

The Playing Fields of Empire: Empire and Spatiality in Videogames

Abstract As in historical accounts, empire in videogames, too, is concerned with the acquisition of geographical space. Videogame empires work on the necessary logic of spatial expansion connected with which is the necessity to remove the “fog” which prevents the player’s ‘line of sight’ from accessing information about surrounding areas. Although much scholarship exists around the representations of the spatiality of Empire in more traditional media, there is little that addresses the videogame representations of Empire. Following on from the general position on the need to examine notions of postcolonial spatiality in videogames, this chapter specifically addresses the representation and experience of space in conceptions of Empire vis-à-vis in empire-building videogames, as understood in terms of both cartography and the lived experience of space.

Keywords Maps · Line of sight · Empire-building games · Surveying Spatiality · Cartography

EMPIRE, SPACE, VIDEOGAMES: A REVIEW

Cecil Rhodes, the British businessman-imperialist extraordinaire who funded the Rhodes scholarships, is said to have wept inconsolably because Britain could not colonize outer space. The victory conditions of the Grand Campaign of Britain in *Empire: Total War* (Creative Assembly

2009; *ETW* here onwards) asking the player to “capture and hold 23 regions [...] including Hindustan, Florida, Gibraltar, Iceland, New France, Leeward Islands” (Creative Assembly 2009) may seem tame in comparison. In both cases, however, the very logic of Empire is tied up with how it reconceives spatiality. From the “Great Game” played for the possession of Central Asia to the expansionist logic of *No Man’s Sky*, the mechanism of empire is based on a geopolitics through which it lays claim to a consolidated space and on further expansion. The most popular genre in videogames to include this as a game mechanic is the RTS (real-time strategy) genre in videogames, which almost always concerns itself with empire-building, whether it is the early *Age of Empire* (Ensemble Studios 1999) games or the more recent *Rise of Nations* (Big Huge Games 2003) and *Rome: Total War 2* (Creative Assembly 2013). In the present scenario, when there is hardly any place for Rhodes and such overt apologists for Empire, the clear popularity of empire-building games is one that deserves critical attention (Fig. 2.1).

The continued relevance of Empire even today in one of the newest media of culture and storytelling is one that is both worrying as well as, arguably, symptomatic of the ambiguity with which contemporary (particularly Western) society views the imperialist system. Through a



Fig. 2.1 Planting flags to conquer—Screenshot from *Empire: Total War* (Creative Assembly 2009)

study of RTS games, such as mainly *ETW*, this chapter explores deeper questions of empire and its relation to space. It points out how the spatial construction of empire in these videogames follows older Western imperialist models; it also shows how the very nature of gameplay itself constantly undercuts and makes the player problematize such notions of spatiality.

IMPERIAL SPACES IN GAMES STUDIES RESEARCH

Game Studies scholarship related to empire and videogame spaces has so far mainly concerned itself with geopolitics in general (Guenzel 2007; Nohr 2010) or gone on to “locate virtual games within a larger analysis of, and controversy about actual global Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, xix). Sybille Lammes’s brief article “Postcolonial Playgrounds: Games as Postcolonial Cultures” (2010) attempts a more direct engagement as does my own earlier essay (2014) on the topic. In the present chapter, a more direct approach to empire is taken by relating questions of imperialist spatiality to videogame space.

Lammes, of course, identifies the hybrid nature of postcolonial spatiality within the maps in the empire-building games. She sees them as both the maps of the colonial cartographer marking out new territory and also as spaces where players can start “translating world histories into personal stories [and thereby] create their own postcolonial stories” (Lammes). While this can be true, the question arises as to who the player is and whose maps are being represented. It is eminently possible to play on the maps that *perpetuate* the logic of colonialism instead of challenging it—in such cases, the personal histories are intertwined with and constructed out of a colonialist logic. The inherent assumptions of the game’s design affordances are also influential. Moreover, this is not true only of videogames.

For example, Karen French and William Stanley describe a board-game based on the colonial expansion in Africa as its basic premise:

The purpose of the game is to *dramatize* the benefits and liabilities of colonial occupation which accrued to Western European governments and their African subjects. Ideally, it should be played by no more than five students. [...] Players each represent a European colonial power (England, France, Belgium, Germany and Portugal) with one of the players serving as an international banker. (French and Stanley 1974, 44).

The game is structured like Monopoly (which itself is about capitalist expansion and industrialization) and the player trades in colonies such as the Slave Coast and Gold Coast based on his or her dice throws and the drawing of the Fate and Fortune cards. The colonialist narrative is thus portrayed as a benign game that can be won by mastering fortune—the underlying connotations of slavery and cupidity notwithstanding. Such a colonial framing of the ludic goes back a long way. For example, *Bowles's Geographical Game of the World* (Bowles and Carver 1796) is an eighteenth century game that almost aims to be a guide to amateur colonizers. For the Cape of Good Hope, the game mentions that it has been taken from the Dutch in 1796 and the player is to “stay three turns to survey the settlements, extending 300 miles up the country of the Hottentots” (Bowles and Carver 1796). Bowles’s game typically combines history with colonial cartography. Compare the experience, over three centuries later, of a player of *Empire: Total War* who describes his gaming experience, playing as the Kingdom of Netherlands:

