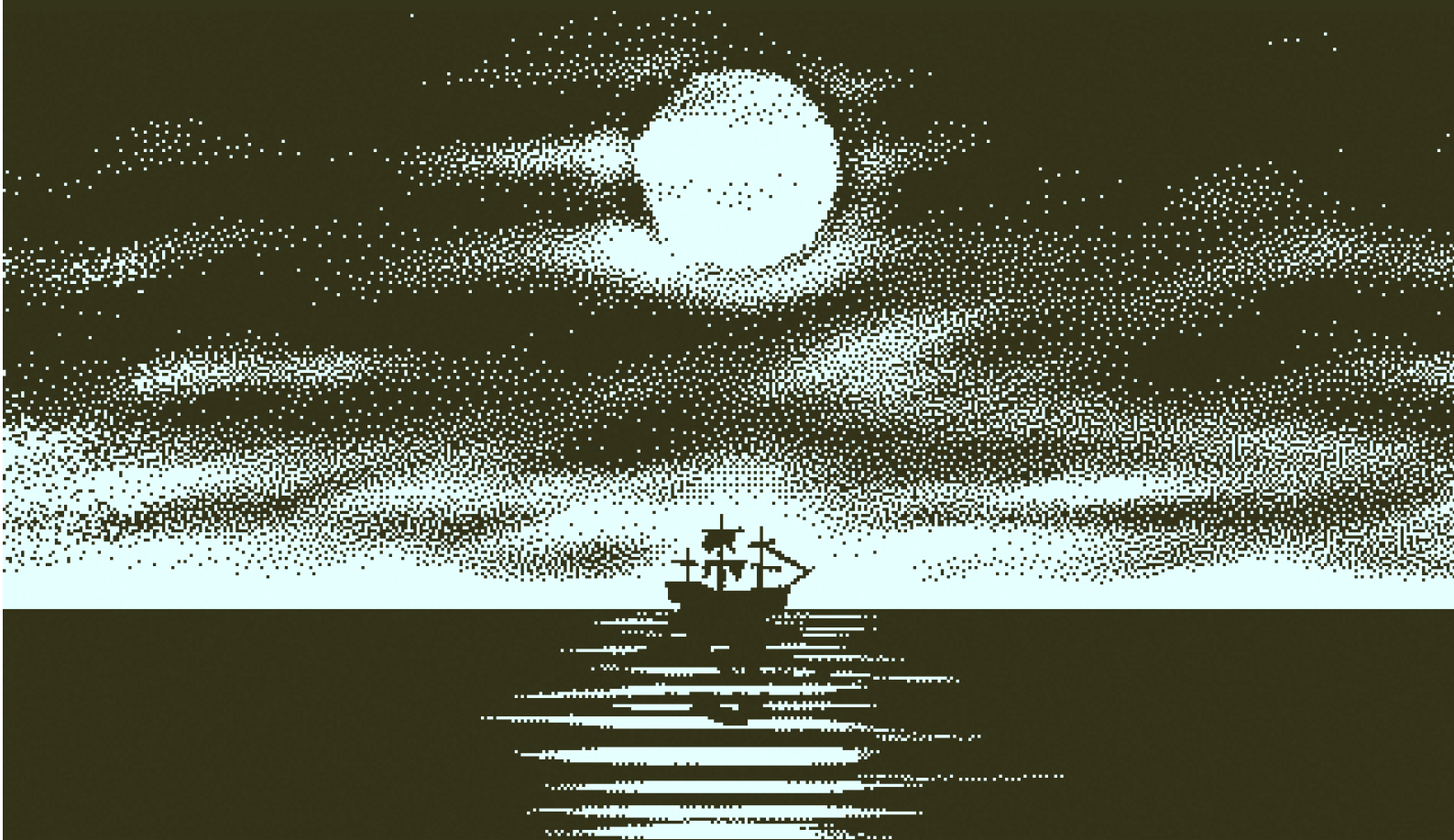# Remembering Death, Adventure and Tragedy:
Grasping Videogames' Epistemic Limits Through a Postcolonial Reading of *Return of the Obra Dinn*

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"Return of the Obra Dinn," Microsoft, accessed June 10, 2020, https://www.microsoft.com/nl-nl/p/return-of-the-obra-dinn/9n185ql77d27?activetab=pivot:overviewtab.

Abstract

This Bachelor thesis examines Lucas Pope's 2018 game *Return of the Obra Dinn* from the perspective of postcolonial game studies and historical game studies. Using theories of colonial discourses and colonial power such as Orientalism, contact zones and hybridity, I argue that without explicitly acknowledging it as such the game presents a colonial history and reproduces (modes of) colonial thought. Colonial power in *Obra Dinn* is understood as structured by an Orientalist discourse, evidenced by the way the formal hierarchy maintained aboard the eponymous ship intersects with the ethnicities of its crewmembers, and by the way a group of Formosan passengers are treated. Moreover, the game itself reproduces Orientalist beliefs by exoticizing the Formosans and presenting colonialism as an adventure. Following a theoretical point of contention regarding the notion of Orientalism, I supplement the understanding of colonial power as represented in the game. Departing from the notion of contact zones, I contrapuntally read details of the game that indicate the complexity of shipboard life. However, the game undercuts an effective representation of such complexity because it reverts to colonial modes of thought in its portrayal of lived actualities. *Obra Dinn*'s mechanics namely reproduce a colonial epistemological and ideological framework, which the player must follow to progress through the game. The player's aim is to solve and record the history of the Obra Dinn, whose every crewmember has disappeared or died. However, the possibilities of writing this history remain within the epistemic limits of colonialism: this amounts to filling in lists of names, which eventually produces an insurance settlement that reduces a lived history to money sums. This undermines the remembrance of the dynamism of shipboard life. Moreover, the possibilities of contesting history through play are limited since even a subversive playstyle, challenging the game mechanics' historiographical affordances, remains confined to the aforementioned lists. The player cannot escape the game's colonial epistemic limits, which I argue extends to the form of videogames generally. The medium may be understood to inherently function as ideological interpellation, by its incessant demands on players, which leads me to position videogames as a genealogical descendant of colonial systems of administration. Players, much like colonial subjects, are inscribed in administrative systems that limit their autonomy and agency – the system is just digital now.

Keywords: *Return of the Obra Dinn*, postcolonialism, postcolonial game studies, historical game studies, videogames, Orientalism, contact zones, hybridity, interpellation.

Introduction

"Company man woke me up." A raspy voice with a thick Cornish accent interrupts the silence and the calm sounds of water sloshing against the sides of a small rowing boat. "Said you'd need ferry to the Obra Dinn. Not many eager for that job." Five years have passed since the merchant vessel Obra Dinn disappeared in 1802, and now you receive word that it resurfaced, drifting into the port of Falmouth without any of its original passengers. You, an insurance agent, are sent to investigate the desolate ship and uncover what events befell it and its passengers. To unravel this history, you use whatever clues you find aboard, a book containing the ship's manifest, and a magic pocket watch that lets you rewind time to certain moments of the ship's disastrous odyssey – the exact moment, frozen in time, of the death of a passenger or crewmember. Hence the appropriate name of the timepiece: *Memento Mortem*, translation 'Remember Death'. Thus opens *Return of the Obra Dinn* (Lucas Pope, 2018), a videogame praised for its originality, visual style and central mystery puzzle, once described as "a cross between an Agatha Christie novel and a Sudoku."[1]

Mostly disregarded however are implications of the game's setting, which is temporally and spatially embedded in colonial history: it unfolds during times of European imperial conquest, in a place that functioned as a colonial harbor providing entry to the Atlantic Ocean.[2] The insurance officer's employer also evidences this colonial background: the "Honourable East India Company" is historically notorious for its slave trade.[3] *Obra Dinn* thus obliquely invokes the subject of British – and by extension European – colonialism, but at no point directly acknowledges it, which raises questions about the game's relation to and representation of this history: does it condemn these practices, or implicitly reinforce ideas that are supportive of and propagated by colonialism? This question is particularly pertinent because players embody a character embedded in a colonizing society – they therefore experience and enact a dominating position, rather than one of subordination. What kind of relationship does the game then offer

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[1] Colin Campbell, "Return of the Obra Dinn is a superb murder mystery game," *Polygon*, October 19, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2018/10/19/18001242/return-of-the-obra-dinn-review-windows-pc-mac-steam;
"Return of the Obra Dinn," Metacritic, accessed March 1, 2020, https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/return-of-the-obra-dinn.

