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Résumé de l'article

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Adaptations of Empire: Kipling's *Kim*, Novel and Game

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Abstract

This paper addresses the depiction of colonialism and imperial ideologies in video games through an adaptation case study of the 2016 indie role-playing game *Kim*, adapted from the Rudyard Kipling novel of the same name. I explore the ways in which underlying colonial and imperial ideologies are replicated and reinforced in the process of adapting novel to game. In the process of adaptation, previously obscured practices of colonial violence are brought to the forefront of the narrative, where they are materialized by the game's procedural rhetoric. However, the game fails to interrogate or critique these practices, ultimately reinforcing the imperial ideological framework in which it was developed.

Author Keywords

Indie Games; Roleplaying Games; Post-colonial; Empire; Colonialism; Adaptation; Kipling

Introduction: A Curious Adaptation

In 2016, indie game developer The Secret Games Company released *Kim*, an open-world, top-down roleplaying game adaptation of the Kipling novel of the same name. Though the game received mixed reviews from critics, it was praised for its fidelity to the source material, the artistry of its visuals, and its narrative structure (Freeman, 2016). At first glance, the decision to adapt Kipling's *Kim* into a video game may seem surprising, as it was written more than a century ago, and the title hardly seems likely to attract a large contemporary audience. However, the reasons behind the developers' choice to adapt *Kim* become clear upon realizing that the novel is, in many ways, structured around and saturated with the notion of 'play'. The importance of play begins with the central conceit of the novel: The Great Game, in which the struggle between rival colonial powers is conducted through espionage. Phillip Wegner (1994) argues that this struggle ensures the novel is constructed within a doubled narrative frame, where the physical setting of India is transformed into a playing field. A playing field, of course, requires a player, which the book provides in the form of the protagonist of the novel, a young orphan boy named Kim who is Irish by birth, but who grows up in the streets of Lahore, India in the late 19th century. The novel follows Kim's life from his recruitment to the Great Game through his eventual ascendancy to manhood and a position as an agent of the British Empire. From the beginning of the novel, the joy that Kim finds in the acts of play is clear. The narrative describes his early play, saying, "it was intrigue, of course… but what he loved was the game for its own sake – the stealthy prowl through the dark gullies and lanes, the crawl up a water-pipe,

the sights and sounds of the women's world on the flat roofs, and the headlong flight from housetop to housetop under cover of the hot dark" (p. 3). These elements of play – stealth, discovery, escape – are what make Kim a suitable candidate for the Great Game; however, they also represent key elements of contemporary video game design, making the shift in medium from novel to game seem not only natural, but almost inevitable.

Another possible driving force behind the choice to adapt *Kim* can be found in an examination of the contemporary political and cultural trend of imperial nostalgia. The colonialist mindset which constructs the world in terms of the centre and the periphery, and which is grounded in the principles of a racial hierarchy that justifies British rule over colonial subjects, did not disappear with the diminishment and supposed dismantling of the British Empire. According to Benita Parry (2004), the current growth of right-wing ideologies in the west has led to a sort of anti-anti-imperialism, in which the colonial legacy of Europe has been embraced as a triumphant narrative of national history, and in which ongoing inequality is justified. Richards et al. (2020) describe this ideological phenomenon as a nostalgia for the past, noting its use as a rhetorical tool in far-right political campaigns where it offers a solution to a "decaying present" and functions as a means by which ethnic nationalism can be re-coded and sanitized (p. 74). Campanella and Dassù (2019) argue that nostalgia serves as a psychological coping mechanism for situations of uncertainty or instability, such as increasing global economic inequality, the threat to employment posed by globalization and rapid technological change, or even the looming figure of catastrophic climate change. In the harsh light of these global disruptions, the return to an imagined past of prosperity and security might pose an appealing solution (p.104).

The political ramifications of this nostalgia can be seen most clearly in the 2016 Brexit referendum, in which a narrow majority of the British population voted for the withdrawal of Britain from the European Union. The outcome of this referendum, Campanella and Dassù assert, was the emotional desire to return to a golden age of Empire, in which the size of Britain's imperial holdings and its resultant power and wealth were unrivalled (p. 105). We can see this imperial nostalgia not only in the political realm of a nation, but in its cultural productions. Stuart Jeffries (2015) described this as a "bankable nostalgia" for the British Raj, and outlined its manifestation in television dramas, film, and even popular restaurants. Alongside this commercial nostalgia comes a renewed interest in the work of Kipling, one in which the author has often been exonerated of his imperialist views (Parry, 2004). This exoneration suggests, in some measure, the desire to rationalize and justify the history of a country still benefiting from an imperial, colonial past, as well as the need to legitimize contemporary colonial or imperial practices. It is in this climate of political and cultural nostalgia for Empire, with the accompanying desires for rationalization and legitimization, in which the *Kim* video game was developed.

The Great Game, with its transformation of India into a game board and the manoeuvrings of colonial powers into players, is not an apolitical narrative device. Rather, Kim's role as a player ultimately serves the larger ideological purposes of empire. As John McBratney (2002) suggests, the framing of espionage as a game signals "the extent to which the Romantic celebration of the child and the public school love of sport insinuated themselves into imperial expansion, lending it an aura of boyish romance" (p. 111). The effect of this 'aura of romance' is to obscure the more objectionable aspects of imperial and colonial practices, and in doing so to heighten the appeal of service to the empire. According to Edward Said (1987), such service becomes "more

enjoyable when thought of as similar less to a story - linear, continuous, temporal - than to a playing field – many dimensional, discontinuous, and spatial" (p. 14). Echoes of this playing field can be found not only in the playing of the Great Game, but also in the fundamental narrative structure of the novel, which resists a strictly linear plot, delights in the episodic, and focuses on the exploration of space. An adaptation of *Kim* which translates the medium of the text to that of a video game is thus a logical choice, one encouraged by the structure of the novel itself. However, the fact that the Game of the novel is inextricably linked with service to the empire means that any adaptation risks replicating the same imperial ideologies which shaped Kipling's work.