The Dutch Navy was one of the strongest in the world, but it was overstretched. Since trade was the primary source of income for the United Provinces, it was decided to reinforce the Navy as well. The Indian Squadron was directed to head to East Africa in order to shore up the trade routes, while new ships were going to be built in order to replace them. The European fleet remained near the Netherlands, in case England or the French decided to invade. The Caribbean Squadron was also strengthened, building up in order to face the pirate threat. (NCR 2014)

Not much, indeed, has changed. Daniel Dooghan commenting on *Minecraft* notes a similar trait: “Minecraft’s mechanics not only encourage this kind of expansionist thinking but go further by representing the physical and cultural violence of territorial expansion as a pleasurable challenge” (Dooghan 2016, 5).

Indeed, the association of games with the military and empire has a long history. German *Kriegsspiel*, used for military training is a direct example. The clearest association of imperialist expansion and games is to be found in the Great Game or the geopolitical struggle between Russia and the British Empire for the possession of Central Asia. In Kipling’s novel *Kim* (1901), the eponymous protagonist is a child who joins the Great Game of secretly surveying beyond the northern borders of British India. Kim’s game, still played among the Scouts and Guides, is

about remembering key locations on a mental map—in the novel, this innocuous game becomes the prelude for the Great Game of colonial expansion. Not surprisingly, key political figures of British India such as the Viceroy Lord Curzon portray imperialist expansionist plans as part of a game:

Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia— [...] To me, I confess, they are the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the dominion of the world. (Walberg 2011, 13)

Serious expansionist geopolitics is represented as being playful, even fun. Although not quite a surveyor and adventurer like Kim, Curzon is well known for another aspect of geopolitics: deciding the fate of the Indian province of Bengal by drawing a dividing line on a map.¹

To start with, one needs to unpack the significance of the two terms, empire and geopolitics. According to Jan Needervén Pieterse, “an imperial state is one that determines the foreign and domestic policies of another political entity, [...] a second broad-brush definition is a state that practices expansionist geopolitics [and] a third loose meaning of empire, pertains to ideology” (Pieterse 2009: 18). All of these descriptions are connected and as is evident from a basic definition of geopolitics: “the term geopolitics refers to the use of politics in controlling territories, where certain geographical positions are more strategic than others, for resources, historical and socio-political reasons” (Walberg 2011, 19).

The imperialist machinery of expansionist geopolitics functions through cartography and surveying. Sir George Everest, as the surveyor general of India and the head of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of 1931, was instrumental in computing the height of Mount Everest to which he lent his name. Not surprisingly, the name of the Indian mathematician, Radhanath Sikdar, who, as part of the survey made the actual calculation, is virtually unknown to the world. Cartography itself was not only about map-making as it would have been in the pre-Empire days:

The cartographic partition of Africa inextricably linked mapmaking and empire building. Yet the act of drawing lines on maps is only one example of how cartography furthered imperialism. Maps were used in various ways to extend European hegemony over foreign and often unknown territory. (Bassett 1994, 316–335)

Like the naming of Mount Everest, the act of naming is significant for the expansionist agenda of Empire. Colonial expansion also meant changes to the geography that went beyond lines on maps and names. In *Flora's Empire* (2011), Eugenia Herbert describes how the British colonialists in India strove to change the landscape with their gardens and often imported foliage. There were also playing fields created out of scrubland to facilitate games of golf and cricket. With cartography and naming, there was the imperial flag to mark out territory. As the British stand-up comedian, Eddie Izzard, brilliantly laughs at Empire in his piece “Do You Have a Flag?”:

We stole countries with the cunning use of flags! Yeah, just sail around the world and stick a flag in. - I claim India for Britain!

They go, You can't claim us, we live here! 500 million of us!

- Do you have a flag?

- We don't need a bloody flag! It's our country, you bastards!

- No flag, no country, you can't have one! That's the rules that I've just made up, and I'm backing it up with this gun that was lent from the National Rifle Association. (Jordan 1999)

The following sections will demonstrate how Izzard's playful yet poignant critique of empire raises issues related to cartography and power compares usefully to the portrayal of empire-spaces in videogames.

Most gamers will be familiar with the concepts of “line of sight” and the “fog of war” in RTS games. The basic aim of the game is to see what is hidden in the dark areas. Send a spy or a diplomat (or a priest, as the case may be) into uncharted territory or even better, send ships and armies to take possession, often after giving battle. Once a region is occupied, the map is redrawn and carries your nation's color. For example, see the map of British India from a gameplay instance of *ETW*. Compare this to the actual maps of the East India Company from the time and a similar logic of expansion is reflected in the cartography. Diplomacy, which includes trade agreements, alliances, joining wars, exchanging technologies and money, is another key factor in defining the changing geographies. The imperialist power also soon replaces the older buildings with its own. For example, a church school or an ashram might become a classical university—in real life, a walk around downtown Calcutta reflects this well as one gets a quick

lesson in British architecture, thousands of miles away from the United Kingdom. Surveying, so famously adventurous in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), is an analogue of the RTS game's line of sight. Kim, playing the Great Game of spying, is much like the agent that one sends into unknown or hostile territory in *ETW*. Once surveyed, occupied, and mapped (not always in that order), the game requires the player to have a significant military presence if one is to prevent rebellions from breaking out. That, of course, is the subject of a later discussion in this chapter.

