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colonial hegemony permeates the epistemology of digital games (Harrer 2018, 20-21). Rules and stories of digital games are mostly rooted in colonial cultural institutions' unnegotiable legacies, which players are required to embody to play the game (Mukherjee 2017, Mukherjee 2018). In the context of action-adventure games, simulations of white protagonists often take place in an exotic hazardous setting, and focus on the narrative of white protagonists while muting the cultural identity of indigenous settings. Peeling multiple layers of whiteness in action-adventure digital games will show how their ludic simulation and cultural representations are deeply intertwined with concepts of white supremacy and orientalism. My article aims to complement pre-existing literature on digital games and postcolonialism which tend to focus on a single aspect and overlook interrelation between various aspects of postcolonialism in digital games.

The method of this article is qualitative content analysis (Bryman 2012, 557), with orientalism and white supremacy as its main coding categories (Bryman 2012, 578). Digital game examples for this article are *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (2007), *Far Cry 3* (2012), and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (2018). They are selected due to their classification as adventure games which fulfil the genre's premises, and due to their status as triple-A digital games which enforce the white hegemony status quo of digital game culture (Fron et al. 2007, 310-311). All of them simulate the adventure of white protagonists with Western game conventions in South American and Southeast Asian settings, which serve no bigger purpose than being backdrops filled with obstacles to be overcome, and resources to be collected.

## **White Supremacy and Digital Games**

At its core, there are two main tenets of white supremacy: invisibility and normative

enforcement. Its invisibility is related to a social context in which white is the only group who are not signified by shallow stereotypes compared to other social groups. White is exempted from the exoticism that objectifies the view of other racial groups. In the context of media and society, Hall (2015, 168-170) and Dyer (2017, 36) provide examples by arguing that white characters are often portrayed as protagonists with complex backstories and trajectories. Said portrayal facilitates whiteness to become a blank sheet for audiences' embodiments where they project themselves into a white avatar and develop emotional affirmation with a whiteness narrative.

White supremacy's invisibility creates a norm that acknowledges white as a group of default human beings with subjective individuality, while assigning otherness to non-white (Dyer 2017, 43). White supremacy portrays values such as purpose, struggle, and personal development as exclusive to white, and it deliberately overlooks those values' inherent attachment to white's identity as a racial group. Their identity is marked by whites' historical oppression toward identity articulations of other races (Said 1977, Bhabha 1994). The historical oppression and their sociotechnical capital in the global media ecosystem (Fron et al. 2007, Mukherjee 2017, Harrer 2018) more easily allows white as a group to enforce its values as universally acceptable.

The invisibility of white supremacy and its wide ideological dissemination create white hegemony. White hegemony can be understood as a state of whiteness as normal (Dyer 2017, 38-40) to the detriment of non-white groups, who often become unwilling participants of its cultural circuit (du Gay et al. 1997, 3-5). White hegemony creates a social circumstance where the world is defined by whiteness and gives white advantages in a manner which is often difficult to be articulated by non-white people (Spracklen 2013, Dyer 2017).

A critical examination of cultural power relations requires an understanding of the epistemology of white supremacy's hegemony. Dyer (1997, 38-40) argues that identifying white hegemony requires acknowledgement of white's perceived exceptionalism, peculiarity, and limitation based on their culture and history. In doing so, white's identity will become more contextual and contradicts the supposed notion in opposition to white universality. At the same time, identifying white supremacy would also dismantle whites' perceived unbound subjectivity by mapping correlations between their unwarranted supremacist thoughts and actions with their sociocultural contexts.

Additionally, it is worth examining anti-blackness as a concept that can provide a wider perspective on white supremacy. Anti-blackness refers to the suffering of blacks' and other minorities' cultural codes from inauthentic articulations which generally represent whites' indirect experience of blackness (Wilderson III 2010, 55-58). Cinema is an exemplary communication medium in which anti-blackness often occurs through representations of stereotypical characters which contrast subjective representation of white characters. Anti-blackness is best understood as a communication epistemology which enforces white supremacy ideology (Wilderson III 2010, 60-67). Ultimately, a combination of both concepts and ideology creates white exceptionalism.

In the context of media and communication, white exceptionalism socially constructs images of races, and reinforces those images through text productions and articulations (Hall 2015, 170). There is a historical homogeneity in representing races which often portrayed minorities as malicious or weak (Hall 2015, 171-172). This representation peaked in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture through novels such as *Gone with the Wind* (1936), which portrays highly







players to reinforce “normative whiteness” (Dietrich 2013, 83) and “virtual white habitus” (Dietrich 2013, 83) which, in turn, positions whiteness as a default.