In recent years, a developing body of scholarship has emerged which explores the ways in which video games make manifest imperial ideologies and practices (Harrer, 2018; Magnet, 2006; Mukherjee, 2018). A common thread amongst these scholars is an understanding of the unique power that games have to express an imperial and colonial heritage, a power generated from and located within the player's agency to act in and upon the game environment (Lammes, 2010). A significant portion of postcolonial games scholarship is dedicated to the implementation of colonial and imperial practices in strategy games, most prominently those belonging to the popular *Civilization* franchise (Lammes & de Smale, 2018; Nohr, 2010; Vrtačič, 2014). These strategy games, often categorized as the "4X " genre,[1] are particularly appealing objects for this kind of analysis, as Ford (2016) acknowledges, since the processes and narratives of these games often openly embrace the Western imperial drive to conquer and colonize. Less frequent, however, is the examination of roleplaying games, where the player embodies the avatar of their character as they engage with the world of the game. Patterson (2014) argues that role-playing games, through the high levels of engagement created by the conventions of the genre have emerged as tools to build empathy, understanding, and ethical reasoning. However, he also notes that these games have the potential to be constructed upon deeply problematic assumptions and beliefs surrounding race, cultural difference, gender, imperialism, and colonialism. As *Kim* (2016) is a roleplaying rather than a strategy game, it is worthwhile to explore the question of whether it fulfills its potential to build empathy for the colonial subject in the player, or whether it legitimizes the harmful structures and patterns of modern imperialist projects.

In order to uncover and explore the underlying ideologies of *Kim* (2016), I draw upon Ian Bogost's (2010) concept of procedural rhetoric – that is, the rhetorical meaning generated by the processes of games – which he argues is uniquely suited to depicting the "hidden procedural systems that drive social, political, or cultural behaviour", as it "makes material" their underlying logic (p. 72). Bogost's examination of procedural rhetoric is focused primarily on those games which are intentionally political; that is, where arguments concerning ideologies are deliberately constructed. He acknowledges, however, that while commercial games may not make deliberate political statements, they are still subject to the ideological frameworks in which they are constructed. Thus the ideologies of such games are obscured, resulting in an implicit procedural rhetoric which should be subject to critique.

Kim (2016) is one such commercial game; it does not set out to make a political argument about the British Raj, instead seeking to present a faithful adaptation of Kipling's text combined with entertaining and engaging gameplay. Because of this, it is possible that the procedural rhetoric of the game reinforces the ideological frame of the empire by invoking colonial processes without acknowledging their existence, instead encoding them without question into the game itself. Of course, it is also possible to simultaneously depict and challenge an ideological frame. In such a

challenge, the procedural rhetoric of the game would "[force] the player to see the consequences" of the colonial processes that they are enacting through the game (Bogost, 2010, p. 110). However, a close examination of both Kipling's novel and its game adaptation demonstrate that this is not, in fact, the case. I argue that while Kipling obscures and elides the more objectionable practices of colonization with an aura of romance and nostalgia, the adaptation of novel to game brings these practices to the forefront of the narrative, where they are materialized by the game's procedural rhetoric. However, the game incentivizes rather than interrogates the implementation of violence, exploitation, and control at the site of the colony. In doing so, it serves to reinforce the imperial mindset that the developers hoped to resist. Ultimately, the design choices of game developers are always unconsciously shaped by the ideological framework that justifies the practices of empire, a framework so pervasive as to remain unseen to those working within it. By identifying the processes of colonization at work within games, their underlying imperialistic ideologies can be brought to light.

Empire and Adaptation

When discussing imperialism and colonialism, I generally understand the terms as defined by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), where he argued that "at some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others" (p. 7). Expanding on this definition, we can understand imperialism to encompass "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory", while colonialism, "which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (p. 9). However, this definition must be accompanied by an understanding of the motivating forces behind the imperialist system. As John Foster (2019) explains, the historical practice of imperialism has undergone multiple phases of development, from the early European colonial stage of the 16th and 17th centuries, to the US hegemony of the 20th century and beyond. Each phase, however, is always characterized by some form of economic exploitation and expropriation, where imperial powers extract labour and capital from the periphery in order to accumulate wealth in the center (Foster, 2019). An illustration of this process of extraction and accumulation can be seen in the history of Britain's colonial rule over India. Utsa Patnaik (2017) has calculated the total drain of wealth from India to Britain over the colonial period of 1765-1938 to be somewhere in the realm of *£9.2 trillion*, an almost incomprehensible sum. Patnaik points out that this number is in fact highly underestimated, and that the actual cumulative impact of the drain, taking into account its cumulative effects on the economy, is in fact "incalculable" (p. 311).

In addition to the transfer of wealth from periphery to center, imperialism and colonialism are both driven and supported by a deep-seated ideology, a 'civilizing' impulse that views certain spaces and people as both requiring and benefiting from domination by a 'superior' culture (Said, 1993). J.M. Blaut (1993) explores these ideologies through what he terms diffusionism, the idea that European civilization has a special quality - whether of race, culture, mind, or spirit - that places it in a superior position over other communities. In this worldview, Europe is framed as the center of progress, while the rest of the world is on the periphery. Thus, in this framework, the project of colonization is seen as a gift imparted by Europe on the rest of the world, the diffusion of civilization from the centre to the periphery (Blaut, 1993). These ideas have served for centuries as justifications and rationalizations for the processes of imperialism and

colonialism. These systems are not contained within history, however; they are also fundamental to the structures of modern global society.