Speaking of geopolitical discourses in RTS games, Rolf Nohr identifies clear links between these games and classical geopolitics from the 1920s to the 1960s. He states that "expansion as acts, however, does not only aim at space as the moment of politics, but can also be financed by or out of space" (Nohr 2010). Nohr points out the Clausewitzian interpretation of politics in these empire-building games that depicts war as a form of politics or a struggle for the resources on the space of the campaign map. For him, this is in keeping with the conception of space as *lebensraum* (German: living space), a concept formulated by German geographer, Friedrich Ratzel, in his 1901 essay. According to Woodruff Smith, "Ratzel defined Lebensraum as the geographical surface area required to support a living species at its current population size and mode of existence. [...] Lebensraum seemed to place Darwinian natural selection in a spatial and environmental dimension" (Smith 1991, 51–68). Lebensraum is also associated with the expansionist policies of the National Socialist regime in Germany from the 1920s to 1945. The struggle for Lebensraum then becomes equated with the struggle for resources. Resource gathering is an important aspect of RTS games: to have a production-based capitalist economy (summed up earlier as "trade and taxes") is to win the game. Such a resource-hungry geopolitics also creates the binarism of centre and its peripheries. For Walberg, such a binarism aims "to expropriate the wealth—surplus—of weaker countries—the periphery, their incorporation into the economy of the empire—the center—in a subordinate and profitable way, and to ensure that other competing imperial powers are kept at a disadvantage" (Walberg 2011, 24). Nohr sees a parallel in games such as *Civilisation V* (2010) where a hierarchy of capitals and colonies is constructed and soon one sees the sprouting of peripheral structures such as ports, storage, and supply posts and settlements as the game forces the player to create such hierarchical and concentric arrangements of the capital and the colonies. Naturally, the peripheral spaces exist to supply the center.

Nohr relates RTS games to Samuel Huntington's (1996) argument that human beings pursue policies that bring about conflict within spatiality. Writing about this aspect of geopolitics, Guenzel mentions how the map precedes the territory in real-life geopolitics as well as in games. The historical example he provides is that of the infamous line drawn across the map of Poland by Ribbentrop and Molotov: the consequences are only too well-known.² The videogame example that he provides is from *Ghost Recon* where the player can switch to map-mode from the FPS mode and where "the map thus precedes the territory: strategic planning is done in the realm of the map and instantly has an effect on the virtual space of experience" (Guenzel 2007: 446). He also examines the geopolitical scenario of the game as the space for alternative history. Set in the (then) near future, where Eastern Europe is on the brink of war in 2008, *Ghost Recon* makes a geopolitical statement about a possible world.

As Guenzel points out, the deterministic geopolitical schema of Ratzel's was challenged by cultural geographers who "used the category of frame of space to rethink culture from a non-deterministic point of view" (Guenzel 2012: 9) rather than see it as a struggle for existence, expansion, and resources. At this point, it will be useful to introduce the "spatial turn" in theory initiated by Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre (1991) is of key interest here and he views space as perceived space (*perçu*), conceived space (*conçu*), and lived space (*vécu*). The first type is the material space as physically negotiated through movement, the second type is the mediated space of maps, and the third or "lived" space is the experienced and imagined space that operates as a simultaneous trialectic (in the sense that it is spatially copresent rather than following on as a temporal sequence) to the other two types. In terms of videogames, such a conception of spatiality works out as follows:

Videogame spaces today are mostly a presentation of perceptual space in the way Lefebvre addresses the individual experience of space or what he also calls 'spatial practice'. In contrast, representations of space differ from this phenomenal experience of space as they are in real-life contexts, videogame maps are essential for orientation, especially in games played from the first-person perspective, for in those games, one needs not only see what one is aiming at, but also where one is located within the entire setting of the game. For this reason, maps in videogames are either fully displayed and function as representations of the whole 'playground' [...] or they are reduced to a visual element within the display. (Guenzel 2007: 444)

The third or the “lived” space is imagined by the player in the zone of becoming and identity formation, where the first and second spaces overlap with each other in various degrees. Arguably, this compares well with RTS games such as *ETW* where the perceived space is itself perceived on the “playground” of the conceived space or the map, especially when one considers the movement of units across the world map; it is possible to go into a deeper level of perceived space in the real-time battle scenarios where the player as the god-like commander of massed military units inhabits all of these units as and when required by giving orders to move and attack and then depending on the AI to carry out the actions. The battle scenarios themselves are perceived spaces that are enacted over the conceived space of the battlefield map (most clearly perceivable when the player gets the opportunity to deploy the army within a limited section of the battlefield although the camera is allowed to pan and zoom across the entire battlefield). Given the very obvious overlap of the perceived and conceived spaces here, one needs to think through the implications of the Lefebvrian spatial turn in empire-based games carefully. What happens also to the lived space? Is the notion applicable at all in these games?