The aforementioned biased mode of representation is problematic for players’, and general audiences’, perception of digital games. Monolithic representations can create a one-dimensional acknowledgement of the represented matters (Shaw 2014, 158-166). Consequently, the acknowledgement becomes a default reception that can cause a one-dimensional reproduction of the message (Shaw 2014, 201-209), thus creating a cycle of hegemony (Mukherjee 2017, 56-58).

This is especially true because even as digital games become increasingly inclusive with regard to genders, white supremacy remains under-addressed. Many female protagonists such as the LGBTQ Ellie from *The Last of Us* duology (2013-2020) still become a node for white universality through detailed characterization and subjectivities inside white personhood, in a fragmented society which is still dominated by white people (Murray 2019, 120-122). Even as Lara Croft becomes more modest and humane (MacCallum-Stewart 2014) in recent titles in the *Tomb Raider* series (2013-2018), the expression of white supremacy persists because of her detailed characterizations as a white British woman in exotic foreign settings, the embodiment of players into her, and the games’ goals which affirm Lara Croft’s white universality (Murray 2019, 133-138).

White supremacy is correlated to the concept and practices of orientalism. While white supremacy perceives whiteness as a subjectivity, orientalism perceives other socioracial groups as fascinating objects. Orientalism commodifies cultures and characteristics of other socioracial groups as commodities by applying stereotypical essentialist attributes to them, and teaches audiences to consume them as *others*

(Spracklen 2013, Dyer 2017, Harrer 2018, Mukherjee 2018). The next section of this article will explore the concept of orientalism, its main signifiers, and its application in media and digital games.

### **Orientalism in Digital Games – Playing Otherness**

Orientalism can be understood as a paradigm that perceives non-western regions as the other – geo-cultural regions with *different* narratives, politics, and production processes – which contrast with the West (Said 1977, Macfie 2002, Curtis 2009). The other, as orientalism describes, is deprived of subjectivities and assigned rigid essentialist attributes which position the other in stereotypes (Said 1977, Macfie, 2002). Orientalism has three signifiers: discourse, despotism, and production model. The discourse of orientalism is the understanding and articulation of non-western cultures in western cultural frameworks (Said 1977, Macfie 2002, Curtis 2009).

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Orientalism often represents non-western cultures as despotic and uncivilized, which requires western intervention to bring civilization (Said 1977, Macfie 2002, Curtis 2009) that is based on European whiteness (Spracklen 2013, 27-46). To that end, orientalism often portrays the implementation of western cultural values and instruments in a non-western locus.

Orientalism often manifests in popular media by constructing a clear dichotomy between white as selves and non-white as others. An example of a literary work on orientalism is Joseph Conrad’s seminal *Heart of Darkness* novel which portrays white European colonizers’ thoroughly superior humanity over black Africans (Fatima, Jamil and Hanif 2015). The novel presents African natives as stereotypically barbaric and foolish other (Fatima, Jamil and Hanif 2015). The title itself is a reference to Africans’ sub-humanity, compared to White Europeans (Fatima, Jamil and Hanif 2015).





formal institutions which are digital game companies, and afford simulations/representations of their creators' political standpoints (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, Fron et al. 2007, Harrer 2018). They are also digital artefacts where interactions mainly occur in their virtual world which also facilitates interaction from players which reproduce political standpoints (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, Bryman 2012).

The selected documents must have relevance to the theme and aim of this article, and are not specifically designed for scientific research purposes (Bryman 2012, 558). There are three commercial action-adventure digital games selected as research objects of this article: *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, *Far Cry 3*, and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, due to their strong simulation/representation of white supremacy and orientalism and their adherence to mainstream conventions of digital games which perpetuate white hegemony (Leonard 2003, Šisler 2008).

These three games express adventures of white protagonists' narratives in non-Western settings, yet they implement values and mechanisms of white exceptionalism, which is rooted in European and Anglo-American identities while objectifying non-white characters. These expressions are rooted in the history of white supremacy and orientalism in popular culture (Spracklen 2013, Dyer 2017). Additionally, each game has unique expressions in various foci of white supremacy, which make them distinct from one another.

