Tampereen yliopisto

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CONFLICTING PRIORITIES
The Depiction of Colonialism in *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire*

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan, miten tietokoneroolipeli *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire* (2018) kuvaa ja käsittelee kolonialismia. Tutkimuksen taustateoriana toimii jälkikoloniaalinen kirjallisuudentutkimus ja jälkikoloniaalinen pelitutkimus. Peliä tutkittiin sen pelimekaniikkojen, tarinankerronnan ja kansojen luonnehdinnan kannalta. Työn tavoitteena on edistää fantasian ja roolipelin genreihin kohdistettua jälkikoloniaalista kritiikkiä, jota on suhteessa niiden suosioon ja yleisyyteen hyvin vähän.

Koska kaupankäyntiin ja ympäristön riistämiseen liittyvät mekaniikat ovat pelissä rajoitetummat kuin monissa muissa roolipeleissä, peli välttää näihin liittyvät kolonialistiset kliseet. Toisaalta kartoittamiseen, haudanryöstämiseen ja seikkailuun liittyvät kliseet ovat vahvasti näkyvissä. Pelin juonelliset tehtävät käsittelevät kolonialismia hyvin harvoin. Kolonialismin teema tulee eniten esille tehtävässä, jossa pelaaja määrätään auttamaan orjakauppiaita, mutta koska pelaaja voi sivuuttaa tehtävän ja silti ongelmitta jatkaa yhteistyötä tehtävän antaneen kauppakomppanian kanssa, tehtävän sanoma jää heikoksi ja epäselväksi.

Pelin kansojen luonnehdintaa ja toiseuttamista tutkittiin analysoimalla kahta ryhmää: pelin tapahtumapaikan alkuperäiskansaa nimeltä Huana ja heimoissa elävien lisko-olentojen lajia nimeltä xaurip. Huanoja toiseutetaan, ja heidän kuvauksensa muistuttaa ns. jaloa villiä, mutta heitä ei demonisoida. Xauripit puolestaan perustuvat melkein pelkästään kolonialistisiin stereotyyppeihin, ja he toimivat pelissä lähes ainoastaan vihollisina, joiden kanssa pelaaja ei voi puhua. Pelin ainoaa ystävällistä xauripia kohdellaan enemmänkin lemmikkinä kuin henkilönä.

Pelin tarinan mahdolliset eri epilogit kuvaavat kolonialismin ja uudisasutuksen haittavaikutuksia paljon enemmän kuin sen muut osat, mutta haittojen rinnalla on lähes aina jonkinlainen niitä vähättelevä tai haastava narratiivi. Alkuperäiskansa kuvataan antoisassa yhteistyössä uudisasuttajien kanssa, ja kolonialismi kuvataan jopa positiivisena ilmiönä. Pelin voittaminen ilman siirtomaakonfliktiin osallistumista johtaa synkempään epilogiin kuin kolonisaation edesauttaminen. Pelin epilogit arvottavat pelaajan päättämättömyyden ja siitä syntyvän kaaoksen kolonialismia haitallisemmaksi.

Asiasanat: *Pillars of Eternity 2*, pelattavuus, ryöstäminen, kartoittaminen, toiseuttaminen, jalo villi

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I analyze how the fantasy role-playing video game *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire* (2018) handles and depicts the issues of colonialism and colonization. I examined the colonialist tropes visible in the gameplay and certain groups in the game, and analyzed how the game's colonizer faction questline and its endings depict colonization. To do this, I used the theoretical framework of postcolonial criticism, drawing also from works of postcolonial game studies.

Resource extraction and trade, two gameplay elements predisposed to colonial ideology, are more limited than in many other role-playing games, but other gameplay elements such as the looting of ruins and burial mounds are common parts of gameplay, implemented with no consideration of colonialist tropes and the setting. On the side of narrative gameplay, the questlines of the colonizer factions rarely discuss the topic of colonalism, with most of the quests being unrelated to colonization. The greatest exception to this, a quest that tasks the player with assisting slavers, is undermined by the lack of consequences for disobeying orders.

Considering the othering of different groups in the game, I focused on two examples: the thesis argues that the tribal, indigenous-coded Huana lean into the noble savage trope but are not demonized, whereas the lizardlike, tribal xaurips are mired in colonial visual stereotypes, and exist only as violent obstacles for the player, with the only friendly xaurip characterized more akin to a pet than a person.