[2] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 7-9;
Megan Lowena Oldcorn, "Falmouth and the British Maritime Empire" (PhD dissertation, London, University of the Arts London, 2014), 2.

[3] Virginia Bever Platt, "The East India Company and the Madagascar Slave Trade," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (October 1969): 548–77;
Frenise A. Logan, "The British East India Company and African Slavery in Benkulen, Sumatra, 1687-1792," *The Journal of Negro History* 41, no. 4 (October 1956): 339.

to the victims of colonialism, those peoples colonized, oppressed and subordinated by European empires?

In this thesis, I study the game's representation of colonialism, and how it is implicitly entangled in colonial practices and modes of thought. Thereto I employ the perspective of postcolonial game studies: a nascent area of study that combines postcolonialism, which examines colonialism's persistent impact on the contemporary world, with game studies' understanding of videogames' medium-specific qualities.[4] The research departs from the following question: *How does* Return of the Obra Dinn *represent a colonial history?* Three sub-questions help answer this question. To grasp how *Obra Dinn* reflects colonial power relations, and reproduces or critiques such structures, the first sub-question is: *How is the exercise of colonial power represented in* Return of the Obra Dinn*?* I appraise this issue using Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, a pre-eminent conceptualization of colonial discourses.[5] Other theories of colonial discourses, however, contest aspects of Said's model, arguing for a more dynamic, complex relationship between colonizing and colonized societies. Therefore, to supplement the understanding of colonial power offered by the game, I pose the sub-question: *How can the Obra Dinn be interpreted as a colonial contact zone?* Departing from Mary Louise Pratt's notion of contact zones, which highlights cross-cultural encounters within colonialism, I examine the fictional space of the Obra Dinn for details that complicate the stable understanding of colonial power.[6] This sub-question, moreover, prefigures a critical consideration of the game's rules and structures. The third sub-question focuses on such medium-specificity by examining the game's mechanics: *How do the mechanics of* Return of the Obra Dinn *shape the interpretation of history?* This relates to a central concern of postcolonial game studies, namely games' ideologies of history.[7] Additionally, scrutinizing mechanics also pertains to the field of historical game studies: *Obra Dinn*'s central aim of uncovering and recording the ship's history essentially constitutes a ludic historiographical effort, which historical game studies can productively

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[4] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 38-39;
Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 8-9.
[5] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin Group, 2003), 2-3.
[6] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 7.
[7] Evidenced by, for instance: Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism*, 8-9, 75;
Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Lundedal Hammar, "Introduction to the Special Issue on Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies," in "Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies," eds. Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Hammar, special issue, *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 2 (November 2018): 3, 6;
Dom Ford, "'eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate': Affective Writing of Postcolonial History and Education in Civilization V," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 16, no. 2 (2016).

address.[8] With gameplay understood as historiography, the sub-question becomes an epistemological inquiry: how do the game's mechanics allow history to be recorded? What constitutes historical knowledge?

The field of historical game studies informs the theoretical framework, which additionally includes postcolonial theories such as the aforementioned Orientalism and the notions of contact zones and hybridity. This framework grants the research relevance. Postcolonial game scholars indicate various lacunae and assert the need for additional research, which this study partly accommodates by addressing a history of oppression – understudied in historical game studies – and by using postcolonial theories to study a game that seemingly does not feature colonial histories, which little research has yet attempted.[9] Additionally, I interrogate a form of gameplay different from most postcolonial inquiries: these approaches chiefly analyze the mechanics of empire-building strategy games, but neglect other forms of gameplay; this research provides a postcolonial assessment of a hitherto unstudied kind of gameplay.[10] The gameplay considered here especially warrants a postcolonial framework because the player enacts the work of an agent embedded in the colonizing enterprise: what does the ludic recreation of such work say about the game, or perhaps videogames generally? Furthermore, societal relevance is derived from postcolonialism's commitment to equality and diverse representations: examining a contemporary videogame's representation – or reproduction – of the ideological substructure of colonialism is crucial to critiquing colonial beliefs and imagining alternative, more equitable representations.[11] Methodologically I am also indebted to postcolonialism: I implement a textual analysis with a postcolonial inflection by

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[8] Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016), 16, 22.

[9] Mukherjee and Hammer, "Introduction to the Special Issue," 10-11;
Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, "Introduction: What Is Historical Game Studies?," *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (July 2017): 365;
The hitherto only research applying postcolonial theory to a game that does not directly feature colonial histories appears to be Tomasz Majkowski's analysis of fantasy game *The Witcher 3*, which demonstrates the broad applicability of postcolonial theory. See: Tomasz Z. Majkowski, "Geralt of Poland: The Witcher 3 Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia," in "Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies," eds. Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Hammar, special issue, *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (January, 2018): 1-35.

[10] Empire-building games' mechanics are studied in, for instance: Sybille Lammes, "On the Border: Pleasure of Exploration and Colonial Mastery in Civilization III Play the World," in *Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up*, vol. 2, 2003, 120-129;
Ford, "'eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate'";
Shoshana Magnet, "Playing at Colonization: Interpreting Imaginary Landscapes in the Video Game Tropico," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (April 2006): 142-162.

[11] Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism*, 8-9;
Mukherjee and Hammar, "Introduction," 3, 6.

performing a contrapuntal reading, which aims to uncover alternative histories within texts – not just focusing on dominant narratives but critically studying them to reveal intertwined histories beneath the surface.[12] In what follows, I first chart the theoretical framework, after which I detail my methodology and perform the analysis. The analysis is roughly structured by following the sub-questions and develops an argument throughout that in total answers all questions. Lastly I provide a conclusion, summarizing and reflecting on the research and suggesting possibilities for future inquiries.

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[12] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 51, 66.

Gaming history (or, interactive *historying*)

While the research primarily builds upon postcolonial game studies, some concerns are also closely related to historical game studies, which Adam Chapman succinctly describes as "the study of those games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it."[13] This field is useful to assess how *Obra Dinn* represents – or ignores – a particular history, and how it allows to explore, interpret and record that history. These interactive historic practices pertain to *Obra Dinn*, as its goal is to uncover the history of the eponymous ship, which is subsequently written down in a book: the player thereby performs a historiographic act. Transposing the notion of historiography to videogames, Chapman introduces the term "historioludicity": whereas historiography denotes representations of history in written discourse, historioludicity considers representations "in visual images (as well as text) but also through rules and opportunities for action and thus, *ludic* discourse."[14] This ludic discourse, driven by the interactivity of videogames, is a central issue of historical game studies because it would appear that interactivity obstructs the accurate representation of histories, as it enables playing with and within the past – thereby altering the historical record.[15]

However, interactivity does not invalidate gamic representations of history: instead, it cultivates a historical engagement that precisely stimulates an understanding of the contingencies of historical developments. Instead of regurgitating facts and dates, videogames offer simulations structured by regulating principles and enacted through player interactions, which lets players experience how their actions affect historical processes.[16] Historical games not merely present historical events, but rather "offer structured access to types of historical practice", which Chapman calls "historying."[17] This may be understood as the player *doing* history; experiencing and enacting it in a game. Through interactive historying, players produce what historian Matthew Kapell and media scholar Andrew Elliott call "counterfactual

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[13] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 16.

[14] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 22.