PERCEIVED, CONCEIVED, AND LIVED SPACE IN EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

ETW has the advantage of combining the turn-based element of RTS games with real-time battles using massed armies. It also (rather boldly) addresses Empire directly in its title and content. The analysis of the game will be twofold. It will involve a discussion of the way in which the developer, Creative Assembly, addresses the notion of empire and portrays the history of nations. Secondly, it will address the ways in which players (re)write this history and many alternative histories. In Creative Assembly’s construction of colonial India in *ETW*, the English are expected to be entrants in the game of building the Indian empire as part of the British campaign: the victory conditions for Britain require the player to “capture and hold 23 regions by the end of the year 1750 *including Hindustan*, Florida, Gibraltar, Iceland, New France, Leeward Islands” (Creative Assembly 2009, italics mine). The mapping of the British Empire involves some set-piece and even “orientalist” conventions as seen in the description of the only playable Indian faction, the Marathas:

Unlike the foreign (in origin) Mughals the Maratha rulers are Indian princes and kings. They know the value of the Indian way of doing things, of the age-old strength of their lands. Their armies may look old fashioned possibly quaint to foreign eyes, but that makes them no less effective. The empire exists solely because it has the military strength to withstand the Mughal threat. (Creative Assembly 2009)

This mapping out of colonial history is somewhat simplistic as it was the Mughals who had been the military masters of India for almost two centuries when the game begins. Phrases such as the “Indian way of doing things” ignore the diversity of cultures in India and have an orientalist ring to them. Moreover, despite the seeming accuracy of the cartographical presentation of early—eighteenth century India, there are many discrepancies. Tea plantations are shown a century ahead of the British discovery of tea in Assam in 1824. Indigo plantations, later the reason for popular outcry, are nowhere to be seen. Despite the initial expanse of the Mughals, there are no Islamic religious centers on the map. Benaras, the holy city of the Hindus, is one of the “great ashrams”—nothing like this existed and ashrams are historically very different institutions. The army types are based on sweeping generalizations that often conflate characteristics of people of very disparate regions and assume that they are present all over the subcontinent. Questions of religion and caste, which were paramount in Indian polity and in how spatial boundaries were conceived, are mostly ignored. A very complex geopolitical situation is thus rendered comfortably simple to portray an entire set of places, resources, and societies through an imperialist (and to use Edward Said’s concept, “orientalist”) lens. The procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007) employed here is to construct the argument for empire through the structured code and gameplay of these games.

As Lammes has already suggested, the ludic medium allows a level of playfulness with the colonial geopolitics. The same notion of play endorsed by imperialists such as Curzon and Rhodes to explore the possibilities of empire also reflects its opposite situation where the game of empire is played *against* them. In response to Creative Assembly’s initial set playing field of empire, there have been player reactions aplenty to upset any status quo notion of empire. What the map of India finally looks like is, effectively, the outcome of player action. In effect, it is the procedural system of the game that allows for contrary positions to

emerge. The “Total War Forum,” full of after-action reports on gameplay instances in *ETW*, is a fitting example. After-action reports (or AARs as they are called) are retrospective analyses of goal-oriented actions; these originated in military culture (Julius Caesar’s commentaries on the Gallic wars are sometimes described as an after-action report) and recently, they have become popular in videogame culture, especially among strategy game players. Often, these AARs describe events that go counter to historical accounts and create their own alternative histories. Alternative History has long been a popular literary genre and *ETW* players add to the genre in their own distinct way. For example, playing as the Maratha empire, it is possible to undermine the historical success of the mighty British Empire and thereby, the entire geopolitics of India. The following AAR taken from “The After Action Reporter” shows counter-history at its extreme:

Empire: Total War is fun, but playing as England, Prussia, France or Spain is a bit easy really. So many provinces, so many troops to build, so much money! So instead of going easy, and to provide an interesting AAR, I unlocked the minor nations and decided to play the Barbary States. Why this rag-tag bunch of North African pirates? For two reasons:

1. I want to play as pirates! Duh!
2. I want to convert Europe to Islam!

...And I also thought it would be quite funny if I could pull it off. Sure enough, it has been amusing, but also really hard. (Tyson 2009)

Extreme as the intentions of the writer may be, this counter-narrative works on multiple levels. First, it poses a reverse-colonization alternative to the conquest of Africa and Asia by the European powers. Secondly, it subverts the intentions and the affordances of the “official” version of the game by unlocking an unplayable faction and devising its own campaign victory conditions. The player’s own experience and intentions thus play an important role in fashioning the empire-spaces in *ETW* and much of the interaction between the perceived space of the player and the conceived space of the map is fashioned imaginatively as the AARs with their detailed narratives reconstructing the action illustrate. One of the correspondents on the Total War forum answers the question “How to win in India?” with Izzard’s sketch cited above and then goes on to

say: “Tried it in game. Was going to work great until I realized Indians [sic] actually do have a flag. Bastards” (Kaamos 2009). The empire-space of the RTS game spills out way beyond the games affordances and the game’s map. It is this personal experience of mapping that Lammes sees the postcolonial reaction being situated in.