Some, like Hardt and Negri (2000), would argue that the traditional structures of empire have been replaced by a new global sovereignty of economic and cultural exchange, one without centre or boundaries. Others, however, assert that the economic processes of modern global capitalism continue to be shaped by imperialist structures and ideas. Foster (2019) argues that the acceleration of globalization has, rather than doing away with national boundaries, simply magnified the structural asymmetries that define the world economy – structural asymmetries which were constructed through the economics of historical imperialism. In the current era of late imperialism, according to Foster, the globalization of production has led to new forms of surplus extraction and transfer of wealth from the global periphery to the global center. This economic system of modern global Empire is supported by what Schiller (1991) terms "media-cultural imperialism"; that is, the cultural production of the center which both contributes to a consumer society and serves the ideological purposes of the system at large by embodying, disseminating, and reinforcing the values of the cultural context in which they are produced. Such is the case for *Kim*, both novel and game.

While Kipling's portrayal of India in *Kim* is largely sympathetic and affectionate, it is necessary to remember that the novel was written in the context of empire, by an author who reaped the benefits of Britain's colonial presence in India. In his introduction to *Kim*, Said (1987) emphasizes this fact, arguing that Kipling was writing not just from the individual perspective of a British man in a colonial setting, but also "from the perspective of a massive colonial system whose economy, functioning and history had acquired the status almost of a fact of nature" (p. 10). For Said, *Kim* is a "master work of imperialism", depicting a colonial mindset which simultaneously takes aesthetic pleasure in and desires control over the colony (p. 45). Kipling's 'love letter to India' is therefore not an act of resistance, but rather a fundamental aspect of colonial power, which constructs and consumes India at the same time as seeks to hold power over it. This desire to maintain control over the colony was increasingly important at a historical moment in which resistance to the empire was growing, both in Britain and in its colonies (Said, 1987, p. 45; McBratney, 2002, xxv). Kipling not only fails to question or resist the colonial presence of Britain in India, but in fact works to "bolster the fiction of an uncontested and incontestable British rule" by obscuring the conflict between colonizer and colonized (Wegner, 1994, p. 140). In addition, Kipling presents the reader with an idealized colonial figure - Kim - in whom Indian and British identities are united in harmony and set to work in the service of the empire. Said (1987) argues that Kipling's fiction "represents both the Empire and conscious legitimizations of it" (p. 24); that he does so while at the same time demonstrating a deep affection for the country and its people is a demonstration of how fundamental the ideologies of empire are to the worldview of those who work within its systems.

In the creation of any adaptation, the source material is inevitably subject to changes, both trivial and significant; in the case of *Kim* (2016), however, the developers appear to have been sincerely committed to fidelity in their interpretation and adaptation of Kipling's novel. In a series of online posts narrating the story of the game's development, Jeremy Hogan (2015), the game's designer, stated that he "didn't want combat or stealth to dominate, that didn't feel true to the book", and that "the opportunity to work with text from a literary classic and let players explore the world of a book however they pleased... was irresistible!" (Prologue). Hogan is emphatic in

his statement that the goal of his adaptation was to translate the setting and story of *Kim* to a different medium while staying 'true' to the novel; in effect, to create a playable version of Kipling's text. The effects of this reverential treatment of the source material are evident throughout the player's experience of the game, where almost all of the dialogue is taken directly from the novel, and where many passages from the novel which do not contain dialogue – as Hogan (2016, Design) puts it, "the best of what was cut" – are presented as loading screens. However, by incorporating so much of Kipling's own text into the game, and through a desire to remain faithful to the 'spirit' of the novel, it is possible that the game unintentionally reinforces the novel's perspective towards empire and the colony. In one interview, Hogan was asked about the implications of "a British studio making a game with a historical, romantic perspective on British India", and whether or not there was "some concern about reviving and lionizing British imperialism" (Wawro, 2016). Hogan's response was as follows:

> I was certainly concerned about how to represent British India but also excited to present a setting, which is so interesting and comparatively under-explored. We've done a lot of research and been really careful not to lionize or whitewash British imperialism; we never shy away from representing its ugly sides.
>
> Wawro (2016)

The developers' goals, then, were to learn from history, to avoid lionizing or whitewashing colonial or imperial practices, and to celebrate the setting of the British Raj while acknowledging the 'ugly sides'. These goals suggest that the developers of the game were conscious throughout of the imperial context that shaped Kipling's work, and actively resisted the perpetuation or reinforcement of a colonizing mentality. However, this resistance is complicated by the fact that the ideological framework which justifies the practice of empire is so pervasive as to remain unseen to those working within it. Immediately after Hogan emphasizes his desire to confront the 'ugly sides' of the Raj, he states, "the book lends itself to this, it's a love letter to India: its people, its religions, its food, its nature, and it mocks the pompous imperialists, who couldn't understand it" (Wawro, 2016). This comment suggests the idea that to hold affection for a colonized land and people, and to criticize the colonizers, are in themselves already acts of resistance against the practice of colonialism. As an examination of Kipling's *Kim* demonstrates, this is not necessarily the case.

Constructing the Colony

An essential step in the creation of a colony is to understand, to catalogue, and in the process, to define the colonial land and subjects. It is this process that is at the heart of Kipling's novel, and which is the driving motivational force behind Kim's adventures. Wegner (1994) argues that Kipling's concern with maintaining British imperial power meant that it was necessary for him to construct a utopian version of India, one in which conflict and historical change were eliminated. This imaginative regulation of India was accomplished by "two linked strategies... mapping and cataloguing" (p.143). Through this strategy, the colonizer - Britain - is figured as "the scientific investigators, the knowers, the masters of ethnography" while "the Indians are the known, the seen, the collected materials... the mere objects of scrutiny" (Plotz, 1992, p. 119). On a practical level, this dichotomy works to uphold the empire's administrative power. As Sailaja Krishnamurth (2002) states, the colonization of India operated through "the collection, archive, and administration of information" (p. 47). To gather information which can be acted upon to secure the power of the colony is the primary goal of the Great Game, and thus appears