[15] William Uricchio, "Simulation, History, and Computer Games," in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, eds. Jozef Frederik Ferdinand Raessens and Jeffrey Haskell Goldstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 327.

[16] Andrew B.R. Elliott and Matthew William Kapell, "Introduction: To Build a Past That Will "Stand the Test of Time" – Discovering Historical Facts, Assembling Historical Narratives," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew William Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2;
Uricchio, "Simulation," 328.

[17] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 173, 22.

histories", histories that differ from the historical record.[18] Nonetheless, players cannot simply rewrite history as they like, because their interactive historying is structured by the possibilities and impossibilities of acting in the game: the game's "affordances."[19] Historical games' affordances are often made to reflect historical conditions, but never simply objectively reflect historical realities. Rather, affordances are based upon particular understandings of history – they are structured by what scholar William Uricchio describes as "unspoken historical principle (or better, ideology)."[20] Chapman thus writes that "the final narrative that emerges is still created by players, [but] within the particular confines" of the game's rules, structures and underlying historical principles.[21] In my analysis, I employ historical game studies' theorizing to examine *Obra Dinn*'s unspoken historical principles, and how the game allows for counterfactual historying and historiography.

Colonial power through Orientalism

More accurately than its representation of history, I examine *Obra Dinn*'s representation of a *colonial* history. Thereto I employ postcolonial theories, which describe how colonial discourses constructed certain power relations. As theorist John McLeod writes, colonialism was predicated upon "a set of beliefs that are held to justify the (dis)possession and continuing occupation of other peoples' lands."[22] Since colonization was fundamentally corroborated by discourse, theorists Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson describe colonialism as "an operation of discourse, [which] interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation."[23] This means that colonialism imposes ideas about "racial/cultural/historical differences" between peoples and cultures – values that supported and legitimized colonization – on both the colonizer and colonized.[24] People internalized these ideas and were accordingly inscribed in colonialism's power structures.[25] Perhaps the most well-known conceptualization

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[18] Matthew William Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott, "Part Five: Looking Back on the End of the World," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew William Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 277;

[19] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 174.

[20] Uricchio, "Simulation," 328.

[21] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 189.

[22] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 44.

[23] Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, "Introduction: The textuality of empire," in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and textuality*, eds. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (London: Routledge, 1994), 3.

[24] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classics ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 100.

[25] Mcleod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 44.

of colonial discourses and their representational system is Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, which I use to analyze how *Obra Dinn* represents and reproduces colonial power relations.[26]

Said describes Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (the West).[27] Orientalism constructs a dichotomy between the Orient and the Occident, as two radically oppositional entities. The Occident is ascribed a superior position, embodying qualities of enlightenment, progress and civilization, while the Orient is deemed barbaric, uncivilized and degenerate.[28] This understanding of "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."[29] Knowledge of the Orient was used by the West to define itself in opposition – the Occident being everything the Orient is not and vice versa. Importantly, Said emphasizes that Orientalism is not "an inert fact of nature", but rather a western invention used for "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[30] As such, Orientalism is self-perpetuating and serves to reaffirm western presuppositions of Oriental inferiority: Orientalist knowledge legitimizes the imperial domination of other peoples, and through this system of domination knowledge is produced which again affirms the colonized peoples as savages who require western domination.[31] With this conceptualization, Said builds upon Michel Foucault's understanding of the enmeshment of knowledge and power: through their alleged knowledge of the Orient, western forces exert power over it.[32] As postcolonial scholars Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia put it, "Orientalism constructs and dominates Orientals in the process of 'knowing' them."[33]

Disrupting colonial power

Orientalism provides a useful understanding of colonial power relations, but this conceptualization should not simply be equated with the entirety of colonial discourses. Said's concept has been fruitfully supplemented and criticized, for issues such as neglecting the significance of gender and disregarding possibilities of resistance within Orientalist discourses

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[26] Said, *Orientalism*.
[27] Said, *Orientalism*, 2.
[28] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 49, 55;
Said, *Orientalism*, 2-3.
[29] Said, *Orientalism*, 1-2.
[30] Said, *Orientalism*, 4, 3.
[31] Mcleod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 51.
[32] Said, *Orientalism*, 3.
[33] Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 51.

from both colonizing and colonized cultures.[34] One point of contention I want to indicate is that Orientalism describes a fairly fixed, stable discourse in which western powers unilaterally exercise power over Orientals. Colonial authority, however, rarely remained uncontested.[35] Therefore, I supplement this image of power departing from Mary Louise Pratt's notion of contact zones.[36] This concept foregrounds precisely the reciprocal effects between cultures caused by colonialism's global efforts, instead of the more unidirectional influence assumed in Orientalism. Pratt describes contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination."[37] While unequal power relations remain, this notion grants more agency to the peoples encountering one another. This understanding of cultural encounters pertains to *Obra Dinn*, because colonial ships are emblematic contact zones. This is evident from Paul Gilroy's writings, where he takes "the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean" as a central organizing symbol, with those ships constituting "living, micro-cultural, micro-political system[s]."[38] Colonial seafaring is crucial to Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic, which takes the Atlantic Ocean as "one single, complex unit of analysis […] to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective."[39] Gilroy's understanding deviates from the traditional perspective of nation states, emphasizing instead the oceanic interculture deriving from the encounters between cultures – thereby providing a less schematic, unilateral understanding of colonial power, an understanding useful to gauge *Obra Dinn*'s representation of colonial cross-cultural encounters.

Colonial discourses are thus more ambiguous than Said's Orientalism initially posited, perhaps especially upon the fertile soil of contact zones that cultivate cultural cross-pollinations. To further specify such an image of colonial power, I use the work of theorist Homi Bhabha. He identifies a fundamental ambivalence in colonial discourse (a singular term in Bhabha's conception), due to its inability to fully achieve its aim of construing "the colonized as a population of degenerate types […] in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction."[40] This is due to colonial discourse's contradicting tendencies: colonialism construes colonized subjects as radically other, and thus outside of western

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[34] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 47, 57-59.
[35] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 28.
[36] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.
[37] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.
[38] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 4.
[39] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic,* 15.
[40] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 101.

comprehension, but simultaneously aims to domesticate this difference through western, Orientalist frameworks in order to exert power. Thus, "colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible."[41] These opposing impulses of colonial discourse undermine its authority: colonial power is disrupted within the fabric of its own discourse.[42] While Bhabha's discursive focus – disregarding material resistance and alternative forms of knowledge – has been contested by his critics, his conception of the uncertainty of colonial discourse creates space to apprehend the instability of the functioning of power within colonial societies.[43] This understanding is used to gauge if and how *Obra Dinn* displays colonialism's ambivalence – and if so, does this afford a critique of colonial beliefs?

A related concept regarding colonial discourse is Bhabha's articulation of hybridity. Hybridities emanate from liminal spaces, the spaces between borders where categories blend and collide, such as the contact zones wherein cultures clash. In these spaces, within the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications", exists the "possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy."[44] Hybridities fuse separated categories to construct a third entity, but crucially they are not hierarchically differentiated, as Orientalist discourses evidently are. For Bhabha, hybridity therefore harbors a subversive potential, as a means of resistance for subordinated peoples. "The exercise of colonialist authority", Bhabha writes, is based on a discursive "production of differentiation": the creation of clear, discriminatory dichotomies between colonizer and colonized, as exemplified in Orientalist discourses.[45] Hybridities disrupt such differentiations because they obscure clear distinctions and produce "a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority", undermining the functioning of power.[46] This notion is used to assess if and how *Obra Dinn* represents such hybridities, which could function as a critique of colonial power by their fundamental subversion of colonial discourse. The Obra Dinn is likely not simply regulated by rigid power structures, but rather a hybrid, lived-in space where various cultures influence each other – but does the game reflect this, and employ hybridities to critically interrogate colonial discourse?