“TRANSFORMING THE TERRAIN”: THIRDSPEACE IN *EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR*

So far this chapter has argued that the Lefebvrian “lived space” in the empire-building games is to be found in the player discourses of the AAR and other records of the player’s experience with the game. Following Guenzel’s astute analysis of the shift from perceived to conceived spaces in *Ghost Recon* and the comparison with *ETW*, one can describe the imagined spaces of empire as encountered by players in the way in which they negotiate the spatiality and the geopolitics intended by the developers (as argued here, Creative Assembly, despite giving players much leeway, still provides its own distinct perspective on the history of empire). These imagined spaces are the lived spaces, where the populations in the game’s cities live, trade, carry on their diplomatic negotiations and wars. The player is always also part of these lived spaces as the AARs tell us. In *ETW*, this third space is also intriguing because it is here that often the player faces protest. The developers have coded in a crucial element in the experience of empire: protest. Unhappy populations will riot, send letters of demands and finally, rebel. The population of the cities in *ETW* will also defend their cities as the relative weak and ill-trained armed citizenry. Thus these lived spaces of empire, operating beyond traditional spatial conceptions, are also supplementary in Jacques Derrida’s sense of the word. In the Derridean sense, the supplement “leaves its trace without ever itself being either present or absent and thereby [...] transform[s] the terrain” (Royle 2003: 50).

It is this “transforming of the terrain” that needs to be considered for a fuller understanding of imperialist space in *ETW* and arguably, in the general discourse of empire itself. Poststructuralist geographer Edward Soja revises the notion of spatiality by building on Lefebvre’s notion of the lived space to propose what he calls “thirdspace.” Soja describes thirdspace as “real and imagined spaces.” As Soja further explains:

[T]hirdspace [...] is rooted in just such a recombinatorial and radically open perspective. In what I will call a critical strategy of othering. I try to open up our spatial imaginaries to ways of thinking and acting politically that responds to all binarisms, to any attempt to confine political thought and action to only two alternatives by interjecting an-Other set of choices. In this critical thirding, the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives. (Soja 1996, 5)

In opening up the spatial imaginaries, he also brings to the forefront more marginal spaces and challenges the center-periphery binarisms of the earlier conceptions of empire-space. He then addresses issues of spatiality from Feminist theorists such as bell hooks, Trinh la Minh, and Donna Haraway and postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Bhabha is particularly important as “third space” is a term originally introduced by him to postcolonial studies. For him, Third Space “is a challenge to the limits of the self in the act of reaching out to what is liminal in the historic experience, and in the cultural representation of other peoples, times, languages, texts” (Bhabha 2011, 10). It is a space of negotiation and not one of resolution. Felipe Hernandez links Bhabha’s notion of third space to Soja’s with an important observation: “although Soja has a clear affinity with Bhabha in this respect, [...] he seems only able to do so via the work of artists and other critics who, as such, are already somewhat detached from the ethnic and cultural minorities” (Hernandez 2010, 95). For Hernandez, to understand the effects and issues related to the “thirding” or the “an-Othered” spaces as described by Soja (and implied in Bhabha’s original conception) “consideration should be given to the products of lay people who live, physically and metaphorically, on the periphery or invisibly in the nooks and crannies of contemporary cultures and cities” (Hernandez 2010, 95).

As mentioned in Chap. 1, Said describes the journey that the protagonist of Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* makes to reach what he calls the “heart of Africa” in terms of the European’s gaining imperial mastery of the space:

Yet underlying Marlow’s inconclusiveness, his arabesque meditations on his feelings and ideas, is unrelenting course of the journey itself [...]

Conrad wants us to, see how Kurtz's great looting adventure, Marlow's journey up the river, and the narrative itself all share a common theme: Europeans performing acts of imperial mastery and will in (or about) Africa. (Said 1994, 19)

Here, the straightforward mapping of territory into imperial possession is beginning to be problematized already in Conrad's ambivalent late-nineteenth century account of the imperial attitude and the "redemptive force, as well as the waste and horror, of Europe's mission in the dark world" (ibid.). Going beyond Conrad's postcolonial doubts about the legitimacy of imperialist notions of spatiality, one further struggles with the post-empire experience of thirdspace in the marginalized narratives of working class Indian women in Spivak's essay on Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Douloti the Bountiful':

In this story, Devi offers a harrowing portrayal of a subaltern woman's exploitation in bonded labour and prostitution during the period of colonialism and subsequent national independence in India. In the final scene of this story, Douloti's 'tormented corpse' is depicted as being sprawled across a map of India, drawn by a schoolmaster in a rural village in India, just after independence from the British Empire. Despite the emancipatory promise of national independence, Devi emphasizes how older forms of gender and class-based exploitation – such as bonded labour and prostitution – continue to be practised in postcolonial India. (Morton 2003, 98)

Spivak points out the problems even after the end of the British Empire in India and how decolonization itself becomes a misleading and problematic word when the spaces of the subaltern are considered. She calls it "the space of the displacement of the colonization-decolonization reversal [and...] the space that can become [...] a representation of decolonization as such" (Spivak 2009, 54).

