistance against colonialism that can serve as a shared cultural pool from which other types of games can be produced. As I have indicated in this contribution, there is a world-wide oral tradition of “tricksters” that can replace the monomaniacal narrative of the hero’s quest. There are diverse forms of personhood in existence that can inspire new forms of agents in games. There is a detailed ethnographic record of sharing practices (and other forms of transfer such as pooling, commoning, gifting etc.) that can complement or replace the “accumulation” mode of practice that dominates much gaming to this day. And finally, alternative social and natural environments need not be invented from scratch since they are part of the social science and humanities record of the repertoire of what it means to be human. It is unlikely that mainstream entertainment gaming will pick up on these opportunities easily. Specialized impact games, on the other hand, are perfectly positioned to take on this role of a mediating device between the “serious” variability of human life and the playfulness of developing this life further.

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