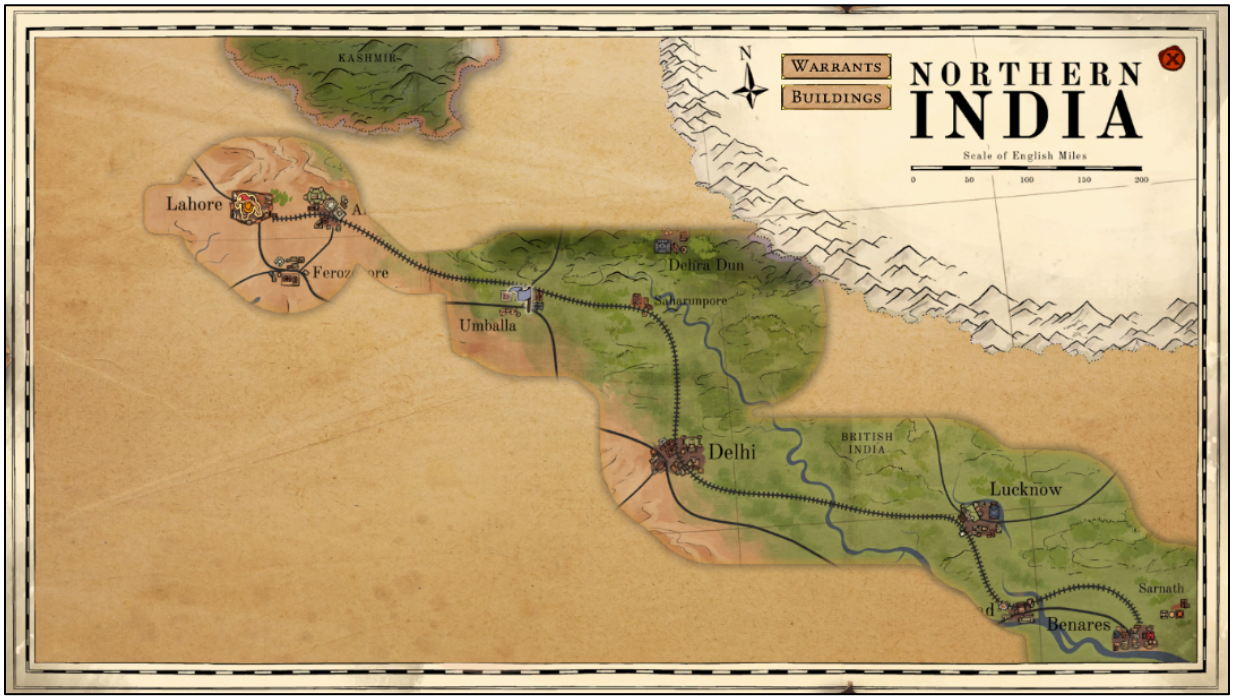
throughout the novel in many forms. Literal mapping, where geographical space is measured and charted, or figurative mapping, where information is collected and pieced together to chart the colony as it is shaped by the movements of people, political shifts and military force.

Running in parallel to this figurative mapping is the curation of colonial knowledge, where information is collected, collated, and stored away as reference material rather than used directly in the maintenance of colonial power. In places such as the Lahore Wonder House, European literacy, curation, and mapping techniques are depicted as granting access to indigenous knowledge that even indigenous people do not have; the Europeans 'know' India (and Indians) better than Indians themselves do. This anthropological knowledge is, ultimately, just as necessary to maintaining colonial power as the more practical geographical and political information. For the empire to maintain itself, no aspect of the colony can be permitted to exist outside of the colonizers' control; the collection and cataloguing of information is one aspect of this control. Plotz (1992) argues that it is Kim's ability to observe which marks him in the text as "truly British", as "the British are consistently characterized as the masters of clear vision as distinguished from the Indians, who are totally engaged in their small areas" (pp. 118). It is this clear vision which allows Kim to become a player in the Great Game, where the colonial act of observation is framed as play and the colonial agent as player. This disguising of colonial processes as play is an essential step in their unquestioned acceptance by the agents involved – after all, a game needs no justification for its existence; its purpose is simply to exist as an end in itself.

Through the process of mapping and cataloguing, the colony itself is written into existence. Wegner (1994) argues that the map produced by colonial agents is an abstraction which situates the colony within the larger ideological structures of empire. This map can only be read by those who are located 'outside' the space that it represents, whether physically or conceptually - those who 'belong' to the center rather than the periphery. In order to prevent a coherent colonial identity from forming, however, the map must then be "broken down into its constitutive elements", a process which appears in *Kim* as continuous interruptions of the "unifying narrative movement with long descriptive interludes: catalogues of the varied peoples, places, and customs that inhabit empire's India" (p. 144). Krishnamurth (2002) asserts that in the process of this breaking-down, "maps produce places... which are sterile, and can be owned and occupied according to the needs of colonialism" (p. 53). Colonialism requires more than simply sterile spaces, however; just as important as the map is the narrative of the colony, which is constructed before and alongside the map itself. This narrative "tells the story of the map; describes its locations, circumscribes its territory, and establishes the authority of the colonizer" (p. 54). It is the narrative which makes it possible to rationalize and justify colonization, to regulate the colonial subjects and turn them into objects of Britain's observing gaze, making it "foundational and integral" to the construction of the colony (p. 54). Thus, the mapping of space and the cataloguing of information come together to construct a complete colony that is located entirely within the control of the colonizer.

The process of constructing India through the process of mapping and cataloguing information is central to the game adaptation of *Kim*. This is not surprising, since video games as a genre often require the player to navigate through space; because of this, maps have become an integral aspect of most games' user interfaces. Indeed, the use of mapping space has been addressed by several postcolonial game scholars. Ford (2016), for example, frames the process of exploration in games – embodied so frequently in the uncovering of a map by the removal of the "fog of

war" – as the primary act that makes other forms of colonial violence possible. Mukherjee (2018), too, identifies cartography as one of the primary tools of colonialism, arguing that the same mechanics that Ford identifies – present in so many empire-building video games – demonstrates the large extent to which colonialist thought has shaped the development of the genre. In many ways, *Kim* (2016) replicates these colonialist mechanics. In the game, the player



is always able to access a map of the Indian space in which the game takes place. As the player begins the game, this map is almost blank; only the towns which are connected by railroad, and the railroad itself, appear (Figure 1). The map is filled in as the player advances through the game; the features of the landscape and smaller towns are added as the player discovers them, and the map itself becomes populated with the objectives that the player is meant to fulfill.