The data analysis method of this article is thematic analysis (Bryman 2012, 578-581) with colonialism as its main theme. This article argues that white supremacy and orientalism are colonialism's formative elements, and contribution to new knowledge about digital games and colonialism will be synthesized through analysis of those











other white characters, while interacting with native and non-white characters in antagonistic and transactional manners. The first-person camera and the open-world structure afford players with abilities to perceive and interact with non-western settings strictly from the point of view of a white man. White supremacy is invisible because it becomes the driving logic that overarches what is considered the standard formula of the open-world action-adventure genre. Despite the series becoming more inclusive in future *Far Cry* games, *Far Cry 3* remains a good example of whiteness' pervasiveness as a logic and key element of digital game expressions.

Owing to its status as a longstanding series in digital game culture, it is noteworthy that no academic research so far has focused on *Tomb Raider's* expressions of white supremacy. The rebooted *Tomb Raider* series manages to express a more holistic version of Lara Croft. Croft evolved from a one-dimensional sex symbol to a heroine with complex emotions and character development. Yet the narrative of the white saviour remains a strong presence in the series. As the general theme of the series, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* expresses a ludo-narrative of treasure hunting in which Lara Croft travels to non-western settings in search of historical artefacts, often encountering supernatural phenomena in the process. In the game, Lara travels to Mexico and Peru to find apocalyptic pre-Columbian artefacts in a race against the Trinity, the rebooted series' main antagonists, who seek to use them for world domination. Like *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* and *Far Cry 3*, the location and narrative backgrounds of *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* reproduce the message of white subjectivity, which consequently strips non-white characters of their agency.

Despite being away from her geo-cultural origin, Lara Croft is depicted as being physically, tactically, and culturally superior to indigenous characters in the game, due to *Shadow of the Tomb Raider's* pre-set narratives and the player only being able to



communities where the artefacts are located. Whereas Croft is concerned with stopping Trinity at all costs to protect her father’s legacy, Jonah is concerned with protecting non-Western communities who have nothing to do with the Croft family and Trinity. This dynamic begins as early as the prologue part of the game, when Lara Croft accidentally unleashes a tsunami on a Mexican town as she searches for artefacts.

Yet the critique is mainly irrelevant because of two aspects. The first is Jonah’s identity as an individual of Pacific Islander ancestry. Instead of delegating the subversive agencies to members of the game’s Paititian community, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* creates a blanket category for non-white characters. While white characters such as Lara Croft and Trinity’s members have unique subjectivities, non-white characters are generic. The role of Lara Croft’s minority counterpart can be represented by any non-white characters. Secondly, the game’s critique is hampered by its structures. The game’s storytelling of Paititian power struggle adds depths to their representation, but only within a narrow framework of the colonial noble savage narrative (Said 1977, Hall 2015, Mukherjee 2017). The interactivity of *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* still revolves around Lara Croft and her privileged white European background, which the players need to embody to complete the game.

At this point, I have discussed how whiteness is often hidden in digital games through expressions of narrative and simulations of rules, which are the norm. The next section of this article will discuss how such norms are uniformly applied in all three researched games, and how they perpetuate white invisibility and white supremacy in general.







*Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, *Far Cry 3*, and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* all express gun use as vital part of the narrative and use guns as ludic devices. Most segments require players to kill in-game opponents using guns; this cannot be negotiated as nonlethal options are often unavailable. Those games also do not have a morality system that would punish players should they simulate gun violence. *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider's* stories are linear, while *Far Cry 3's* narrative's point of divergence does not involve critical expressions of gun violence. The symbolic devaluation of human lives by gun violence mirrors the insistence by vocal portions of white conservative Americans to preserve gun rights despite the fact that gun violence costs lives in the country, and despite the brutal history of firearms usage in oppressing indigenous population across the globe (Witkowski 2013, Schwartz 2017). By expressing gun violence uncritically through their formal texts, digital games contribute to internalizing white supremacy as a commonplace.

Another form of white supremacy manifestation in digital games is white personhood, which perpetuates colonial legacy in digital games. Despite the emergence of a more inclusive expression of women as minorities, whiteness is still the norm. Many women protagonists in recent digital games are still white characters of European ancestry. In addition, Eurocentric liberal democratic values such as self-determination, capitalism, and putting one's interests above others are expressed as signifiers of digital games' protagonists in both storytelling and gameplay mechanism. Mukherjee (2017, 63-65) argues that even when digital games attempt to express non-white as protagonists, they will still embody values and practices which are rooted in whiteness. This makes non-white protagonists in digital games hybrids (Mukherjee 2017, 68-70) at best, or tokens at worst.





an orientalist view of lawlessness beyond the western world, and at the same time constructs non-western regions as free-for-all lands.