The game's endings mention a number of real effects of colonization, but also present narratives that downplay the issue in different ways. The prosperous cooperation of the Huana with the colonizer is a recurring theme, as is the possibility of benevolent colonization. Ending the game without assisting any faction is depicted as more harmful than working for the colonizers, portraying chaos and indecision as a greater evil than colonialism.

Keywords: *Pillars of Eternity 2*, gameplay, looting, mapping, othering, noble savage

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1. Introduction

Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire is a 2018 role-playing video game developed by Obsidian Entertainment. The game, which is set in a tropical fantasy setting of the Deadfire Archipelago, consists of combat, dialogue, and exploration, on foot and on a ship. In addition to several smaller side quests, the game has two major questlines: a main storyline with apocalyptic stakes and a focus on grand concepts such as gods and metaphysics, and the technically optional set of faction questlines focused on more mundane questions of politics, power, and colonialism. Both questlines culminate at Ukaizo, a mysterious lost island surrounded by constant storms.

In the latter questlines, the player is given the option to work for one of the four factions of the game, three of which are connected to the topic of colonialism and thus relevant to this thesis: the Huana, the native tribal culture of the archipelago, consisting mainly of the nonhuman species of aumaua; the Vailian Trading Company, a majority-human trading group visibly inspired by the East India Company, with plans to take over the region for means and reasons very neocolonial; and the Royal Deadfire Company, a paramilitary arm of the aumaua empire of Rauatai, aiming to absorb the region for the purposes of producing and shipping food and other natural resources to the barren Rauatai mainland, which suffers from constant brutal storms.

There are currently no academic studies on *Pillars of Eternity 2*, and though the previous game, *Pillars of Eternity*, has been mentioned in at least two articles, neither discuss themes relevant for this thesis. The amount of postcolonial critique on video games is also limited. In his 2017 book, Souvik Mukherjee notes: "there has been very little scholarship on post-colonial perspectives on gaming in almost two decades of game studies research" (1) Now, enough scholarship does exist for "postcolonial game studies" to be something one can refer to, but the field has large blindspots. This is doubly true when focusing on the role-playing game genre. When role-playing games are discussed in Mukherjee's book, the focus tends to be on wider issues of race and the subaltern, not genre conventions. Michael Fuchs et al.'s analysis and critique of the Bioware

role-playing games is the main work focused on colonialist ideology in role-playing games used in this thesis. This lack of current writing on the topic is also why I consider the questions of the thesis to be relevant and significant: the amount of writing on the topic is not in proportion with how popular and prevalent the fantasy and role-playing genres are in today's media landscape, and how much there is to interrogate in these genres.

In this thesis, I will analyze the way the game portrays colonialism, considering both the story elements and the colonial tropes visible in the gameplay. The thesis argues that both the writing and the gameplay design of the game treat the subject of colonialism as an issue of secondary importance, with the inclusion of colonialist tropes in different parts of the game with no consideration, and with colonialism characterized inconsistently, and often in a downplaying manner.

I will start by considering how the gameplay elements of *Pillars of Eternity 2* reject or follow colonialist tropes, and how the different mainstay mechanics of role-playing games are handled in the game. I will move on to looking at the player's role in the narrative parts of the game, and consider what the player, when working for either colonizer faction, is tasked with doing. Then I will consider the depiction and othering of groups in the game, with a focus on two groups: the indigenous-coded Huana culture and the tribal species of hostile creatures called xaurips. Finally, I will consider the game's attitude or stance on colonialism by analyzing the game's different endings and their depiction of the effects of colonization.

As the subject of the thesis is the depiction of colonialism and colonialist tropes, the main theoretical frameworks of the thesis are postcolonial criticism and postcolonial game studies. I will draw from works describing or applying both and point to relevant examples of tropes in the game.

2. Postcolonial criticism and postcolonial game studies

As the thesis is centered around issues of colonialist and imperialist ideology and analyzes a video game both on the levels of story and gameplay, the main theoretical frameworks or avenues of study relevant to the text are postcolonial criticism and its counterpart in game studies, postcolonial game studies.

Postcolonial criticism, as understood in this thesis, is a critical framework that, as Lois Tyson puts it, "seeks to understand the operations . . . of colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies" (418). Soraya Murray describes the framework as "deconstructing the colonizing impulse and its rationalizations evidenced in cultural manifestations in the arts, humanities, and sciences" (5). Tyson describes this colonialist ideology as an assumption of the colonizer's total general and cultural superiority over the colonized (419). Tyson also notes that the theoretical framework can be applied to works not written by the colonized, because "colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies can be present in any literary text" (418).