[41] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 101.
[42] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 126.
[43] Mcleod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 67.
[44] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 4.
[45] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 111.
[46] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 113.

Methodology: A symptomatic, contrapuntal reading

To analyze *Return of the Obra Dinn*, I perform a textual analysis: a common hermeneutic-analytical method studying "the likely interpretations of texts made by people who consume them."[47] This research does so through some of the game's formal elements, some of the "pieces that make it up."[48] Game scholar Clara Fernández-Vara writes that "the formal aspects refer to the system of the game and its components (the rules, the control schemes), as well as how the system is presented to the player (interface design, visual design)."[49] This formal focus chimes with what game scholars Jasper van Vught and René Glas call an object-oriented approach. Offering a methodological taxonomy to studying games, they distinguish between approaching games as objects or processes – two ends of a continuum.[50] The former category studies games' fixed underlying structures, while the latter focuses more on play-practices and the player's specific instantiation and experience of a game.[51] This research leans toward an object-orientation, whilst acknowledging that the game is only brought to life through player interactions. A number of formal elements form the corpus of the analysis. Particularly important are the "cultural and social values" the game expresses either through its rules and processes – reflected in what behavior it encourages or punishes – or through what is represented, what scholar Ian Bogost calls a game's "graphical skin."[52] Borrowing from neoformalist film analysis, the expression of such social values is akin to what Kristin Thompson calls "symptomatic meaning": meanings that "help define [a text's] relations to the world."[53] Whereas other forms of meaning are more denotative, or explicit, symptomatic meaning is connotative, consisting of the "non-explicit ideology" of a text.[54]

The first two sub-questions study *Obra Dinn*'s symptomatic meaning through its graphical skin, examining aspects such as the relationships between the characters populating

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[47] Eggo Müller, "The writing of a research proposal based on "the five-question-pie chart"," trans. Berber Hagedoorn (2007): 7, https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/309230;
Alan Mckee, *Textual Analysis* (Newbury Park: Sage, 2002), 2.
[48] Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 15.
[49] Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 15-16.
[50] Jasper van Vught and René Glas, "Considering Play: From Method to Analysis," *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 4, no. 2 (December 12, 2018): 210-211.
[51] van Vught and Glas, "Considering Play," 210-211;
Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society* (London: Routledge, 2018), 8.
[52] Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 131-132;
Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 50.
[53] Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 12.
[54] Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 12.

the Obra Dinn. The third sub-question examines the symptomatic meaning of the game's rules and processes, assessed through its mechanics. Game scholar Miguel Sicart defines mechanics as "methods invoked by agents for interacting with the game world."[55] Frequently, mechanics are actions that entities in the game can perform, such as 'run' and 'shoot'.[56] The possibilities and impossibilities of acting granted by *Obra Dinn*'s mechanics – the game's affordances for historying – will be read for their ideological and epistemological presuppositions. This focus chimes with communication scholar Gerald Voorhees' notion of discursive games, which I will address briefly. Voorhees proposes to apply communication studies perspectives to videogames, thereby reading videogames discursively: this allows researchers to assess how games, through their specific representational modalities (visual, aural, textual and procedural), make arguments: making claims about the world, conveying a particular worldview or ideology.[57] Additionally, Voorhees argues that games may be understood as "generative sites with the potential to stimulate thinking about communication processes."[58] *Obra Dinn* thus functions as a generative site to think about the way history is recorded and represented.

Furthermore, to appraise the game's symptomatic meanings in postcolonial fashion, I use what Said calls "contrapuntal reading": reading with "a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts."[59] Said thus considers intertwined histories and alternative perspectives on canonical literary works, to uncover their implicit colonialist underpinnings, how they are entangled in colonialist systems and practices. Contrapuntal reading thus gives "emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented."[60] This analysis functions similarly, using details of the game to reveal how it is, despite its apparent disregard of colonialism, implicated in colonial (modes of) thought. This reading method warrants a consideration of the playstyle used to study the game. Van Vught and Glas, describing possible playstyles for research, oppose "instrumental play" (following the game's instructions to "progress through the game and achieve its goals") with "free play", which pushes a game's boundaries and subverts its instructions and objectives.[61] While this

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[55] Miguel Sicart, "Defining Game Mechanics," *Game Studies* 8, no. 2 (December 2008), http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart.

[56] Sicart, "Defining Game Mechanics."

[57] Gerald Voorhees, "Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses," *Communication +1* 1, no. 1 (August 2012): 5.

[58] Gerald Voorhees, "Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses," abstract.

[59] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 66, 51.

[60] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 66.

[61] van Vught and Glas, "Considering Play," 213-214;

distinction is mostly heuristic and this research blends playstyles, I use a free playstyle to particular ends: since both contrapuntal reading and free play are attenuated to alternative, non-dominant ways of reading a text, a free playstyle supplements contrapuntal reading.[62] The free playstyle is additionally used to push the boundaries of the possibilities of historying: for example, by filling in wrong answers to the puzzle and attempting to record a 'wrong' history, it is possible to see how the game allows for alternative ways of historying, rather than uncovering the predetermined history of the ship. To appropriately do so, though, it remains necessary to examine the game's intended narrative as a prerequisite for contrapuntal reading and free play – an instrumental playstyle is therefore employed in an initial playthrough.

Muriel and Crawford, *Video Games as Culture*," 8.
[62] Muriel and Crawford, *Video Games as Culture*," 8.

Administrating order: Orientalist ideology and colonial epistemology

Crucial to discovering the Obra Dinn's history is an unfinished book: this "Catalogue of Adventure and Tragedy" is written by surgeon Henry Evans, who intended to record "the ship's strange tale" but due to illness could only "produce the basic outline." Nonetheless, it contains valuable information: a list of crew and passengers; face sketches of these travelers; a map of the ship; a map of the ship's route to "the Orient"; and a glossary of nautical terms. The player uses this information and the dioramas – frozen in time, but spatially navigable – accessed through the *Memento Mortem* timepiece (also sent by Evans; Figure 1), to figure out who each person is (matching names with sketched faces), what happened to whom, and sometimes by whose hands somebody perished. The Catalogue is filled with this information as the player progresses, and eventually tells a tale rife with deaths through accidents, murders, and disasters caused by mythological beasts like mermaids. While such a fantastical narrative seemingly has little bearing on colonialism, I will argue that the game remains entangled in colonial beliefs and practices. An indication of the game's reproduction of colonial ideology is the Catalogue's name, with its promise of adventure. This obscures the colonial history of the East India Company through a romanticized notion of adventure and exploration, a distinctly European frame masking the exploitative business of colonialism.[63] Importantly, the game presents this notion not only to the insurance inspector, but also to the player, reaffirming this pernicious idea of colonialism as adventure.

The listing of crew and passengers provides a fertile point to begin uncovering the power structures aboard the ship and the game's treatment of colonial ideology. This manifest lists all 60 persons aboard the ship, with their name, "Quality" (ranking), "Origin" and "Fate." The 28 different Qualities indicate the ship's formal hierarchy, and range from "Captain" through ranks such as "Fourth Mate" to the lowly "Seaman." Upon closer inspection, this formal hierarchy reflects Orientalist power relations. This
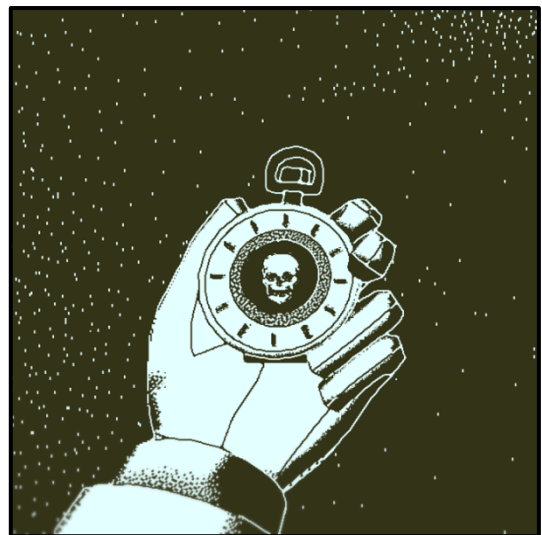

Figure 1: The *Memento Mortem* pocket watch

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[63] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 23;
Ford, ""eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate"," sec. 4.

is evident especially in the way it intersects with the category of Origin – the differential axis of ethnicity.[64] Though the Obra Dinn housed various ethnicities (eighteen in total), positions of power are without exception held by Europeans, predominantly Englishmen. The Captain and his Mates are English or Scottish, the boatswain is Austrian, the butcher Irish, and the "Gunner" (in charge of weaponry) is German.[65] Origins like Persian, New Guinean and Indian appear only lower in the hierarchy, chiefly in categories of laborers like Topmen and Seamen. Ethnicity is thus entwined with the formal hierarchy to constitute an Orientalist power distribution.