The orientalist despotism is a main ludo-narrative element of both *Far Cry 3* and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*. *Far Cry 3*'s Rook Island is expressed as a lawless zone that is rife with violence and conflict as the game progresses. The main conflict of *Far Cry 3* is between Hoyt Volker's privateer faction and the Rakyat insurgent tribe led by Citra Talugmai. The background of *Far Cry 3* is Volker's conquest of Rooks Island, which is later transformed into his base for human trafficking and illegal weapons and drug trades. The game expresses clearly that the Rakyat insurgent is inferior to Volker's privateers, and the player's actions are required to reach the desirable goal. Furthermore, despite being expressed as the oppressed, the Rook Islander society is also one with a belief in human sacrifice: an abhorrent action by modern western standards. Indeed, players, such as Jason Brody, would eventually have to confront Citra Talugmai and the Rook Islanders in the game's final segment. Citra Talugmai's occidental fascination of Jason Brody's whiteness is an interesting expression. Yet Citra Talugmai's personal motives are not well-developed. Instead, it is the prophecy of the Rook Islands that becomes her motivation. As such, Citra Talugmai and the Rook Islanders are unable to escape the divisive othering that positions them in a despotic category.

In *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, the Paititian are represented as a much nobler community compared to the Rook Islanders, as they never attempt to use Lara for their own gain. Yet they are still trapped in a violent successor dispute between the Trinity-controlled incumbent and the rightful heir to the Paititian throne. The Paititian's dispute is ultimately secondary to the ongoing conflict between Lara Croft and the Trinity. As such, again, the interest of non-white characters is subordinate to





white invisibility by expressing Trinity as an invisible actor. But it is ultimately irrelevant due to Paititian’s dependence on Lara Croft as the tiebreaker in their conflict: a white saviour expression which *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* also shares with *Far Cry 3*. Ultimately, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* expresses an orientalist production model by asymmetrically positioning Lara Croft as the master and the Paititians as followers in a conflict in which white agendas are at stake.

## Conclusion – Critical Engagement

Based on this article’s discussion, I argue that colonial expression in games is maintained by romanticising orientalist themes and entrenching the white hegemony of play to be accepted as a norm. *Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune*, *Far Cry 3*, and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* exemplify the subtle yet prevalent and ubiquitous expression of colonialism, which is rigid and malleable at the same time. A question needs to be asked: how can we as players critically engage whiteness?

Whiteness is the logic of digital games. It is the dominant cultural root of digital games’ semiotic dimensions and formal texts. Digital games’ stories are written based on Eurocentric social constructions, and their pre-existing reproductions in various forms of popular media. Likewise, the convention of digital games’ virtual experience is based on phenomena which are common in white-dominated societies. This includes but is not limited to individual competence, technological mastery, and capitalism. Expressions of rules and narratives in digital games fetishize the identity of whiteness and frame it as universal.

The prevalence of white supremacy and orientalism in digital games is rooted in societal and technological hegemony. The long history of white-dominated arts and

entertainment by the western world has accrued both financial and social capital, which enable them to herd the public discourse and market logic. These, in turn, enabled the western world to accrue human capital in the arts and the entertainment industry, and digital games are no exception. The white hegemony of digital game workers hinders the industry from expressing digital games within the framework of blackness, and the frameworks of other socioracial groups. As whiteness becomes the logic of digital games, it will remain supreme and orientalist expressions will persist, no matter how subtle.

Critical engagement with whiteness needs commitment toward criticism of digital games' epistemology. We need to be aware about the cultural root of digital games' dominant conventions, to study how they are biased toward politically and economically dominant social groups such as white. We need to critically examine how digital games' expressions entrench dominant values while alienating less-dominant values. It requires a fragmentation of game culture into localized expressions. This is exceptionally crucial to escape a reproduction of whiteness into the shell of non-white characters and/or settings.

This also means diversifying digital games' expression by re-formulating the role of non-white characters in digital games. This includes the development of authentic conventions in digital games which are specifically non-white, instead of merely appropriating digital game norms, which are inherently white. Critical engagement with whiteness in digital games requires a development of a new logic which acknowledges the contexts of whiteness in digital games and their oppression, and actively resists them. Whiteness needs to be understood as deeply contextual as opposed to universal, and the colonialization of digital games' spaces and culture needs to be reclaimed.



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