Figure 1: The Blank Map. *Kim* (2016)

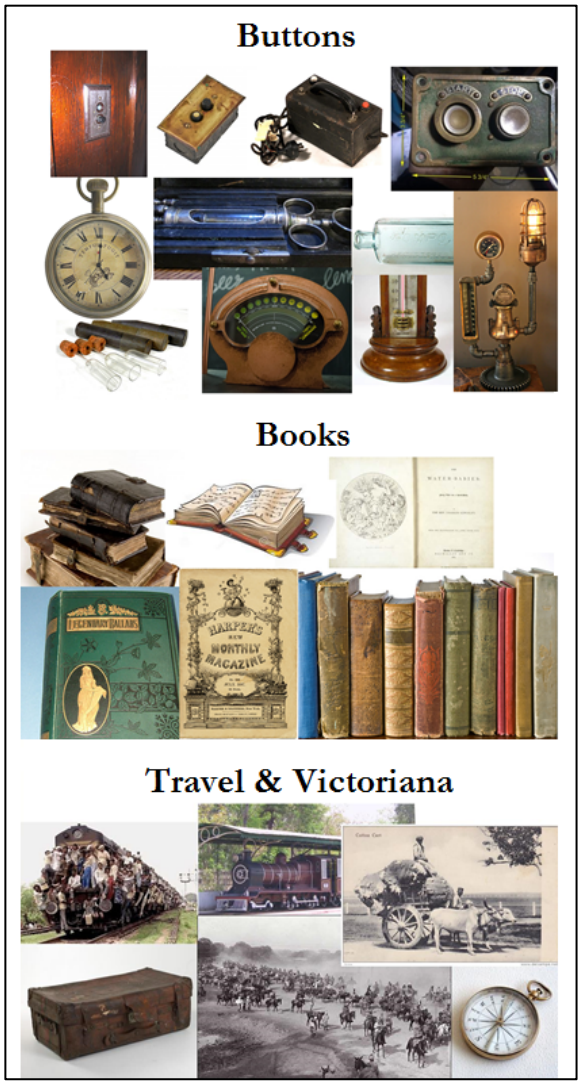
The player is not only uncovering India through this process, however; because of the procedural generation used by the games' designers, the player is literally constructing India as they move through it. As Hogan explains, the game's map contains 500 smaller areas; of these, all but 17 are procedurally generated (2016, Programming). In procedural generation, the content of the game is created through a complex series of algorithms. Instead of designing each area of the map by hand, the game designer creates a series of mathematical rules concerning the possibilities for each space. A random number, called a 'seed' is then placed into the set of algorithms, generating the space of the game. Each seed provides a different constructed space, so that the player will never experience an identical world in two different playthroughs of the game. The areas of the map are not stored in the game memory, to be called up when needed; rather, they are 'generated' as the player moves into them. Thus, in the game, the process of moving through space is one and the same as the process of writing space. Of course, this similarity is largely symbolic; the player does not have a conscious input into the construction of the India through which they are moving – with the notable exception of choosing to play the game with a specific chosen seed, allowing the player to experience a certain generation more than once, or the same generation as

another player. The exploration and mapping of space is of fundamental importance to the playing of *Kim* (2016), just as it is in the construction of Kipling's ideal colony, however, it is by no means the only means of knowledge acquisition available to the player.

As the player moves through the space of the game, they encounter and uncover a great deal of 'ethnographical' information. This information takes many different forms. In one case, upon arriving in each major town, a window opens containing an historical photograph of the city, as well as a brief textual excerpt of information. The information presented to the player in these boxes is taken from Victorian travel guides – most frequently Mrs. Bradshaw's. Because of this, the understanding of India that a player acquires is curated entirely from a colonial perspective; that is, Indian towns and cities are described through the voice and gaze of the colonizer rather than the colonized. Other information in the game is collected by speaking to the non-player characters (NPCs) that are present throughout the game's space. NPCs with whom the player interacts are described by an information panel that appears when the player clicks on them. This panel categorizes the NPC in various ways, generally identifying their religion and occupation, or, in the case of female NPCs only, their sex. The player, acting as Kim, can interrogate these NPCs regarding said categories, though each category can be investigated only once. For example, upon selecting a character described as "Muslim Woman", the player is given the choice to ask about "Muslim" or "Woman"; in each case, the NPC will answer with a brief statement before moving on. For example, when asked about "Woman", the NPC will respond, "The proverb says war is to men and childbirth is to women but we have wars of our own". In this way, the player can gather information from what appears to be a multitude of different perspectives. However, the information gathered is always superficial at best. In categorizing the NPCs, the game necessarily flattens the identity of colonial subjects into one or two easily identifiable racial or class characteristics. An attempt at ameliorating this flattening can be found in the identity window, which also contains randomly generated personal traits, however, these traits have no bearing on the interactions between the NPCs and the player, and thus no effect on the processes of the game. The overwhelming effect of this system, therefore, is the construction of colonial subjects as a repository of information, available to be observed and catalogued at the players' discretion.