According to Murray, the field of postcolonial game studies is about "examining games whose form, content and affordance engage with the postcolonial condition; or which engage in neocolonial ideologies" (5). In summarizing a number of works of postcolonial game studies, Murray refers to two levels of postcolonial analysis applicable to games, which are relevant to this thesis: the analysis of "story-level problems of neoliberal, neo-Orientalist, and colonizing values that come across through textual reading" and the analysis of "the very form of games", meaning the "game mechanics and rule-based systems" and "the way in which the aforementioned values are built into their substrates" (11). Thus, games have two different "mediums" for exhibiting post- or neocolonial ideologies: in addition to the story level in games, which can include implicit or explicit pro- or postcolonial views, the way a game works mechanically, how it plays and how it simulates reality, may also be a vessel for values and worldviews.

In the case of this thesis, the focus is mostly on the conventions and colonial implications of the role-playing game genre. It is a genre rife with tropes and conventions to analyze from this perspective and, in fact, Michael Fuchs et al. trace its lineage to colonial adventure stories, stories that allow for the experience of continued colonial exploration when there are no uncharted parts of the Earth left (1477).

Considering the gameplay conventions of the genre, Fuchs et al. mention mapping, looting, and the extraction of resources as game elements with colonialist baggage: "As the player directs the imperial gaze (Kaplan) toward exploitable resources (e.g., searching or scanning), they engage in imperialist acts of taking possession (e.g., mapping and naming), and/or establish (or help establish) new nodes of imperial control (e.g, camps, trading posts, and garrisons)" (1482). They make a point of the way "video game adventures . . . interconnect the exploration of unknown spaces with mapping" and argue that "adventures are inextricably interrelated with imperialist practices, as cartography was key to empire building" (1483). They also see looting, especially of the long dead and indigenous people, as an element inseparable from the colonial adventure genre: discussing an example from a different game, Fuchs et al. connect the looting of elven graves to "the well-worn treasure hunter trope characteristic of adventures . . ." (1492). Fuchs et al. do not only regard the gameplay or fantasy of exploration as colonialist but also note that the places the player character comes from or returns to often function as "node[s] of imperial power" (1482).

Othering is a widely used term in postcolonial analysis, central to this thesis at the level of story analysis. Tyson describes the phenomenon of othering as the "practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human" (420). Tyson sees othering as the division of the world into a civilized "us" and a savage "them", a classification that diminishes and – often but not necessarily – demonizes the other (420). Tyson also writes of a phenomenon where this "savage other" is regarded as somehow noble, through their connection with nature (420). Fuchs et al. describe an example of this as being "in the vein of the noble savage trope" (1490).

While othering is a term not specific to the postcolonial analysis of games, the way it occurs in games may differ from other genres. Leigh Schwartz, in discussing othering from the perspective of postcolonial game studies, points out that videogames often represent "geographical ideas" through "equating fantasy cultures to real-life cultures, to real-life cultural traditions such as 'Eastern' or 'Western'", adding that in video games these representations are often condensed into caricatures (318).

On the topic of othering and caricatures, the thesis also draws from Mika Loponen's study on prejudice in the fantastic arts. Although Loponen's text uses the framework of semiotics and not postcolonial analysis, I find it very useful for this thesis, because it analyzes the colonial and racial stereotypes and tropes common to the fantasy genre, including video games. A core concept of Loponen's text, "semiospheric containment", can be connected both to othering and Fuchs et al.'s ideas about the colonialist roots of the role-playing game genre. Loponen argues that the use of "racial imagery and racist stereotypes" has declined in general culture and literature, but such unacceptable tropes and images have persisted in fantasy, becoming "signs and jargon of the genres" (26). In addition, discussing genre elements that carry "racist or racial undertones", Loponen mentions "orcs, goblins, gnomes, and dwarves presented as the other or abjectified monstrous others" (3). He also points out that the phenomenon of semiospheric containment – the protective layer of genre that is applied to elements carrying otherwise unsavory tropes – can function without specific pre-existing fantasy objects or entities (27).

Using this theoretical background, it is now time to analyze the primary material.

3. Colonialism in gameplay and narrative

The questions of what the player does, both in the narrative and divorced from it, to whom the player does these things, what these actions lead to, and how the consequences are expressed, are all relevant for understanding the game from a postcolonial perspective.