Orientalist beliefs are further evidenced through a group of passengers: the "Formosan Royalty."[66] Though as Passengers they rank above crewmembers such as Stewards and Seamen, this group – and not other passengers like the Italian musician Nunzio Pasqua – is treated poorly, despite their apparently royal status. Their prejudiced treatment is evident from the wrongful conviction of guard Hok-Seng Lau, who is "found guilty by self-confession" for the murder of Pasqua.[67] However, the diorama of Pasqua's murder, reveals he was knifed by Second Mate Nichols, while Lau was nearby clearly knocked unconscious.[68] Additionally, throughout the game the crew have trouble understanding the Formosans, which makes a self-confession unlikely – likelier is that Lau was convicted for his presence at the murder scene without much thought or fair trial. His conviction evidences an Orientalist, racist disdain for the Formosans, stemming from the belief they are untrustworthy, deceitful savages. Contrapuntally interpreting another detail about the Formosans confirms the crew's Orientalist attitude: the term 'Royalty'. In 1802, when the Obra Dinn last sailed, Formosa was part of the Chinese empire as the Taiwanese Prefecture (a province of sorts).[69] While from 1661 to 1683 the island was known as the Kingdom of Formosa, ruled by the House of Koxinga, it is unlikely that in 1802

[64] Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), 21-22;
Here I employ an intersectional understanding of difference, which considers the ways various differential axes like ethnicity and gender are entwined and operate simultaneously; they are thereby co-constitutive of difference and social relations.
[65] "Characters," Return of the Obra Dinn Wiki, accessed June 10, 2020, https://obradinn.fandom.com/wiki/Characters.
[66] The term 'Formosa' is an old Portuguese name for what is today known as the island of Taiwan;
W.G. Goddard, *Formosa: A Study in Chinese History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1966), xvii.
[67] Pope, *Return of the Obra Dinn*, this occurs in the diorama 'Murder, part 2';
"Murder, part 2," Return of the Obra Dinn Wiki, accessed June 11, 2020, https://obradinn.fandom.com/wiki/Murder,_part_2.
[68] Pope, *Return of the Obra Dinn*, this occurs in the diorama 'Murder, part 1';
"Murder, part 1," Return of the Obra Dinn Wiki, accessed June 11, 2020, https://obradinn.fandom.com/wiki/Murder,_part_1.
[69] James W. Davison, *The Island of Formosa, Past and Present: History, People, Resources, and Commercial Prospects: Tea, Camphor, Sugar, Gold, Coal, Sulphur, Economical Plants, and Other Productions* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1903), 92-93, https://archive.org/details/islandofformosap00davi/page/n11/mode/2up.

any group would have been 'Formosan Royalty' in any sense.[70] Within the game's fiction, this historical inaccuracy evidences an Orientalist disinterest, the sketch artist being indifferent about precise terms. This disinterest exoticizes the Formosans, and reductively interprets the complexity of Formosan rule through a western framework. However, this Orientalist exoticization also invites a critique of the game itself, which unquestioningly reproduces this inaccurate, Orientalist understanding of Formosa: it replicates the exoticization – the term 'Royalty' nowadays has a more mythical resonance than a descriptor like 'local magistrate' – and reduces the complexity of the Chinese empire by employing western terminology.

Lived actuality: The Obra Dinn as a contact zone and linguistic hybridity

In the previous section I have shown how *Obra Dinn* represents and reproduces the functioning of colonial power relations, using the lens of Orientalism. The first sub-question, concerning the game's representation of the discursive functioning of colonial power, is thus answered: the game not merely reflects colonial, Orientalist hierarchies, but inadvertently reproduces them by presenting colonialism as an adventure and by exoticizing the Formosans. However, as mentioned before, the notion of Orientalism may present an understanding of colonial power that is too fixed and unilaterally structured, leaving little room for the instability and ambiguities of colonial discourses. Therefore, I now supplement this image by reading the game contrapuntally, to offer a more complete and complex image of shipboard life – a dynamic environment of hybridity, fluidity and liveliness. This reading additionally serves as a prerequisite for a critical assessment of how the game's mechanics allow to represent this complexity.

Though the Obra Dinn, a "three-masted, full-rigged ship", appears imposing, it seems a cramped space considering that it housed sixty people.[71] Crewmembers, with their various backgrounds, inevitably encountered each other. The vessel is thus appropriately understood as a contact zone, where "disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other" – they would have been forced to within the ship's limited confines.[72] The "Under Way" sketch, depicting the crew enjoying leisure time filled with gambling, singing and dancing, shows crewmembers such as the New Guinean Maba, covered in intricate tattoos, sitting alongside the

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[70] Davison, *The Island of Formosa, Past and Present*, 49.
[71] "Obra Dinn," Return of the Obra Dinn Wiki, accessed May 30, 2020,
    https://obradinn.fandom.com/wiki/Obra_Dinn#cite_note-6.
[72] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.

Persian Omid Gul, and they are surrounded by Englishmen, Scotsmen, and some Indian crewmembers (Figure 2). However, throughout the game the player also finds separated groups of crewmembers, joined together by a shared ethnicity or ranking. For instance, when Soloman Syed succumbs to a lung disease, a group of Russians is playing cards elsewhere.[73] Although such groupings seemingly contradict the transculturation aboard this floating contact zone, a detail hints at a linguistic hybridization and solves the conundrum of communication on a ship so crowded with cultures and languages. Namely, in one of the soundbites that precede the *Memento Mortem* dioramas and provide an aural clue of the events leading up to it, surgeon Evans references a "lascar house."[74]

Figure 2: The "Under Way" sketch. Maba and Omid Gul are in the back [1], with in front of them the Indians [2]. Nunzio Pasqua can be seen playing the violin [3]. In the lower right corner is a fragment of the sketch of the Formosan passengers, Hok-Seng Lau being the far-right character. [4]

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[73] Pope, *Return of the Obra Dinn*, this occurs in the diorama 'A Bitter Cold, part 1';
"A Bitter Cold, part 1," Return of the Obra Dinn Wiki, accessed June 9, 2020,
 https://obradinn.fandom.com/wiki/A_Bitter_Cold,_part_1.

[74] Pope, *Return of the obra Dinn*, this occurs in the diorama 'A Bitter Cold, part 2';
"A Bitter Cold, part 2," Return of the Obra Dinn Wiki, accessed June 10, 2020,
 https://obradinn.fandom.com/wiki/A_Bitter_Cold,_part_2.