The dead woman sprawled on the map of India is an extremely disturbing image, but it brings to mind other parallels from fiction and popular culture. The one example used in lectures on post colonialism the world over is that of the map of the fictitious Kukuanaland in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1886). The intrepid British adventurers enter a land where the map resembles a woman's body (indeed, the place names such as Sheba's Breasts establish this further). So the possession of land by the colonial powers is indirectly

likened to the possession of a woman's body. However, the image of a woman's body, this time a goddess's, is likewise used in the portrayal of independent India as "Bharat Mata" (or Mother India) where the Indian map is covered by the goddess's body. Devi's story where the unfortunate woman falls dead on the Indian map is perhaps a scathing inversion of this image of the independent nation.

Such maps bring the discussion of spatiality from the second space of cartography simultaneously to the thirdspace of Otherness as described by Soja. The connection between the map and the lived body, subaltern or otherwise, is a deep-rooted one. To examine this issue in terms of the videogame space in *ETW*, it will be useful to return to the question asked earlier about lived space in such empire-building games. When the player constructs a map of her own empire in *ETW*, there is much of the player's imagined spaces in the map and much that reflect issues (such as worker's riots, diplomatic offers, or buildings built) that are not obvious on the cartographic second space. Conceived space itself cannot be understood except in terms of lived space.

However, with the expansionist logic of imperialist space in *ETW* and other RTS games described earlier, the simultaneous space of protest also, arguably, affects the gameplay. Existing on the level of lived space, this is the thirdspace that Soja identifies. As in the writings of Said and Spivak, this thirdspace of protest is a problem in the videogame empires as it is in their real-life counterparts. Again, the concern of a player helpfully illustrates the problem (the description almost reads like an AAR):

So I've taken most of Europe as Sweden and but I keep having money issues from exempting tax from lots of conquered cities and eventually its [sic] still not enough to fund my huge army and stop rebellions. [...] It's just impossible to please the lower class people. How do I stop this from happening? My friend said I should change to a republic or constitutional monarchy but I doubt it will work. (Captainsnake 2009)

The player here is almost giving up on empire and expansion, so great is the problem caused by the protest space on his imperial map. One of the "helpful" responses on the forum, by a respondent called Crinalex, is equally intriguing if one is to consider this as the rationale for empire:

I, also playing as Sweden had the exact problem around the same time. You're getting more and more schools, correct? You're building improved mining facilities and clothes and iron factories. The people who live in the

countries aren't used to such awesome machinery as the one that your country probably is using, and it's costing them their jobs. At the same time, the progress in your schools and the philosophical knowledge is making them angry. Best thing is probably not to upgrade anything that brings down the happiness in the lower classes in awhile [sic], and perhaps let them destroy some of the factories, if they want to. (Crinalex 2009)

This logic runs counter to the redemptive claims that apologists of empire tend to make and it involves not taking technology and education to the colonies. Incidentally, the railway and the telegraph were held as partly responsible for creating the distrust that led to the Indian revolt of 1857 against the East India Company rule and it was the Western-educated elite who started the Indian National Congress. There is no way of knowing whether Crinalex's recommendation worked as the foolproof solution for the Swedish empire in *ETW*; however, it is clear that protest (as the players' conversation above shows) and armed resistance (as encountered by the player who had recommended the Eddie Izzard tactic for conquering India) work greatly toward any comprehension of spatiality in empire-building games.

As stated earlier, alternative history-making also contributes to the challenge to empire. Almost as a postcolonial response, it is possible for players from erstwhile colonized countries to defeat their historical colonizers in *ETW* and thereby challenge imperialist historiography with the alternative discourses from the RTS games. However, in doing so, they also adopt the same expansionist logic of empire that was posited by the real-life colonial powers. It cannot be denied, however, that within every such effort at expansion, whether real-life or in-game, there is an ineluctable element of the "Other" space as Soja and others point out.

As Spivak observes in her postcolonial critique, decolonizing is a problematic concept in the sense that the displacement of the colonizing powers from the colonized space still involves a logic that is similar to that used by empire. Further, the "othered" space of protest always exists simultaneously as a "thirthing" to the spatiality of expansion as understood by empire. In the videogame, too, the ejection of the colonizing faction from one's territory involves the same military process and this might be augmented with further expansion on the now-independent nation, which in turn starts reconfiguring space according to its territorial demands. Lived space is always part of this schema; in the case of a "thirthing," the marginal space emerges as a protest space and

often, one sees in *ETW* that rebels have taken over a city—i.e., declared it independent. Mostly, the now independent city either forms a new faction or gets assimilated into some other larger state with imperialist ambitions of its own. Further, as Spivak argues, the space of the subaltern Other can also exist as one that is voiceless and in strategy games, the conquered populations that are killed off, enslaved, or converted (in *Age of Empires* the priest/mage performs the conversion).