I will analyze the game's gameplay elements by contrasting them to Fuchs et al.'s descriptions of colonialist tropes in the gameplay of the genre, and then examine whether the colonial questlines of the game discuss or question the issue of colonialism. I will then consider the othering of two tribal groups in the game by comparing them to tropes and phenomena discussed in the theory section, before examining several recurring narratives in the game's endings in an effort to understand the game's view of colonialism.

3.1. Exploration and quests

While set in an environment and political setting very distinct from most role-playing games, the general gameplay loop of *Pillars of Eternity 2* leans into very common fantasy role-playing tropes, such as exploration, looting, and mapping. In a setting so explicit in depicting colonialism, the inclusion and handling of these tropes, which Fuchs et al. consider rooted in colonialism, risks making the gameplay colonial even on the surface.

For the most part, the game avoids the colonialist gameplay trope of extracting resources from the environment. The player can pick fruit and collect fresh water to feed their crew, but further resource extraction mechanics common to the genre, such as the mining of rare metals, are absent. In a similar vein, instead of a static home base, the player has a ship. While the choice to forgo the keep of *Pillars of Eternity* in favor a ship makes sense even purely from the perspective of the setting and swashbuckling fantasy of *Pillars of Eternity 2*, it also avoids many issues inherent to the keep.

While a ship could still function as the "node of imperial power" Fuchs et al. describe, it does not transform the player into a colonial landowner, a colonial force in their own right, as an island or a fortress would. The lack of a real, robust trading system also bars the player from many forms of exploitation that the image of a western-style ship in a colonial setting might evoke.

Similarly, while the player can buy more ships of different designs, these never turn into a fleet: the player's naval power is always limited to a single, personally captained ship.

Yet, while the gameplay of *Pillars of Eternity 2* places considerably less emphasis on the extraction of resources and the construction of a stronghold compared to its predecessor, it is still very focused on exploration, and the mechanics and framing of this exploration are very uncritical of colonialist ideology. For example, the plundering of ancient indigenous ruins is present not only as a key part of the main questline, but also as optional side content. The game world of the archipelago is littered with islands, many of which have ruins and burial sites for the player to explore and loot.

The practise of cartography, not completely free from its imperialist connotations, is also an element in the game: each new area the player enters is represented by a blank map the player fills through exploration. The general gameplay loop of the game, outside of the more dialogue-oriented areas of the game, amounts to filling in a map through exploring, "clearing", and looting the area. This loop is visible at its purest in the one part of the game where cartography becomes diegetic: the game has a set of side quests where the player seeks out, explores, and then names uncharted islands. To complete the exploration of an island, the player is generally required to go to every location on the island, many of them ancient ruins, and kill any enemies present there. These enemies are often the "wilders": intelligent creatures that sometimes even live in tribes. The act of mapping, then, becomes the act of going to an island, killing the native inhabitants of that island, looting whatever indigenous ruins or burial sites may be present there, and then giving this "newfound" island a name. None of this comes off as deliberately grim or something the player is meant to feel uneasy with. The quest giver for the mapping quests is a young and excited independent cartographer, not working for any of the main factions of the game. The end reward of naming every one of the uncharted islands is a book called "The Explorer's Guide to the Deadfire Archipelago", described in the game as "an account" of the player's "adventures in those most

distant and perilous isles. . .”. This side of the game's gameplay appears as an extension of the "treasure hunter trope" Fuchs et al. mention: a general trope or fantasy of "adventurers" or "explorers" that carries in it a lot of implicit colonialist ideas and impulses.

On the generally non-narrative gameplay level of the game, we can see that the player's actions, regardless of chosen faction, can lean very heavily into seemingly unintended colonialist tropes. In contrast, the narrative part of the game, when siding with either colonial group, is mostly disconnected from the issue of colonialism. The factions' questlines consist largely of competition and sabotage between the rival colonizers, along with errands that advance a faction's interests in the region somewhat indirectly. Although following either colonizer faction's questline to its conclusion will see that faction victorious over the region, only a very few of these quests reflect on or even simply depict the evils of colonialism.

