

The Problematic Pleasures of Efficiency in Goa and Navigador

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As the hobby board game industry has grown, especially in the last five years, analog games have received much more attention both in mainstream media and in scholarship. Along with accolades for the beauty and the cleverness of these games, the increased attention has also brought criticism of their often troubling themes. This essay will engage with criticisms that have arisen around prevalent themes in Eurogames in particular.¹ Eurogames as a genre are characterized by thin themes and elegant mechanics, typically focusing on economic development and competition for resources rather than direct conflict.² Although many games scholars, such as Greg Costikyan,³ go so far as to argue that theming in Eurogames is therefore entirely separate from gameplay, this essay argues that

1. See William Robinson. "Orientalism and Abstraction in Eurogames." in *Analog Game Studies Volume I*, Edited by Evan Torner, Emma Leigh-Waldron, and Aaron Trammell. Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016.
2. The BoardGameGeek Wiki defines Eurogames in contrast to "Ameritrash" games: the former themeless, strategic, and nonviolent, and the latter heavy in conflict, theme, and randomness.
3. Costikyan writes that in Eurogames, "[a]ctual gameplay is divorced from the theme, [and] the theme is a mere marketing appendage on what is at heart an abstract strategy game." Greg Costikyan. "Boardgame Aesthetics." *Tabletop: Analog Game Design*. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2011.

certain themes recur in Eurogames because they align with certain economic mechanics, and that this pairing of themes and mechanics is politically problematic. Thus, despite the lack of overtly violent themes, Eurogame mechanics often draw on deeply violent histories. As Will Robinson notes, the thematic abstraction typical to Eurogames based on colonial themes is problematic because the Indigenous Other is abstracted out so as to erase the violence of European expansion. Moreover, this problematic theming is facilitated by the Eurogame emphasis on ostensibly non-violent economic mechanics rather than militaristic ones.⁴ While others have critiqued the politics of erasure in popular Eurogames such as *Catan* (1995)⁵ and *Vasco da Gama* (2009)⁶, this essay will further explore how the pleasures of economic mechanics produce games with themes that are necessarily historically problematic. Although this is a trend that can be observed in *many* contemporary games, this essay will focus on two specifically: *Goa* (2009) and *Navegador* (2010).

Many Eurogames—including those critiqued here—are mathematically beautiful, strategically rich, and socially engaging. However, they are frequently set in a colonial past which is approached uncritically. These historical settings allow the games to appear to offer the possibility of beginning an economy from scratch. Games like *Puerto Rico* (2002), *Age of Empires III: The Age of Discovery* (2007), *Macao* (2009), *Vasco da Gama* (2009), *Amerigo* (2013), *Francis Drake* (2013), *Mombasa* (2015), *Goa* and *Navegador* invoke a past in which the players, as European merchants and explorers, can freely exploit resources in exotic locales. These games focus heavily on the players' opportunities to behave efficiently and productively,

4. "[T]he historical recounting of European expansionism is glorified in economic terms, rather than problematized in militaristic ones." (Robinson 2016).

5. See Greg Loring-Albright. "The First Nations of Catan Practices of Critical Modification" in *Analog Game Studies Volume II*, Edited by Evan Torner, Emma Leigh-Waldron, and Aaron Trammell. Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2017.

6. Robinson 2016

building economies where there were none before. They model fascinating economic interactions among the players while removing or ignoring complicating factors like previous ownership of the land and resources being exploited.

Erasure of problematic historical elements is extremely common in board games. The popular board game *Catan* has been critiqued for this issue by designers and scholars alike. French game designer Bruno Faidutti has noted that the “quaint themes” of Eurogames often involve glossing over historical horrors, and critiques the absence of any natives of *Catan* in the game.⁷ Similarly, games scholar Greg Loring-Albright reads the game as a retelling of the American frontier myth, an ideology that encouraged nineteenth-century American expansionism while erasing native claims to the land. Finally, postcolonial scholar Lorenzo Veracini analyzes how *Catan* fantasizes an empty, but productive, landscape to be filled by settlers. It is:

terra nullius, finally a “new” land that is empty as it should be, different from the new lands that real settlers usually encounter, which are actually filled with prior claims by indigenous peoples.⁸

However, the building of this myth of *terra nullius* does not only rely on fictional (or at least geographically non-specific) landscapes like *Catan*. Many Eurogames perpetuate this myth through specific references to real places and people. They use abstraction to transform actual lands, former colonies, into *terra nullius*. Even the harsh colonial empires of earlier centuries can be transformed into a peaceful competition among colonizers, with not a native—or a slave—to be seen.