The information presented to the player as they move through the game's representation of India is thus already shaped through a colonial perspective. However, the game goes a step further in reinforcing this perspective through the design of the user interface (UI). The UI is the means through which a player acts upon the game world – it is the visual representation of the player's agency and ability, and thus informs all of their interactions with the game. In his interview with Gamasutra, Hogan discusses the process of designing this interface. He states that "...we wanted each UI element to feel like a Victorian object... Kim's inventory is stored in a battered leather suitcase, his objectives are in a traveller's notebook, the game's map is straight out of National Geographic" (Wawro, 2016). Figure 2 depicts the references that were used in the creation of this interface. The aesthetic of the UI is specifically, deliberately European in design, containing

multiple visual references to Victorian Britain. In making this design choice, the game frames Kim as a colonizer, moving through the space of the periphery while relying on the tools of the



center. Kim, and by extension the player, do not 'belong' in the landscape in the way that the native NPCs do; the UI creates an always-present distance between the player and India. All of the player's interactions with the game, conducted through the UI of the colonizer, reinforce – without questioning – the process of mapping and collecting knowledge as a desirable goal; Kipling's Great Game is thus replicated not only in its specific details, but in its larger ideological implications.

Figure 2: Victorian Aesthetics. Hogan (2016, User Interface)

Colonial Violence

In *Kim*, Kipling celebrates the process of mapping and observation, however, there are many other – perhaps more obviously objectionable – colonial practices which he is careful to obscure. Chief among these is the economic exploitation of the colony. As Blaut (1993) states, the practice of colonialism is "an immensely profitable business" (p. 23). In this practice, the

resources and wealth of a colonized land are extracted and used for the economic benefit of the empire, making the process of colonization instrumental in maintaining the power and strength of the empire. The colonizer's justifications for their practices are, ultimately, mere rationalizations for a process that is nothing more than theft on a global scale. This economic exploitation is notably absent from Kipling's text. In the novel, those acts of theft which are committed by Kim, such as stealing the papers of the Russian agents, or the ledger of the Commissariat sergeant, are presented as acts in service to a larger purpose, as a necessary evil for a greater good. The empire is an end in and of itself; there is no question of the necessity of supporting its structures, and, significantly, there is no explanation or understanding of why the empire exists. In reality, the empire is constructed to facilitate theft. In *Kim* (2016), however, theft is used only as a necessary tool to support the empire. Kipling's colonial agent is a moral figure in his refusal to commit theft for personal gain: “he fingered a superb prismatic compass and the shiny top of the theodolite. But after all, a Sahib cannot very well steal...” (p. 254). Here, Kipling constructs an ideal model of the colony, where the 'sahib' is the moral exemplar, a figure who resists the temptation for personal gain at the expense of the colony; an ironic construction, since the colony exists entirely for the economic benefit of the colonizer at the expense of the colonized. The only character in the novel who attempts a theft for personal gain is, in fact, an Indian priest who "insisted that the honour of entertaining the lama belonged to the temple – at which the lama smiled guilelessly. Kim glanced from one face to the other, and drew his own conclusions” (p. 49). Kim, acting as an agent of colonial morality, recognizes the danger and prevents it, taking the lama's money into his own protection. In this way, Kipling constructs a representation of the colony in which the moral burden rests with the colonizer, who must regulate the behaviour of the colonized. In doing so, he obscures the economic realities of colonization, and its importance to the larger imperial project.

Theft is handled very differently in the world of the game. As the player travels through India, they quickly discover that resources are scarce. While food, an item necessary to maintaining the avatar’s health, can sometimes be acquired by begging, this process only works if the lama is present with the player. When the player and lama are separated, food must be purchased from vendors or scrounged from the occasionally appearance of free resources on the map, represented symbolically by abandoned campfires. Because of the procedural generation, however, there is no guarantee that the player will be able to find these free resources when they are needed, as their appearance on the map is random. While money can be earned by the player, the opportunities to do so are few and far apart; travelling between spaces on the map either uses far more money than can legitimately be earned, or drains the player's health and happiness faster than it can be refilled. The beginning player, unaware of these mechanics, may spend their limited cash on a railway ticket to a distant city. Upon arrival, however, they would quickly discover that they have no means with which to travel further; each step across the map that they make is a net negative to their resources. It is therefore difficult for a player of *Kim* (2016) – especially a novice – to move through the landscape in the manner that Kim does in the novel, relying happily on the goodness of strangers. However, the game does present an alternative source of resources to the player: theft. A set of lock-picks are acquired early in the game, which can be used to break into the 'hovels' and 'huts' that dot the landscape. In each of these, the player finds random selections of food, coin, or medical goods which can be added to their inventory. If the player is careful in their use of stealth mode, these thefts can be accomplished with no punishment other than a slight decrease in merit. Through theft, an abundance of wealth can quickly be amassed by the player; travel becomes easier and faster, as well as having less of a

negative impact to the character's health and happiness meters. Because of this, the player can cover a greater distance in less time and achieve a greater number of completed quests – both actions which earn merit, possibly balancing the negative impact created by the theft in the first place. Put simply, the game is both easier and more fun when the player sets aside any moral qualms concerning theft. Through this process, perhaps inadvertently, the game uncovers the realities of economic exploitation in the colony that Kipling obscures. For the player of *Kim*, theft is a fundamental, inextricable aspect of colonization. However, what remains unexamined in the game are the motivations behind the construction of the colony. As Kim, the player steals to move ahead in the game, but the object of the game is not the theft itself; it is a means to an end rather than the prime motivational force.