Interpreting this hint contrapuntally (exposing an alternative, intertwined history) clarifies shipboard communications and indicates a linguistic hybridity. The term 'lascar' denotes the historical phenomenon of eclectic groups of sailors. Social anthropologist and novelist Amitav Ghosh writes that the term was "applied to all indigenous sailors of the Indian Ocean region […], which is to say that it referred indifferently to Arabs, south Asians, Malays, east Africans, Filipinos and Chinese."[75] As Ghosh observes, "[t]hat a single word should cast so large a net seems puzzling only from a landward, and contemporary, perspective" – more appropriate is to use "the ocean as a referent", echoing Gilroy's conception of the Black Atlantic.[76] Ravi Ahuja asserts that the term "carried connotations of a low subordinated status and of inferiority to 'white' workers" – lascars often replaced diseased or deserted white crew.[77] Notable is that these groups communicated in 'Laskari', which Ghosh describes as "a wonderful nautical jargon that mixed bits of Hindi, Urdu, English, Portuguese, Bengali, Arabic, Malay and many other languages."[78] Laskari is a fundamentally hybrid language, an amalgam of languages and dialects that have melted into one mixture.

Evans' reference to a "lascar house" hints at the presence of lascars aboard the ship, and thereby answers the communication issue: only through Laskari's linguistic hybridity can the crew communicate with each other and function properly. This hybridity is both an inevitable product of various cultures' encounters and a necessary means of communication amongst these peoples, enabling the functioning of the ship. It moreover indicates the complexity of shipboard life and the ambiguity within colonial order, which appears not unilaterally structured but influenced by its numerous participants. Hybridity as a concept is applicable to various domains, and other cultural hybridities presumably existed aboard the Obra Dinn: one could wonder, for example, what games the crew are playing in the "Under Way" sketch.[79] In this section, I have drawn an image of the dynamism of shipboard life. However, the trouble with discerning this image should be noted: *Obra Dinn* seems to resist interpretation of

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[75] Amitav Ghosh, "Of Fanas and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 25 (2008): 56, 57.

[76] Ghosh, "Of Fanas and Forecastles," 57.

[77] Ravi Ahuja, "Networks of subordination – networks of the subordinated: The ordered spaces of South Asian maritime labour in an age of imperialism (*c*. 1890-1947)," in *The Limits of British Colonial Order in South Asia: Spaces of disorder in the Indian Ocean region*, eds. Ashwini Tambe and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 14.

[78] Amitav Ghosh, "L'Espresso Magazine, by Angiola Codacci" interview by Angiola Codacci, *L'Espresso Magazine*, November 24, 2011, https://www.amitavghosh.com/interviews.html#gpm1_20.

[79] Amardeep Singh, "Mimicry and Hybridity in Plain English," *Amardeep Singh*, May 8, 2009, https://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2009/05/mimicry-and-hybridity-in-plain-english.html.

shipboard life as fluid and lively. Its representational style, in frozen dioramas, especially opposes such an understanding, as it does not allow the player to see the bustle of the daily goings-on. The game's representational modalities undermine the representation of shipboard liveliness – and the same goes for its rules and structures. In the next section, I critique the way the game's mechanics allow the player to engage with the vibrancy of shipboard life.

Capturing complexity: Reducing liveliness to money sums

Much of the dynamism detailed above is lost through the game's rules and structures, particularly its mechanics. This is because aside from an Orientalist discourse, the Catalogue reproduces the colonial practice of administration and exemplifies distinctly western epistemology. The production of Orientalist knowledge was predicated upon certain methods and technologies: Bhabha writes that "strategies of hierarchization and marginalization are employed in the management of colonial societies" – including colonizing societies.[80] The list of travelers on the Obra Dinn reflects this practice of colonial administration, a distinctly western mode of maintaining order and producing knowledge (Figure 3). However, the game does not interrogate this epistemological mode, but reproduces it as a governing principle for structuring (historical) knowledge in the Catalogue. As argued before, uncovering the Obra Dinn's history is a historiographic effort, but this effort is carried out within and through a colonial framework. The Catalogue is the main tool to uncover the ship's history, by cross-checking information and eliminating possibilities. For example: if person X sleeps in a hut reserved for crewmembers with a certain ranking, and X is not the other person with that ranking, then they must be remaining person so-and-so. This process of gathering and sorting information benefits from the player writing it down, since the game does not allow to freely take notes or document detailed histories. Instead, they can fill in a list of names, origins and fates. The way the game's mechanics structure knowledge thus reverts to the same epistemological framework as exercised by the game's colonial authorities, a system of administration that substantiates an Orientalist power structure.

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[80] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 119.

Figure 3: Part of the crew manifest, listing people aboard with their Name, Quality, Origin and Fate.

	Name	Quality	Origin	Fate
1	Robert Witterel	Captain	England	Suicide, Gun
2	William Hoscut	First Mate	Scotland	Shot, Gun, R. Witterel
3	Edward Nichols	Second Mate	England	Shot, Gun, C. Tan
4	Martin Perrott	Third Mate	England	Unknown
5	John Davies	Fourth Mate	England	
6	Alfred Klestil	Bosun	Austria	Torn Apart, Beast
7	Charles Miner	Bosun's Mate	France	Unknown

The game mechanics' adherence to administrative tools thus reproduces colonial epistemology. Crucially, this epistemological mode is ill-equipped to engage with the complexities of shipboard life as discerned in the previous section – the game's mechanics stifle any ability to capture this liveliness. The crew manifest illustrates this, as it turns out not to list everybody aboard the ship. Rather, it lists *nearly* everybody: the exception being an "unidentified stowaway" who hid inside a barrel but died in an accident when cargo was loaded onto the ship.[81] They go unnoticed by the crew, and their remains are only discovered by the inspector. This undocumented traveler indicates the failing of the administrative system imposed upon the people on the Obra Dinn and reveals the limits of the governing epistemological mode, which is unable to capture the messiness of shipboard life. This points to the fundamental ambivalence Bhabha described, as colonial discourse cannot completely encompass an unknowable "social reality" through its "systems of administration and instruction."[82] The Catalogue's epistemological shortcomings are also evidenced by the few categories used to describe history (Figure 4): someone's name; their cause of death (or if they deserted the ship, where they rest alive); and sometimes who murdered them. Each category offers many possibilities: there are 60 people aboard to choose from for the categories of murdered and murderer; 37 ways to die; and ten possible places of desertion. Statistically this amounts to a great number of different possible histories, but these categories still constitute a rather limited framework – and one exclusively focused on death. They do not evidence any liveliness or transculturation but narrow a person's remembrance to their final moments. These

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[81] Pope, *Return of the Obra Dinn*, this occurs in diorama 'Loose Cargo, part 2';
"Loose Cargo, part 2," Return of the Obra Dinn Wiki, accessed June 10, 2020,
   https://obradinn.fandom.com/wiki/Loose_Cargo,_part_2.
[82] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 101.

categories cannot accommodate varying motives, circumstances or contingencies, thereby undermining the dynamism of lived actuality. By reproducing a colonial administrative system in its mechanics, the game's historical affordances cannot fully represent the complexity of shipboard life.
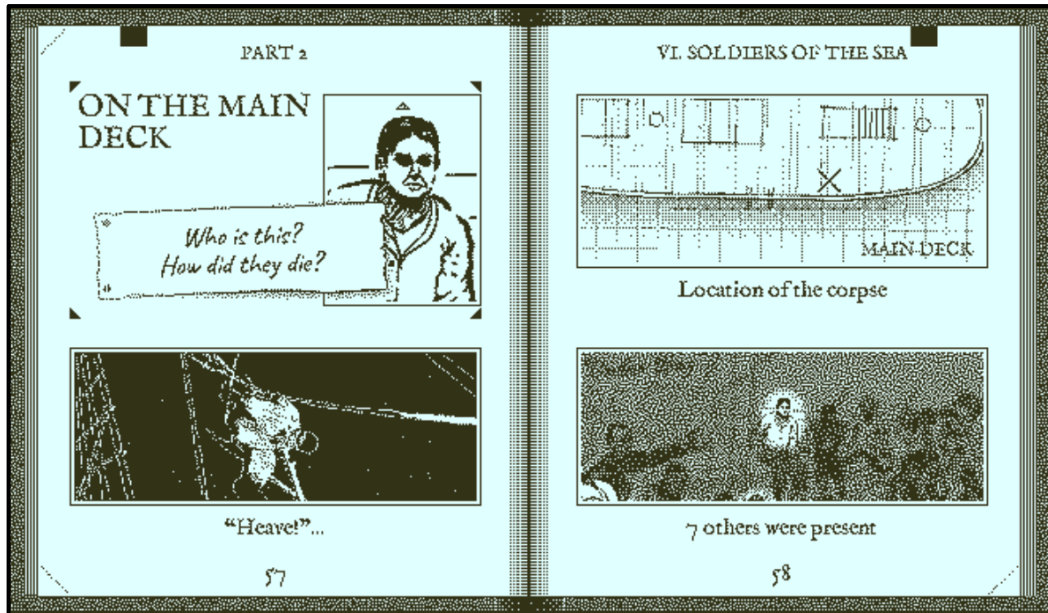

Figure 4: The historical record in the Catalogue. The player may use three categories to fill in the two questions posed in the upper left corner: who is this? How did they die?