Likely the worst thing the player is tasked with doing in service of a colonial power takes place in the Vailian Trading Company questline. The company's director tasks the player with assisting a group of slavers to secure a business relationship between the trading company and the slavers. The player is ordered to assassinate the leaders of a lone Huana tribe. The task and its aims are genuinely reprehensible, but the message is somewhat undercut by the result of disobeying the order: opting to free the slaves and kill every slaver on their home base of Crookspur, either before the quest or during it, does not harm the player's relationship with the company as the player is merely rewarded a slightly smaller amount of positive reputation with the faction. An equivalent quest on the side of the Royal Deadfire Company tasks the player with killing the slavers: the colonialist Rauatai empire is explicitly characterized as being against slavery. On the side of the Deadfire Company, the only real task consisting of violence against the Huana is the faction's final mission, which sees the player assassinating the leader of the Huana.

3.2. Othering the enemy

Besides the gameplay of *Pillars of Eternity 2*, the other part of the game to consider from the perspective of colonial tropes is the depiction and othering of groups and cultures.

The Huana, the main indigenous inhabitants of Deadfire Archipelago, are a group of tribes made up mostly of aumaua, a species of tall humanoid beings with some fishlike characteristics. The Huana are not generally demonized by the game, but the Huana are, and function in the game as, an other: they are strongly coded as indigenous in overall visual design, drawing inspiration from real-life Pacific Island cultures, up and including their skin, the natural patterns of which, while being visually distinct from, at least evoke the Maori Tā moko tattoos. In addition, they are shown to be less technologically advanced than the two colonial forces, but also in some ways more attuned to nature, having shamans capable of manipulating the stormy weathers of the region, shielding villages from the elements, or weaponizing the natural forces against their enemies. This nature connection could be seen as invoking what Tyson describes as a "'primitive' beauty or nobility born of a closeness to nature", or what Fuchs et al. refer to as "the noble savage".

The Huana culture is also strongly different from those of their colonizers, as well as real-world western culture in general: their culture is generally collectivist instead of individualist, and based on a cruel caste system that in times of scarcity starves the members of the lowest caste. I would argue that this unjust system, most likely alien to the player, exists to make supporting the Huana less uncomplicated a choice, while also working as a source of otherness.

In both their visual design and culture, the Huana seem to, in the sense argued by Schwartz above, be equated to a vague non-western cultural tradition in contrast to the clearly western-inspired Vailians. To some degree, this othered sense of "non-western-ness" also applies to the Royal Deadfire Company: the other aumaua culture, an expansionist empire with a strong navy of Chinese-style ships and a mastery of gunpowder, seems to invoke a set of tropes and fears about the East.

The ending slideshow depicting Rauataian victory echoes the colonialist ideology of technological advancement but is also tinged with ominous mentions of "dispassionate Rauataian efficiency", "Rauataian unity and striving" and talk of a shared purpose. Similar to the Huana, the Rauataians do not fall into the category of complete stereotype or demonized other, but they do function as an other.

However, the question of othering in *Pillars of Eternity 2* does not end with the Huana and Rauatai. The wilders, the "uncivilized races" of the game world, are very much worth analyzing from the viewpoint of othering. It would be wrong to claim that the wilders are given no hint of complexity: a handful of characters and quests present the wilders as essentially human, and some passages of in-game writing make the in-world distinction between the wilders and the civilized races (also called the "kith") seem very artificial. Yet, at the same time, the vast majority of the wilders are hostile, placed in the role of the enemy in combat encounters on otherwise uninhabited islands. A good example of this is the xaurip: a species of lizardlike wilders that live in tribes. The xaurips are shown using weapons, wearing clothes, and having a culture of sorts. Yet, aside from one exception, their function in the game is to be killed or, in some cases, avoided by the player's party. The xaurips, though essentially intelligent beings capable of communication, society, and culture, are never spoken to and rarely even named.

The one exception to the xaurips' role as an obstacle that attacks the player on sight, is Mother Sharp-Rock, a fearful xaurip shunned by her tribe. The player can hire a few differently named wilders to be a part of their ship's crew, and Mother is the only hireable xaurip crewmate in the game. However, unlike the other wilder crewmates, who are hired by going to a port and who require wages just like any kith crewmates, Mother is rescued from a cage in a cave full of hostile xaurips, and she does not require wages, only eating the ship's food. Doing the good deed and helping Mother even counts as kindness towards animals in the game's reputation system, which can raise a certain party member's opinion of the player character. Mother is a creature that uses

tools and lives in communities and has a culture, and yet, in the eyes of the game, she is essentially a pet, not a person.