Like economic exploitation, the violent acts which are instrumental in colonization are absent from *Kim*, an exclusion which is necessary for Kipling's attempt to construct a utopian version of the colony. When violence is present, it is generally represented as morally justified. When Creighton orders the assemblage of 8,000 troops, he is clear in his statement that “It’s punishment – not war” (p. 37). In this framing, the colonizer assumes the parental role, making it their moral duty to administer punishment for the ultimate good of the 'child' – that is, the unruly colonial subject. Later in the novel, a speech concerning the Mutiny of 1857 is given by an old Indian soldier, who describes it as "a madness [which] ate into all the Army… then came the Sahibs from over the sea and called them to most strict account” (p. 52). Here, the violence committed by the colonial subject is framed as 'madness', and that committed by the colonizer as a necessary punishment. In Said's (1987) explication of this passage, he argues that Kipling places the British perspective of the Mutiny into the "mouth of an Indian whose much more likely nationalist counterpart is never seen in the novel at all" (p. 26). In doing so, he presents an image of the colony in which there is no real conflict between the colonizer and the colonized; instead, there is 'madness' and 'punishment', a dichotomy which fits neatly into imperial ideology. Kim himself rarely uses violence, with one notable exception; in the confrontation between the Russian and the lama, “before Kim could ward him off, the Russian struck the old man full on the face. Next instant, he was rolling over and over down hill with Kim at his throat. The blow had wakened every unknown Irish devil in the boy’s blood, and the sudden fall of his enemy did the rest”. The most significant feature of this violent act is the fact that it is directed against a rival colonial agent and in defense of the colonial subject; it is motivated purely by the emotional ties that bind Kim to the lama. In contrast is the behaviour of the Russian, who "saw no more than an unclean old man haggling over a dirty piece of paper” (p. 242) and acted with violence to seize what he does not understand. In Kipling's ideal of the colony, violence does have a role to play, but it is as a tool of the colonizer used for the benefit of the colonized.

As was the case with theft, the procedures of the game reveal a great deal more of colonial violence than does Kipling's novel. They do this in two respects: the first is that they connect acts of violence with an economic motive, revealing the root of the motivations behind imperial and colonial violence. The player of the game can equip Kim's avatar with a series of weapons, ranging from wooden sticks, to bladed weapons, to firearms. The player can then engage any NPC in combat, and if armed with an effective weapon, the NPC will be killed and the player is free to 'loot' the dead body – that is, to add any goods that the NPC was carrying to their own inventory. Much like theft, murder becomes a means of advancement in the game. Though there is a larger punishment if the player is caught[2], there are many underpopulated areas of the map where the player can kill with impunity in order to increase their access to resources. In addition,

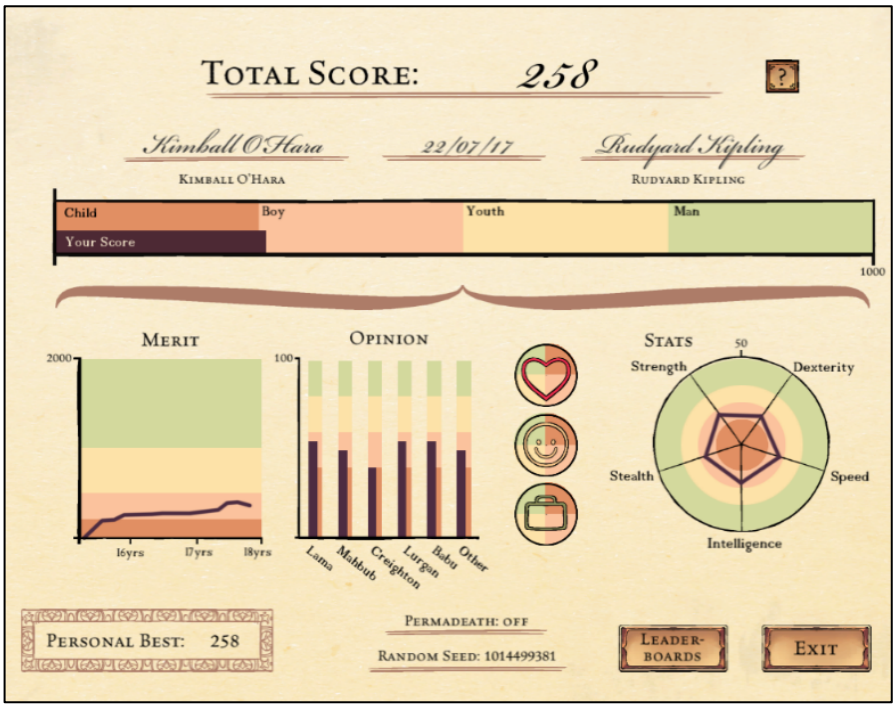
violence is necessary to the completion of some quests, such as the fulfilment of bounties set by Queen Victoria and posted in towns. In other quests, violence can be used as a means to an end, as is the case when Creighton asks the player to 'deal with' a dissatisfied landowner who is speaking publicly in the city. One of the ways in which the 'problem' can be 'dealt with' is to simply kill the offending NPC. Violence in the game is thus used to maintain the power of the colony. However, it is also used to increase the player's personal wealth, much as the violence inflicted upon the colonized is, ultimately, in pursuit of the economic growth of the empire. The second way in which the game demonstrates a more accurate picture of colonial violence is in the targets chosen by the player as Kim. In the game, violence is generally directed not against other players of the Great Game, but against the NPCs who populate the landscape, overwhelmingly identified by the game as Indians from many different strata of society. This reflects the targets of colonial violence in the real world in a way that Kipling's novel does not. However, in order to determine whether or not the game offers a resistance to the violent processes of colonization, it is necessary to examine the way in which they impact the larger purpose of the game: to achieve success and acquire merit.

The Merits of Victory

In Kipling's *Kim*, merit – a Buddhist concept in which a person may achieve happiness and growth in their current and future lives through the performance of meritorious acts – is often spoken of by the lama. Those who acquire merit do so by assisting the lama with charity or service, as in the case of the old woman, who was "[permitted] to acquire merit by gifts". In performing these acts of charity, the widow is acquiring merit by furthering the holy cause of the lama, who himself earns merit by pursuing this cause. In other cases, merit can be used as a sort of counter-balance, as the lama asserts when he says: "I stepped aside from the Way... at least I may, acquiring merit, wipe out past ill" (pp. 92-93). Kim himself acquires merit through acting as the lama's chela throughout the novel, however, at the same time he performs this duty, Kim is actively engaged in playing the Great Game. That is, he is an agent of the colonial project furthering the interests of the empire, an act which directly opposes the principles of charity and service that the lama embodies. The fact that there is no merit lost in the construction of the colony would seem to suggest that, for Kipling, there is no moral dilemma inherent in the colonial project. Said (1987) argues that Kim's ability to "move relatively unscarred through India" is due to the imperialist mindset which erases conflict (p. 42). I would add that Kim's journey in the novel leaves him not only physically unscarred, but morally unscarred as well, and for similar reasons; that is, that in an imperial mindset, the act of colonization is not inherently immoral.