That this limited epistemological framework is informed by colonial ideology is exemplified by the outcome of solving the game's mystery. There are 58 fates to figure out, and with that information the East India Company squares up the expenses and penalties from the ship's disastrous voyage. Outstanding wages and rewards for "exceptional performance of duties" are awarded to people's estates, and fines are issued for criminal wrongdoings. These settlements are the final product of the player's historiographic efforts, which resonates historically and ideologically with the inherently capitalist nature of imperialism by expressing a multi-faceted, complex and hybrid history in quantifiable terms – reducing this complex history to a matter of money sums.[83] The complexity of lived actuality is thus lost: assessed through its mechanics, the game is incapable of thinking beyond the ideological and epistemological framework of colonialism, reproducing instead its limited modes of thinking and kinds of knowledge. As I mentioned above, the game could be seen to highlight the ambivalence of colonial discourse by showing the shortcomings of colonial epistemology,

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[83] Mcleod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 8-9.

thereby arguably producing a critical representation of an inequitable social reality. Additionally, it could be argued that by recreating a capitalist framework, which reduces lively histories to numbers, the game precisely intends to critique this framework. However, I argue that such a critique is inadequately articulated. Firstly because of the effort it takes to reveal the complexities of shipboard life: this interpretation is severely undermined by the game's portrayal of life in frozen dioramas. Secondly, the game rewards the player for uncovering the ship's intended history: this is clear from the game typesetting correct answers into the Catalogue, indicating progress and rewarding a 'proper' playstyle. The game's ending similarly rewards 'proper' play: the player eventually receives a response from Catalogue author Evans, who is either disappointed or delighted by your work depending on how many fates you solved correctly.[84] By encouraging and rewarding a certain desirable playstyle and outcome, the game ultimately abrogates the possibility of critiquing colonial ideology and epistemology, which undoes the representation of ambivalence and complexity. Instead, *Obra Dinn* reproduces a colonial administrative system as a ludic activity for the player to enact, encouraging thinking through its rigid structures.

A circumscribed contestation of historical fiction

As the game's historiographic framework does not allow much room for complexity and ambiguity, questions rise about the possibility of contesting or subverting this framework and the interpretations it produces – whether the game affords play with history and alternative historying. This question is assessed with a free playstyle, by filling in wrong answers to the game's questions to study how much historiographic agency the player is granted. Playing constitutes a historioludic act, by writing a history – a historio*graphic* effort, ironically – that incorrectly reflects the facts of the Obra Dinn's history. Since these 'facts' are fictional, however, this play is perhaps not so much a counterfactual history but rather a counter-fictional history. This counter-fictional playthrough produces a drastically different insurance settlement, which reflects the wrong answers noted in the Catalogue and blames different characters. For instance, I made the records show that First Mate William Hoscut – otherwise a fairly law-abiding crewmember – murdered seventeen crewmembers with an axe, for which his estate is

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[84] "Endings," Return of the Obra Dinn Wiki, accessed May 30, 2020,
    https://obradinn.fandom.com/wiki/Endings.

subsequently fined (Figure 5).[85] The player thus has some freedom in determining the precise details of the historical record, but the game's historiographic affordances remain firmly within the framework of colonial administrative systems, restricted to categories, names and numbers. Reading the game discursively, as Voorhees proposes, urges a consideration of historiography within colonialism and capitalism. This regime then appears severely restrictive: although the victors – or survivors – have the power to write history, as the common aphorism dictates, the way in which they do is constrained by the hegemonic epistemic framework of their time. Interpreted thusly, it is disconcerting that a contemporary representation of historiography reproduces this limited, harmful episteme.
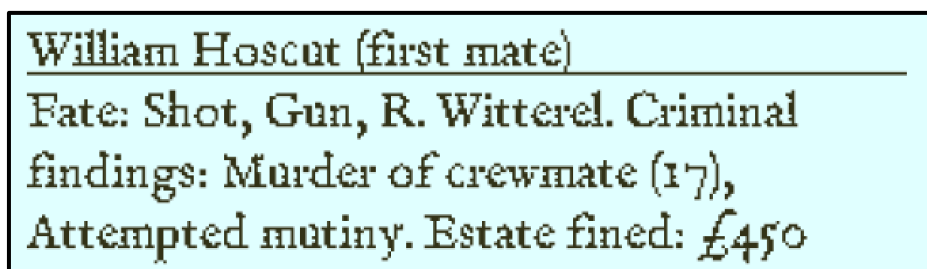

Figure 5: The insurance claim for Hoscut's estate. It shows him found guilty of the murder of seventeen crewmates.

This reading of the game introduces a larger argument about interactive digital media: can any videogame escape the epistemic limits *Obra Dinn* espouses? As mentioned in the introduction, I study a different form of gameplay than most postcolonial game inquiries. Now, precisely by reading this gameplay through a postcolonial lens I can build an argument about the medium, because this symptomatic reading of *Obra Dinn*'s narrowly circumscribed epistemological and ideological framework may be extended to the general form of videogames, which are fundamentally built on digitally encoded rules and structures. Such an argument corresponds closely with critical theorist Matt Garite's description of videogames as an aggressive form of ideological interpellation.[86] Garite uses Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, which denotes "the process whereby ideology hails or addresses subjects": subjects are inscribed into an ideological system which fundamentally shapes them – they are "constructed *through* and *within* ideology."[87] Videogames' interactivity

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[85] "William Hoscut," Return of the Obra Dinn Wiki, accessed May 30, 2020, https://obradinn.fandom.com/wiki/William_Hoscut.

[86] Matt Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity (or, Video Games and the Taylorization of Leisure)," in *Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up*, vol. 2 (Digital Games Research Association Conference 2003, Utrecht, 2003), 1.

[87] Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity," 5; Garite's emphasis.

"manifest[s] itself as a relentless series of demands" on the player, who willingly subjects themselves to these demands.[88] Garite likens games' "command structure" to the "disciplinary regimes of late capitalism", which are similarly predicated upon "information processing tasks."[89] With their rigidly encoded structures, videogames cannot process free inputs: rather, "players are disciplined […] to work in accordance with the game."[90] Players subject themselves to the game's commands and internalize the rules of the game – akin to how ideology interpellates subjects, inscribing them into an ideological system. Note that for Garite, interpellation is not a feature of a specific videogame, dependent upon a particular ideological expression as Fernández-Vara describes, but rather intrinsic to the form. Nevertheless, *Obra Dinn*'s ideological expression as assessed through its specific formal elements supports Garite's argument about the medium: *Obra Dinn* makes the medium's inherent, ideological interpellating function explicit in its particularities.