In addition, unlike the Huana whose visual design invokes real-world indigenous cultures in a somewhat respectful manner, the xaurips' visuals are pure shorthand, representing a generic stereotype of "tribal culture": the xaurip wear clothes of bone and leather, wooden masks and warpaint. They carry spears tipped with large animal claws, and their priest's wear masks of what looks to be a horned skull, with large feathers that evoke the image of Native American war bonnets. Their visual design never strays beyond what Loponen refers to as "signifiers of tribal imagery used in colonial imagery" (72).

While the Huana are othered to a degree, and in some ways lean in the direction of the "noble savage" trope, their depiction is somewhat restrained, and much more so than the depiction of wilders. I would argue the difference between the othering of the two groups stems from their different roles in the game, and from how those roles allow for different amounts of shorthand. The Huana are essentially people: their role in the game is to be characters, to exist in the narrative and dialogue-focused parts of the game. The tropes are used to signify their role as the colonized and as the other, but only to a degree. The wilders, on the other hand, generally exist to populate wilderness areas with enemies that are not simply animals or monsters. Their connection to the narrative parts of the game is very limited. While the xaurip are not strictly a pre-existing fantasy creature with colonial or racial genre backage the way the orcs and goblins discussed in Loponen's study are, the general recurring concept of "tribal" (enemy) others, along with the use of surface-level stereotypical "tribal" imagery on role-playing game enemy creatures, is a common fantasy trope.

3.3. The effects of colonialism and the player's choices

Now that we have a grasp of the colonial tropes in the game's gameplay and characters and have

noticed the limited attention given to the issue in the game's questlines, it is time to examine how

colonialism and colonization are described in the game. A good method for gauging the game's

attitude towards the events and actions it depicts is to consider how those events and their results

are described. This is most visible in the game's ending slides, which are sets of short texts that

depict the effects and consequences of the player's choices on the places and characters of the story.

One can point to several different narratives and attitudes these endings exhibit.

One common element in the ending slides of the two colonialist factions is the

downplaying of the harm. The Vailian Trading Company's ending slides include a section that

describes some Huana profiting from the trading company while others lose their lands, followed by

a perplexing comment, "but for many, life continues much as it had before." The ending

acknowledges the stealing of land as a result of colonialism but surrounds this acknowledgement

with a point about colonialism benefiting some of the colonized, and another one about colonization

not really having an effect on many a colonized person's life. Similarly, the equivalent ending for

the Royal Deadfire Company depicts the cultural colonization of the Huana by the Rauatai,

describing the replacement of Huana architechture and infrastructure with those of the Rauatai, and

splitting the Huana into those who assimilate into the colonizer's culture and prosper, and those

who mourn the death of their culture and way of life. A real effect of colonialism is presented,

juxtaposed with a naive description of some of the colonized thriving under new rule.

The idea of profiting or prospering under the control of the colonizers also leads into

another major recurring narrative in the ending slides: the narrative of fruitful cooperation of the

Huana with the Vailian Trading Company. Repeatedly in the game and in the endings for the trading

company, the Huana are described as profiting from the Vailian presence. In one case, the Vailian

Trading Company's dominion over the archipelago is the only scenario where a Huana settlement

can even continue to exist, with the non-Vailian versions of the slides describing the community either "fragmenting and scattering" or just leaving.

And yet, these endings seem to ignore the nature of the relationship: the Company's operations are extractive and colonialist in nature. The positive portrayal of the Huana working for the Vailians is a confusing choice when placed next to the ending slides speaking of land theft and the extraction of the region's natural resources.

Much of this is also connected to another major message or narrative of the Vailian Trading Company endings: the idea of "better" or even "good" forms of colonialism. Central to the Vailian Trading Company's questline and endings is the attempted ousting and replacement of the company's current director, Ignato Castol. The player can choose to either defend Castol in front of the company's board of directors or let him be replaced. This decision leads into two very different endings for the trading company. Under Castol, the company becomes the dominant permanent power in the Deadfire and makes great developments in technology through studying ancient arcane machinery found at Ukaizo. The director's replacement, however, massively accelerates the harvesting of resources with an intent to leave once the region has been drained of its riches, creating a momentary economic boom through large-scale harvesting operations and a future power vacuum in the region, a situation that echoes the real-life end results of extractive imperialism. This choice between directors and forms of colonialism is essentially one between a "good" and a "bad" form of colonialism. Thus, the game seems to posit that there can be a be a better form of colonialism, or even a good, net positive one. This goes hand in hand with the recurring portrayal of Huana cooperation as being beneficial to them, something that in many cases only occurs or is portrayed as continuing if the player manages to save Castol's position. The message of these endings is also further muddled by the fact Castol is the one responsible for trying to work with slavers in the Vailian Trading Company questline.