7. Bruno Faidutti. “Postcolonial *Catan*.” in *Analog Game Studies Volume II*, Edited by Evan Torner, Emma Leigh-Waldron, and Aaron Trammell. Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2017.

8. Lorenzo Veracini. “Settlers of *Catan*.” *Settler Colonial Studies* 3.3 (2013). <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/18380743.2013.761941>.

While abstracting out historical violence and erasing its victims, Eurogames tend to celebrate the productivity of colonialism, a portrayal that allows players to indulge in the pleasures of efficient management and the acquisition of wealth while also quietly supporting the colonialist ideologies of lands outside Europe as *terra nullius*. For a closer look at how this works, I will analyze two representative examples, both focusing on the Portuguese empire: *Goa* and *Navegador*. The Portuguese empire is a particularly popular theme in Eurogames. Portugal's empire, although historically obtained through conquest and supported by slavery, thematically provides many opportunities for building a new economy and an environment in which limited resources make sense. *Goa* makes players into managers who must work as efficiently as possible to produce valuable goods where nothing would exist without their intervention. *Navegador* emphasizes "exploration" and the seizure of land, and demonstrates how this creates wealth in the homeland. Players who seek out games like *Goa* and *Navegador* (and *Macao* and *Vasco da Gama* and *Mombasa*) enjoy them because they grant a high degree of control over the development of the economy, reward efficiency, and require players to deeply understand the values of the resources they can access. However, as this article will show, the pleasures of these games are very closely tied to their colonial fantasies.

GOA: PROVINCIAL MANAGEMENT

Goa, along with games like *Puerto Rico* and *Macao*, presents an exotic foreign province as *terra nullius* and invites players to make the most of it. The focus is on production and efficiency; both profit and glory (as expressed in victory points) are goals for the player. Although *Goa* is very abstract, its rulebook and mechanisms do draw on some of the

history of Portuguese colonization of India. Its choices about what to abstract reflect colonial ideologies of productivity, putting players in a position to rationally and productively exploit available resources.

In *Goa*, the players are cast as Portuguese merchants after the military conquest of Goa. Although the rulebook's explanation of the theme emphasizes the Portuguese cooperation and competition with "strong Muslim princes" and "Indian leaders," neither a Muslim prince nor an Indian leader is anywhere to be found in the game. Rather, making use of natural resources is the domain of the Portuguese. The economy of the game is based on both actions and auctions; both of these are controlled by the players.

Players produce various types of spices and send them home to Portugal. To do this, players must acquire land, either by founding colonies in distant parts of India or, more often, in the auction that begins each round. Curiously, the land is identified for auction by a fellow Portuguese merchant, who is also the one who receives money from the sale. From a mechanical standpoint, this is a beautiful auction, because the auctioneers must choose desirable tiles, because deciding what to bid is difficult, and because it creates a fascinating closed economy in which every transaction affects the whole. Thematically, however, it is not totally clear why the players (who represent merchants) are authorized to auction land to each other, but it is notable that Portuguese ownership is assumed. Rather, everything proceeds as if this were indeed *terra nullius*. Indeed, when the land first appears it is (always) already a plantation; other potential uses for this land simply do not exist.



An auction in Goa. Photo by Doug Faust and used with permission of the author.

Plantations are also already loaded with spices when players first acquire them, although players must subsequently refill them by using their own strictly limited actions, the game's equivalent to work. Historically, however, sufficient labor supply was a difficult problem, solved by slavery and other forced labor.⁹ But this problematic history is erased in the world of the game, where the production of spices is purely the consequence of the players' – that is, the colonizers'—efforts, contingent on the careful budgeting of their actions and resources. The pleasure of *Goa* is in its difficulty; players feel that they are working very hard, and each of their choices is very important. Slave labor is erased while the labor of elite merchants is celebrated. This narrative is oddly consonant with the propaganda

9. Stephanie Hassell. "Inquisition Records from Goa as Sources for the Study of Slavery in the Eastern Domains of the Portuguese Empire." *History in Africa* 42 (2015): pp. 397–418.

of the Portuguese empire itself, which promoted narratives of the “peaceful and celebratory conquest” of “Golden Goa.”¹⁰

The game rewards productive colonialism with greater efficiency of actions. Players are also responsible for sending the spices they produce back to Portugal; this grants them victory points, but it also makes other actions more effective. As the game continues, players can thus plan more impressive and rewarding actions. Although *Goa* never becomes easy, players who are doing well in the game can experience a narrative arc of ever-increasing productivity and success.