In *Kim* (2016), merit plays a prominent role. The player as Kim is able to acquire merit, however, unlike the novel the primary means through which this is accomplished is not charity or service. Rather, merit is acquired through various actions including learning new information, talking to new people, investigating each of the major religions present in the game, and, most importantly, by completing quests which further the goals of the Great Game. Admittedly, the player can earn merit by assisting the lama in his quest to find the River of the Arrow, however this is only one branch of a multitude of quest lines which award merit. The processes of the game, rather than the lama, assign merit to the player's actions. At the end of the game, the merit that the player has acquired is considered in the calculation of their final score. Also considered in this calculation, however, are the material measures of the player's success: their health, happiness, and wealth. The level to which the player has developed Kim's abilities and the

opinions of the NPCs towards Kim are also included in the calculation of the final score. Merit is thus one of many metrics by which success in the game is measured, and the loss of merit through committing immoral actions can be balanced by the greater success that those actions bring. In Figures 5 and 6, the final scores of two playthroughs can be seen. In the first, the player's merit moved steadily upward over the course of the game. However, this player's final score was lower than that in Figure 6, where the player lost what little merit they earned through committing acts of theft and violence. Thus, even though the game appears to discourage the player from committing these acts, they are in fact incentivised to a greater extent than they are punished. A strategic player will seek any means to advance their score in the game, and those means will almost always include some form of violence.



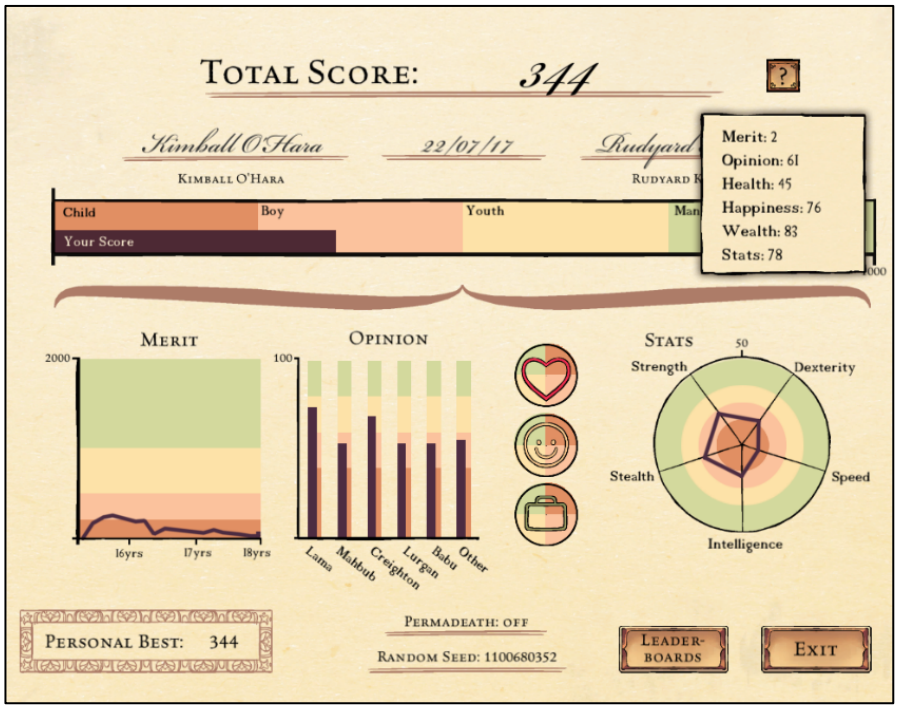


Figure 5: Upward merit. *Kim* (2016)

Figure 6: The incentive of violence. *Kim (2016)*

Conclusions

The ultimate goal of *Kim* is to play through the game 'successfully'; since the actions that the player takes are always mediated through the perspective of the colonizer, and since so much of the game is comprised of the colonial practice of mapping the land and people of the colony in order to bring them under the control of the colonizer, it could be argued that success in the game represents the successful implementation of empire. Though *Kim* (2016) depicts clearly the more unsavoury practices of colonization that Kipling tried to obscure, it fails to challenge its own depiction. Thus, the game, though separated by more than a century from Kipling's novel, reinforces the imperial ideological structures within which both book and game were created. It is the nature of procedural rhetoric to embody the underlying rules that govern systems of belief, and in doing so to bring them to the surface of the text. The developers of *Kim* may not have consciously chosen to represent the material practices of constructing the colony, however, procedural rhetoric did not give them a choice.

The question that suggests itself here is whether there was a way in which the developers of *Kim* could have effectively enacted resistance to the frameworks of imperialism and colonization. Two options suggest themselves. The first is the possibility of taking advantage of the nature of the typical 'processes' of video games to consciously critique the ideologies from which they emerge. The second is to consider how one can reinvent these processes; that is, how one can discover new ways for the player to interact with the story of the game, to create mechanics which, themselves, resist the urge to map, catalogue, collect, exploit, and murder. Such reinventions are a necessary part of the work of decolonization; that is, of creating games that, through both their narratives and processes, embody not the prevailing ideology of Empire, but rather an anti-imperial, anti-colonialist worldview. Ultimately, however, this decolonization of games will be marginally effective at best without material changes in the game development industry and its structures of production which are inextricably intertwined with the imperialist structure of global capitalism. If we wish to move towards a decolonization of games, we must first work towards challenging and dismantling the economic structures of Empire which produce them.

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[1] Referring to the core generic mechanics of "eXploring, eXpanding, eXploiting, and eXterminating" (Ford, 2016)

[2] The apprehended player is sent to jail, losing a significant portion of time. The impact of this punishment is fairly severe, since the game ends when Kim turns 18; the player is always racing against the clock.