With all these sentiments visible in the other ending slides, it is interesting how relatively free from issues the ending depicting Huana victory is: if the player sides with the Huana, and the island of Ukaizo falls under their control, the Huana are in a position of power to drive away one faction and renegotiate the terms of the other faction's presence in the region. With the Vailian Trading Company, this means a trading agreement that is, according to the game's ending slide, "much more favorable to the tribes than to their own interests in the region". For the Royal Deadfire Company, this would entail losing the majority of their strongholds in the region. As Ukaizo is revealed to cause the storms that tormented the imperial core of the Rauatai, the Huana control of Ukaizo becomes a deterrent against the Rauatai, as the storm-causing technology of Ukaizo functions as a threat to the well-being of the Rauatai mainland. The fates of the colonizers are told in a neutral, matter-of-fact manner. The game's ending slides do take a downplaying or even apologist stance towards the colonization, but in the situation of anticolonial victory, it does not pity the colonizers.

In contrast to all these endings, the harshest one, and the only one to truly pass judgement on the player's actions, is the one that is shown when the game is finished without working for any faction.

Resolving only the grander narrative of apocalyptic stakes without choosing a side leads to ending slides that depict a continuing and worsening conflict between the different factions of Deadfire. The effects of colonialism are also portrayed in a harsher manner here: the Vailian Trading Company becomes vastly more aggressive in its extracting operations, and "Huana villages are left at the mercy of unscrupulous speculators, and resource-rich islands are swarmed and stripped." For the most part, the game tries to avoid describing any of the colonial endings as truly and fully a wrong choice, but here it seems to punish the player for not choosing: there is generally no reason to believe that the player working for the colonizers pushes them into not being colonizers. Instead, *Pillars of Eternity 2* seems to suggest here that the conflict and chaos of the

colonial rush for the region is more evil than the outcome of any one group taking control of the region. Colonization is thus shown to be a lesser evil compared to conflict and indecision. This ending, while also being paradoxically the one to viscerally depict the damage and nature of colonialism, subscribes to the recurring narratives found in the other endings: the naïve ideal of cooperation, and a view of colonialism as possibly benign or even value-neutral.

4. Conclusion

Many of *Pillars of Eternity 2*'s failings seem rooted in the fantasy role-playing game genre. Many of the colonial tropes present in the game can be explained with the combination of common fantasy role-playing game tropes and a limited consideration of the historically inspired, tropical, colonial setting. As argued by Fuchs et al. and Loponen respectively, the genres of role-playing and fantasy are rooted in colonialist tropes and imagery, both on the level of gameplay and in the design of the world and its inhabitants. These seemingly unconsidered colonialist tropes, such as the gameplay loop of exploration, mapping, and looting and killing, or the depiction of wilders, are brought into sharper focus by the game's explicitly colonial, tropical setting. What might pass in a different setting and story as regular, default fantasy visuals or design, cannot stay so completely "semiospherically contained" when set next to a narrative about colonization.

Yet, the issues of narrative and of the general depiction of colonialism in the game are not so easily explained: *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire* is a game that depicts and handles the issue of colonialism in an often-incoherent manner. It depicts some of the harmful effects of colonialism, but also often does so in a downplaying manner. It highlights and portrays the cooperation of the colonized with the colonizer as positive while seemingly forgetting the harms of colonial occupation or any specific scenario of cooperation it is elsewhere describing. Often, it seems as if the developer or writers were not willing to take a side in the colonial conflict, and yet at the same

time, if the player opts to not support any of the game's factions, the game will punish them with the worst possible ending, one where the harms of colonialism are suddenly strikingly visible and not downplayed.

It is possible that this need for no clear right choice for the player also stems from the role-playing game genre, though not in the sense of colonial genre heritage. *Pillars of Eternity 2* is a game about making difficult moral judgements and choices. The same is arguably true for most, if not all, computer role-playing games of its type. Often, choosing between supporting different factions is one such difficult choice. From that perspective, *Pillars of Eternity 2*'s main issue might stem from a trying to make the choice of any of the factions equally morally grey, something I am unsure is possible when two of the factions are colonial forces and one faction is the target of those forces.

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