Is Goa, then, portrayed as *terra nullius*? The procedures of the game certainly suggest not only that its resources are there to be claimed, but that it is only colonizers who can productively use the land. As Historian Andrew Fitzmaurice shows, the concept of *terra nullius* hinges on productive use of resources. According to one of the principles established at a conference of imperial powers in 1884-5, “sovereignty could not be claimed by flag raising or other ceremonies but only through the effective exploitation of the land.”¹¹ Such effective exploitation is precisely the subject matter of *Goa*. The land is only good for producing spices, which in turn serve only for exportation to Portugal. Presumably, nothing interesting could happen here without the intervention of Portuguese merchants.

10. José Celso de Castro Alves. “Rupture and Continuity in Colonial Discourses: The Racialized Representation of Portuguese Goa in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.” *Portuguese Studies* 16 (2000): pp. 148-161.

11. Andrew Fitzmaurice. “The Genealogy of Terra Nullius.” *Australian Historical Studies* 38.129 (2007), p. 10.



Plantations in Goa. Photo by Doug Faust and used with permission of the author.

By emphasizing the management aspects of colonialism, *Goa* promotes the Orientalist idea that native populations are not capable of fully exploiting the resources to which they may have access, and that it is up to European settlers to help these countries reach their full potential, this presumably consisting in the maximum economic benefit to Europe.¹² It is the players (as European settlers) who can and must exploit resources by appropriating land and spice. By putting players in the position of colonizers, whose work is seen to consist of careful and difficult management, the mechanics of games like *Goa* portray themes of colonialism sympathetically.

12. As Edward Said has established, Orientalism is a perspective that constructs "the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability" (pp. 206-207), while imagining Europeans as "(in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion" (p. 49). Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

NAVEGADOR: EXPLORING THE WORLD

Where *Goa* is about managing a province, *Navegador* is about expanding the empire and profiting from it in the homeland. In *Navegador*, players are elites in the Portuguese empire and can send out ships to colonize other lands. This colonial perspective is shared by many other games, such as *Age of Empires III* and *Vasco da Gama*. However, *Navegador* is much less abstract than many games in its genre; it gestures toward history in many small particulars, touching on the development of technology, the economy that resulted from colonialism, and the role of the church. But it, too, skirts the most troubling aspects of the colonial economy. The economy and the point system of the game reward players for their role in establishing Portuguese political and economic dominance across the globe, but negative effects of colonialism are obscured.

In *Navegador*, players explore a world full of resources but devoid of inhabitants. The game begins with most regions of the world “unexplored,” and not available until at least one player has entered them. Players who do this are rewarded with valuable navigation tokens and money, but also must lose one of their ships. The rules explain that the ship is “lost in the unknown waters,” implying that the greatest dangers to these explorers are natural ones. Although illustrations on the board depict the people of these regions in traditional dress, the only mechanism in the game that indicates their presence is that players must lose an additional ship when they sail to Nagasaki, presumably in reference to Japan’s national seclusion policies during the seventeenth century.¹³

13. Lane Eams. “Tokugawa Period.” *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*. Volume 5. Edited by Karen Christensen and David Levinson. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2002, pp. 505–508.



Colonies in Navegador. Photo by Doug Faust and used with permission of the author.

The exploration mechanic in the game is in service of colonialism because it exposes the cost of the colonies, allowing any player to enter a region and buy a colony. As in *Goa*, colonization meets no resistance and is not difficult; in fact, it is the easiest way to establish a strong economy at the beginning of the game. The colonies are of three types: sugar, gold, and spice. It is important to note, however, that the history of sugar and gold is bound up inextricably with the history of slavery. In fact, the Atlantic slave trade arose largely in order to support sugar plantations, and the gold coming back from Africa was often accompanied by slaves.¹⁴ However, the historical role of slavery is not modeled in *Navegador*, although many other aspects of the relevant economics are at least hinted at. For instance, Portugal

14. Claudius Fergus. "Why an Atlantic Slave Trade?" *The Journal of Caribbean History* 42.1 (2008): pp. 1-21.

was not a destination for spices so much as a hub through which they were distributed into the global economy.¹⁵ While this certainly is not simulated in detail, the market that drives the economy of the game strongly suggests the resale of goods imported into Portugal. Even the religious politics of colonialism are incorporated into the game's mechanics, with a slightly cynical tone. This can be seen in the game's mechanic where churches make workers cheaper. These workers are located in the "Lisboa" area of the board and facilitate many other aspects of the game. This mechanism can be read to imply that religious enthusiasm encourages workers to work more cheaply,¹⁶ which fits historically because the Church embraced both colonialism and slavery, even offering forgiveness of sins in exchange for participating.¹⁷