It is ironically fitting that the notion of interpellation is central to colonial discourses' power. Earlier I addressed Tiffin and Lawson's assertion that colonialism functions discursively, interpellating "colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation."[91] Following Garite's argument, videogames then figure as an extension of colonialism's discursive process of interpellating subjects into a particular ideology. *Obra Dinn* evidences this by interpellating players not merely into the disciplinary regimes of late capitalism but, by replicating colonial administrative systems, also into colonialism's power structure. Perhaps videogames can be regarded as a genealogical descendant of colonialism's episteme: is not every game, with its digital codification, essentially an administrative system? A system in which the player is inscribed, leaving only room to act within its limits? A player may attempt to push those limits, as I tried to record a counter-fictional history, but they never truly make the game work differently – I remain unable to record historical nuances. As Garite puts it, the notion of interactivity and the idea that players truly exercise influence over a game "seems profoundly misguided in the face of this absolute circumscription of options."[92] *Obra Dinn*, with its limited historiographic affordances, certainly demonstrates. Videogames then appear emblematic of western thinking, restricted to its colonial epistemic foundations while further developing the tradition of administrative systems – a tradition rooted in colonial practices.

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[88] Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity," 1.
[89] Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity," 12.
[90] Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity," 10
[91] Tiffin and Lawson, "Introduction," 3.
[92] Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity," 12.

Conclusion

"This game looks way better in motion", YouTuber Keith Ballard remarks about *Return of the Obra Dinn*'s 1-bit visual style when beginning his playthrough.[93] "Some of the screenshots look really not-great […], but the motion kind of adds life to it."[94] Though I have not addressed the game's visual style in this research, Ballard's off-hand comment remarkably parallels my assertion that the game reductively represents a complex and vibrant history by remembering it in rigid forms, in frozen dioramas and lists of names. In this research, I have examined how *Return of the Obra Dinn* is entangled in colonial beliefs and practices, its modes of thinking and representing. Though the game's narrative is spatially and temporally embedded in colonial practices, it never directly acknowledges this history, which makes it pertinent to critically assess how it implicitly reproduces or indicts colonial belief systems. I have done so departing from the question: *How does* Return of the Obra Dinn *represent a colonial history?* Using three sub-questions, I have answered this question and built an argument regarding the representation – and reproduction – of colonial ideology and epistemology in the game. Here I summarize the main findings and my argument.

I approached the game using postcolonial theories about the discursive construction of colonial power, which is based on such differentiations as race, culture and gender. *Obra Dinn* both represents such discourses and at times reproduces them, as well as the means that support their operation. The most clear example of colonial discourses in the game is the treatment of the Formosan passengers, one of whom is wrongfully convicted of murder by alleged self-confession. His quick conviction, I argued, evidences the racist, Orientalist disdain towards the Formosans by those in power on the ship, predominantly Europeans. Ethnicity furthermore informs the power distribution on the ship, as only Europeans hold positions of power and non-western peoples invariably occupy the lowest rankings – an Orientalist distribution of power is thus discernible. Though it could be seen as critiquing such power differentials, the game itself reproduces Orientalist beliefs by exoticizing the Formosans and by offering an understanding of colonialism as an adventure, a distinctly European frame.

This frame appears in the title of the Catalogue of Adventure and Tragedy, a manifest the player uses to unravel the ship's history and which reflects the formal hierarchy aboard the

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[93] Keith Ballard, "Let's Play Return of the Obra Dinn Part 1 – From the Creator of Papers, Please!," October 28, 2018,YouTube video, 2:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49raSPavxDI.

[94] Ballard, "Let's Play Return of the Obra Dinn Part 1," 3:15.

ship. By using this Catalogue the game itself, in its mechanics, employs a colonial ideological and epistemological framework. It reflects the historical practice of colonial administration, used in the domination of colonial societies, and crucially reproduces this system for the player to enact. Because the game relapses into this epistemological mode – determining the way historical knowledge is recorded – any representation of the dynamism and complexity of shipboard life is ultimately negated. Using theories that supplement Said's Orientalism, which emphasize the complexity and ambivalence of colonial discourse, the ship could be interpreted as a lively contact zone, wherein various cultures and peoples reciprocally influence each other and where their cross-cultural encounters produce hybridities. The game hints at the presence of lascars, for instance: eclectic groups of sailors communicating in the hybrid Laskari, an amalgam of numerous languages. However, the way the game represents and remembers history fundamentally undermines its ability to capture such transculturation and liveliness. The *Memento Mortem* dioramas that provide access to past moments remain frozen in time, thereby effacing the dynamic bustle of everyday life.

The epistemological mode the game employs nullifies the possibility of representing the vibrancy of shipboard life. The player's historiographic agency is limited to a few categories in the Catalogue, denoting persons' names, their cause of death and their murderer. The history thus written is severely restricted by a capitalist logic and colonial epistemology. The player can do little to play with this history or subvert the game's historiographic affordances: intentionally recording an incorrect history assigns blame to different actors but ultimately remains restricted to the same parameters. There is no thinking possible outside of these confines, and crucially the game encourages the player to follow this colonial epistemic framework. But does not every game do so? I have argued that, following the understanding of games as an aggressive mode of interpellation, the very form of videogames reproduces the colonial episteme exemplified in *Obra Dinn* – which severely limits its possibilities of remembering and imagining. Thus, videogames can be positioned as a genealogical descendant of the western, colonial practice of administration. Though comprised of digitally encoded rules and structures, rather than the pencil-and-paper administration of colonial times, games' subjects remain inscribed into a demanding ideological system, which limits their agency. Videogames thus interpellate their willing subjects into a system which does not allow much freedom, the medium's much-professed interactivity notwithstanding – how different is this from inscription into the colonial systems of administration?

To conclude, some reflections on the research and recommendations for future inquiries. Firstly, other research might examine other formal aspects of *Obra Dinn*, such as its visual style – Ballard's remark seems indicative of an argument comparable to mine, but more research is needed to reveal how the game's visual style relates to its representation of history. Concerning the framework applied here, I have hopefully further demonstrated the applicability of postcolonial theory beyond those games that explicitly address colonial histories. Games that do not directly concern these histories – or any history – can be fruitfully examined using postcolonialism, and future research ought to continue this effort. Additionally though, expanding on the epistemic limits mentioned above, perhaps it is time for a radically different perspective to engage with game studies. Decolonial thought (genealogically distinct from postcolonial thought) argues that the dyad of modernity and coloniality has effaced alternative, non-western forms of knowledge and that western thinking has become hegemonic, regarded as the only true form of knowledge.[95] While postcolonialism, similarly to decoloniality, critically assesses colonial histories and its persistent effects, it originates from western thinking and critiques this thinking from within. Decoloniality instead stands outside the western episteme of modernity, and could perhaps through its non-western thought offer another perspective on the medium of videogames – a fundamentally, epistemically western medium, as I have argued.[96] Decoloniality might be helpful to further decolonize gaming and game studies as a field. Such a non-western perspective might enable thinking beyond some of the medium's current constraints and enable radically free, more equitable imaginations. Because, just as Ballard remarked about *Obra Dinn*'s visuals, history too looks better in motion – how might videogames accommodate motion, complexity and liveliness?

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[95] Rolando Vázquez, "The Museum, Decoloniality and the End of the Contemporary," in *The Future of the New: Artistic Innovation in Times of Social Acceleration*, ed. Thijs Lijster (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018), 189; Rolando Vázquez, "Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity. *Buen Vivir*, Relationality and the Task of Listening," *Capital, Poverty, Development, Denktraditionen Im Dialog: Studien Zur Befreiung Und Interkulturalität* 33 (2012): 243; Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 211-212.

[96] Note that I am by no means advocating for the appropriation of decolonial thought into western academia or the field of game studies; decoloniality does not strive to be included in such institutional and epistemological frameworks, which arguably could not do decolonial thinking justice. Instead, a dialogue with decolonial thought might be productive, without reductively integrating it into the realm of western theory, in order to provide an alternative perspective on the medium of videogames.

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Verklaring intellectueel eigendom

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