“NO END TO EMPIRE?”: OTHER VIDEOGAMES GENRES AND THE SPACES OF EMPIRE

Following the game’s logic, there is no end to empire and its extent; yet, the spatial expansion is always accompanied by the thirdspace of protest. The empire-building strategy games serve as a case study for how spatial themes connected to empire and post colonialism are represented in videogames. Some of these themes can also be observed in other genres of videogames as has been indicated earlier. Consider, for example as disparate a game as *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin*. In the game, the protagonist Agent 47 must infiltrate the Golden Temple in Amritsar (the holiest shrine of the Sikh religion) in order to eliminate the leader of a religious cult. Chakraborti observes:

The Golden Temple becomes the exotic location where the future of the Indian nation is to be determined through western intervention. India, far from being a sovereign nation, becomes a destination to which the [W]estern agent must travel in order to ensure the destiny of the Indian nation. (Chakraborti 2015, 195)

In a similarly intriguing example, the Western dominance over colonial videogame spaces is best seen in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward 2011) where a level is set in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Very strangely, as the Americans and the Russians battle it out in the middle of an Indian city, the entire Indian army seems to be absent! Such an erasure when defining colonial spaces may be surprising but it is also symptomatic.

There are further examples of straightforward orientalism. Vit Sisler argues that the videogames such as the *Prince of Persia* series construct “the Middle East as a place without history” (Sisler 2011), a realm of the *Thousand and One Nights* with “caliphs, Bedouins, djinns, belly

dancers and Oriental *topoi* such as deserts, minarets, bazaars and harems” (ibid.). Chakraborti also points out the historical inaccuracy of the locale of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*: “The architectural setting of the siege of the Indian city shows Islamic influences, including minarets and rounded cupolas, but the storyline nonetheless asserts a Hindu kingdom” (Chakraborti 2015, 189). Sisler observes the stark shift from such fantasy orientalism to a faux-real setting in videogames that depict modern-day Middle-Eastern countries and points to how the region is “a favourite battle-ground” in videogames; for example, *Full Spectrum Warrior* is set in the fictional but overtly Muslim country of “Tazikhstan, a haven for terrorists and extremists” (Leonard and King 2009).

The perceived and conceived spaces in these cases are seemingly meant to follow a Western mapping but it is in the “thirling” that conflicts keep emerging. For example, the ambiguity of *Heart of Darkness* has been reflected in *Far Cry 2* and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012)—both of these games that remediate Marlow’s journey in Conrad’s novel into the space that is shown as linear and increasingly darker. The darkness is not merely physical. The search for the antagonist takes place in psychological space as well as physical space and just as Marlow and Captain Willard from the film *Apocalypse Now*, the player in these games while moving in the space of colonization (whether it be Africa in *Far Cry 2* or post-apocalyptic Dubai in *Spec Ops*), moves toward madness. The ambiguity of the colonial spaces lies in the consciousness of exploitation versus the belief that the colonial intervention is amelioratory in nature. Although neither of the games are set in an overtly colonial setting, the context clearly assumes the former interference by a foreign nation. In *Far Cry 2*, this has resulted in civil war and the trade in weapons and blood diamonds; in *Spec Ops: The Line*, it is US intervention in the Middle-East. The latter’s title also indicates the crossing of a threshold space. The “line” crossed may be that between sanity and insanity as the protagonist quests to rescue his Kurtz-like mentor (ironically named Konrad in the game), but the “line” is also that between exploitation and enlightenment—just as Said describes in his assessment of *Heart of Darkness*.

If the gameplay experience of these two games aim to incorporate the same ambiguity that Conrad sees in Marlow, what about those players who occupy these spaces as the colonized or the formerly colonized? What about the an-Othered space that Soja addresses? Lammes’s description of the personal experience of space is also important here. Rhonda Roumani articulates the concern of Middle-Eastern game developers:

‘Most video games on the market are anti-Arab and anti-Islam,’ says Radwan Kasmiya, executive manager of the Syrian company Afkar Media. ‘Arab gamers are playing games that attack their culture, their beliefs, and their way of life. The youth who are playing the foreign games are feeling guilt.’ (Roumani 2006)

Players from erstwhile colonies may have similar reactions to playing out the imperial vision of a Curzon, Rhodes, or American imperialism on the maps of their countries. In the case of Afkar Media, of course, the reaction is to reverse the agents and re-conceptualize the space of conflict:

A different approach to the topic of self-representation can be found in the Syrian game *Tahta al-Ramad* or *Under Ash* (Afkar Media 2002) which deals with the First Intifada. The game is unusually emotional in the way that it presents players with a story starting with the Palestinians’ conflict with Israeli soldiers at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The first mission introduces the main hero, Ahmad, in a demonstration. The Palestinians throw stones at the Israeli soldiers who answer with rifle shots, and the scene is full of shouting, shooting and moaning of the wounded. The player’s task is to get out of the demonstration alive; then the story goes on into the classic scheme of action games with the hero joining the Palestinian resistance. (Šisler 2008)

Other kinds of reactions are the conception of space as absurd in the voiceless understanding of the city of Kayamgadh finding which is the objective of the player of *Somewhere*, described in Chap. 1. In *Somewhere* the alternative to challenging the colonial and orientalist construction of space is voicelessness and silence. Where, in the *Call of Duty* example or similar ones, the Indians are absent from their own space, in *Somewhere*, the absence is of the space itself.