Thus, although *Navegador* is a streamlined Eurogame and does not attempt to offer a detailed simulation of the establishment of the Portuguese empire, it is engaged with the history it portrays, portraying some historical elements while ignoring others. Given these many small touches, the omission of slavery and indigenous resistance is notable. *Navegador* offers what Robinson criticized in the game *Vasco da Gama*: a "clean and unproblematic interpretation of the Portuguese empire."¹⁸ It is interested in the history of colonialism exclusively from the colonizers' point of view. It invokes historical figures like Francis Xavier, Alfonso de Albuquerque, and Vasco da Gama, but does not engage with anything that happened in the colonies aside from the production of wealth. Rather, the establishment of empire is shown to be an orderly, predictable, and above all, profitable enterprise. Players establish an empire based

15. Stefan Haliowski Smith. "Profits Sprout Like Tropical Plants": A Fresh Look at What Went Wrong with the Eurasian Spice Trade, c. 1500-1800." *Journal of Global History* 3 (2008): pp. 389-418.

16. I read this as a critical stance on the religious ideology of the game's setting, although it could also be read as a critique of the merchants' propensity for taking advantage of the religious.

17. Fergus, p. 15.

18. Robinson 2016

solely on their decisions about what kinds of goods will be the most valuable, and consequently enjoy the profit and the ability to do more and more. The production process itself (along with its messy political implications) are not allowed to intrude upon the joys of establishing an economy. This makes the game work smoothly, but it also makes colonialism appear inevitable even as players participate in it.



The market in Navegador. Photo by Doug Faust and used with permission of the author.

GAMES AS TEXTS: CAN WE DO BETTER?

As this article has explored, the themes of games are important, and an appreciation of elegant mechanics should not obscure the more problematic aspects of the stories that games tell. As games scholar Ian Bogost argues, games “are an expressive medium. They represent

how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them.”¹⁹ Games like *Goa* and *Navegador* represent systems of colonialism—both mechanically and thematically—and when they and others in their genre invite players to profit unproblematically from the systems of colonialism, they celebrate that history.

Abstraction does not have to support colonialism. Games scholar Devin Wilson shows that, in some cases, abstraction allows players room to imagine a less oppressive in-game world.²⁰ Game reviewer and scholar Scott Nicholson makes a similar point about *Agricola* (2007), in which the nondescript worker tokens allow players to imagine their family members however they would like, rather than implementing compulsory heterosexuality.²¹ Context is key, however. To imagine an animal sanctuary in fifteenth century France or a same-gender couple on a farm in seventeenth century Germany is not the same as to imagine that Africa and Asia are empty and available for Portuguese exploitation. Abstraction can function as a creative space or a harmful erasure.

Game designers make decisions about what to abstract; they are not compelled to use abstraction to celebrate colonial ideologies. Loring-Albright’s modification of *Settlers of Catan* represents the existence of indigenous people without further complicating the game.²² Other games, such as *Endeavor* (2009) and *New Amsterdam* (2012) have colonial themes, but acknowledge their effects on indigenous and enslaved people. *Lewis & Clark* (2013), while certainly not free of problematic ideologies, portrays Native

19. Ian Bogost. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2007, p. vii. Bogost has videogames specifically in mind, but board games also invite players to work with systems—and the systems in board games are often much more explicit.

20. Devin Wilson. “The Eurogame as Heterotopia.” *Analog Game Studies* 2.7 (2015). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/11/the-eurogame-as-heterotopia/>.

21. Scott Nicholson. “Agricola.” *Board Games with Scott*. August 19, 2008. <http://www.boardgameswithscott.com/?p=87>.

22. Loring-Albright 2017

Americans as central to the expedition, and even includes specific individuals.

By erasing the colonized from our representations of colonialism, games perpetuate a narrative that prioritizes the wealth of the powerful and the pleasures of building an empire that creates that wealth, while ignoring the violence through which it is acquired. It is only possible to consider these games as nonviolent because their violence is hidden, and its victims erased, in pursuit of an empty *terra nullius*. As it stands, the economic themes of efficiency and productivity often go hand-in-hand with militaristic realities of slavery, violence, and oppression, and are implemented in a carelessly laudatory way.