Whether there is a direct engagement with imperialism as in either *Under Ash* or *Somewhere*, the problem nevertheless comes to the forefront. In describing the spaces of empire, videogames have defined them within a homogenous code—the affordances of the machine code reflect globally dominant cultural codes. As Alexander Galloway comments about *Civilization*: “‘History’ in *Civilization* is precisely the opposite of history, not because the game fetishizes the imperial perspective, but because the diachronic details of lived life are replaced by the synchronic homogeneity of code pure and simple” (Galloway 2006, 102). The lived space of the peripheral and the invisible is easily ignored in the global all-pervading narratives of empire.

CONCLUSION: EMPIRE DETERRITORIALIZED AND RETERRITORIALIZED

In the context of global notions of empire, it is tempting to bring in Hardt and Negri's much-debated concept of Empire, already mentioned in Chap. 1. For them, Empire presents the paradigmatic form of "biopower," a concept borrowed from Michel Foucault, which "refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself" (Hardt and Negri 2001, 24). Within such a theoretical framework, "Empire does not have any boundaries and it operates on registers of social order; it not only regulates human interactions but also seeks to rule over human nature" (ibid.). Thus in their attempt to represent the age of empire and the corresponding conception of spatiality, one can argue that games like *ETW* end up doing much more and tend to resemble such a uniform notion of global Empire. As has been pointed out already, however, Hardt and Negri's concept has been criticized for the "smoothness" in its thinking of global empire. Here, although the appeal of their concept of empire continuing into the present and pervading global discourses is recognized, the differences in the experience of empire in different regions and communities is to be kept in mind. As a challenge to Empire, Hardt and Negri also posit a universal concept of "the multitude" that will resist and reorganize the processes of empire to create a counter-empire, or an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges that will "deterritorialize" empire on its very own imperial terrain. Moving away from Hardt and Negri's universality of Empire, their identification of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization as key processes in understanding empire is, nevertheless, of major importance.

To simplify a many-faceted and rather complex concept, deterritorialization is "a capacity to take any actual thing and translate it into a movement of flow [...] but deterritorialization, which relies on an initial territorialization, is also accompanied by reterritorialization [...] which] arrests its tendency to produce and open flows by quantifying all exchange" (Colebrook 2001, 65). Sara Upstone, writing about the representation of colonial space in postcolonial writing, states that the postcolonial writer "does not accept absolute space as a reality: rather, he or she reveals the sense of an overwritten chaos" and this is a "three-fold process, colonial space is acknowledged, rejected, and then re-made."

To explain this, Upstone invokes “Deleuze and Guattari’s argument for the power of this multiplicitous, fluid, and moving space which strikes at the core of the structure of the state and, more importantly, is explicitly anti-colonial—a ‘nomadism’ that is ‘deterritorialized par excellence’ and subversive as ‘it is the vital concern of every State not only to vanquish nomadism but to control migrations’” (Upstone 2009, 146–147). In the videogame, too, a similar threefold spatiality can be seen. For the real and the imagined spaces posited in the game, there is also the lived space of experience that is conveyed through records of gameplay experiences such as AARs and Let’s Plays. To the hegemonic understanding of homogenously coded spaces, there are alternatives constructed by subverting that code via mods or spin-offs (the *ETW* mod and *Under Ash* serve as examples) and there is the subsequent re-coding and reimagining of the space. Even as the hints of protest located in the unplayable interstices of the games, such as the rebellions and workers’ strikes in *ETW*, or even the metaphorical spaces of periphery such as the guilt of the players engaging with the imperial construction of space, the “thirthing” occurs as a negotiation where colonial spatiality is challenged. This deterritorialization is the process whereby the fixities and the homogeneities of colonialism are replaced by a flow of the experiences of the Other. In terms of understanding how spatiality is perceived, conceived, and lived within the framework of empire, it is imperative to take into account the spaces of protest which, as the an-Other space that Soja describes, deterritorialize imperialist space by highlighting problems within the construction of such a space; however, this is always accompanied by a reterritorialization that closes off the flows of the marginal protest space and fixes an order of spatiality that is akin to the previous logic of imperialist space.

Games with their huge possibility-spaces allow for many different ways in which one can (re)play the logic of empire. Together with the logic of imperialist expansion as designed by the developers through their victory conditions and other elements of gameplay, there is always the reconfiguring of space as embodied by the possibilities of alternative history, in-game opposition from the AI or other players and also the element of protest from within the lived thirdspace in the game. In the replaying of the game, however, this reconfigured space itself becomes the norm, the process continues and it might be argued that the replaying of *Empire: Total War* illustrates the replaying of empire itself.

NOTES

1. In 1905, Lord Curzon, the viceroy of India, passed the resolution to partition the Province of Bengal into two parts, East Bengal and West Bengal. This was ostensibly done for administrative reasons but it is well-known that the East had a Muslim majority whereas the Western part had more Hindus.
2. According to Guenzel, Poland was divided into two between the German and Russian governments in the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between the Nazi government and Stalin.

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