

Lallani, Shayan S. "Virtual Empire: Performing Colonialism in the MMORPG Runescape." *Games and Culture* 18, no. 5 (2023): 539-558.

Abstract

This article argues that advancement in the MMORPG Runescape is connected to virtual performances of colonial exploitation. It places in geographic and temporal context various societies represented in Runescape by historicizing in-game cultural representations. Thereafter, it is asserted that players partake in virtual iterations of colonialism to advance their accounts. Analysis is grounded in four case studies exploring the themes of exploitative archaeology, colonial cartography, imperial diplomacy, and resource extraction. Each example represents opportunities for in-game progress. In connecting the virtual advancement of user accounts to performances of colonialism, it is argued that Runescape reproduces historic colonial projects in which European powers commodified other societies to advance their own economic and cultural agendas. Through this analysis, the article seeks to develop a guiding framework for the study of MMORPGs as replicating Eurocentric colonial encounters.

Keywords

Runescape, MMORPG, colonialism, imperialism, empire, archaeology, commodities, cultural encounters, gaming

Please refer to the authoritative version when citing:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15554120221109130>

Runescape is a PC-based massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), developed and published by British developer Jagex Ltd. It is set in the medieval fantasy world of Gielinor.¹ Released in 2001, it boasts multiple Guinness World Records for its popularity; 250 million accounts were created as of 2017 (Game Developer, 2017).² *Runescape* revolves around a player-protagonist training skills, completing quests, defeating various creatures, and earning currency to upgrade gear.

For its popularity over two decades, *Runescape* has been given surprisingly little attention in the cultural studies. It has been analyzed in-depth across a range of other fields. Much of the psychological analysis to date concerns player socialization and identity self-construction (Crowe and Bradford, 2006; Crowe and Watts, 2014; Robe, 2018; Vandenbosch, Driesmans, Trekels, Eggermont, 2017). Legal scholars have considered whether virtual vices in *Runescape* are subject to real-world laws. For instance, Wolswijk (2012) examined a Dutch Supreme Court case in which defendants were charged for in-game theft, though the victim was threatened in-person, while Griffiths and King (2015) asked if the legal definition of "gambling" could be extended to *Runescape*'s chance-based minigames. Economic analysis has been

especially fruitful, given the resemblance of certain aspects of *Runescape*'s economy to an actual one. De Sousa and Munro (2012) argued that in-game trading is a useful means to test economic theories. Guo (2009) advanced a consumer psychology analysis in examining the motivations behind players' virtual purchases. Despite useful analysis from psychological, legal, and economic perspectives, adequate treatment of *Runescape* from a cultural studies perspective is lacking. As a video game that incorporates historical elements into its conception of fantasy, analyzing the cultural representations in *Runescape* reveals how players are asked to conceive of societies past.

In recent years scholars have emphasized the sociocultural aspects of video games (Guins, 2014; Wills, 2019), for instance, representations of race and ethnicity (LaPensée, 2021; Penix-Tadsen, 2016; Šisler, 2008), gender and sexuality (Glasspool, 2016; Navarro-Remesal, 2018; Ruberg, 2020), and religion (De Wildt and Aupers, 2019). While (neo)colonialism has received extensive analysis in game studies (Hutchinson, 2016; Lammes, 2003; Leonard and King, 2009; Mukherjee, 2017, 2018), MMORPGs have seen little of that attention. Most significant for this study, communications scholar Rhea Antonia Vichot (2019) conceived of the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV* as a virtual "contact zone," drawing on Pratt's (2007) framework of contact zones as spaces for imperial encounters in which historically and geographically separated groups confront one another, enacting reciprocal but often unequal relations foregrounded in racial inequality.

A growing body of literature exists on the racial stereotypes encoded in MMORPGs, most convincingly in connection to *World of Warcraft* (Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, 2009; Higgins, 2009; Langer, 2008; Monson, 2012). However, most of the existing scholarship takes as its point of departure mythical NPCs (non-player characters) such as trolls, elves, and orcs, examining how real-world ideas of race and ethnicity are represented through those beings in a fantasy realm. Lacking are studies of MMORPGs that deal with temporalized racial representations in human figures. This article's focus on human actors responds to a bias in the existing literature. Though *Runescape* is set in a fantasy realm with many of the same mythical creatures that *World of Warcraft* contains, unlike *World of Warcraft*, many of *Runescape*'s in-game spaces are modeled on historic societies. These areas contain human NPCs who perform and at times subvert racial stereotypes. They are participants in the player's in-game progress—a journey of expansion, conquest, and resource extraction that bears similarities to European imperialism. That *Runescape* contains some historical inaccuracies is irrelevant because even fictionalized cultural representations convey how players are encouraged to perceive of the connection between their characters and virtual cultural Others. In other words, video games that entail empire-building can become spaces to construct alternate histories (Mukherjee 2018, p. 509).

This article argues that *Runescape* players participate in imperial adventures— aspects of which resemble historical European colonialism—to advance in-game progress. The case must first be made that *Runescape* is modeled on historic societies. Therefore, this article begins by placing in geographic and temporal context various places in *Runescape* by historicizing in-game cultural

representations. Explored thereafter are virtual iterations of colonialism that players partake in. Analysis is grounded in four case studies: the Pyramid Plunder minigame, the quests Tribal Totem and Legends Quest, the Player-Owned Port minigame, and activities in the Wushanko Isles. These case studies explore such themes as exploitative archaeology, colonial cartography, imperial diplomacy, and resource extraction.

In advancing its analysis, this article draws on Lammes (2003) who asserted that *Civilization* allows the gamer to partake in the virtual colonialist exploration of anachronistic lands, and more specifically on the work of Mukherjee (2018, p. 506) who argued that video games can incorporate players into discourses of colonialism and possession. Building on both, I argue that colonial ways of possessing the resources of Others are important to the in-game advancement of *Runescape* players. In connecting the virtual advancement of user accounts to performances of colonialism, it is asserted that *Runescape* reproduces empire projects in which European powers commodified other societies to serve their own economic and cultural agendas.

Ultimately, this article seeks to develop a guiding framework for the study of MMORPGs as replicating Eurocentric colonial encounters. Studying *Runescape* as a historically inspired fantasy MMORPG reveals how developers ask players to understand empire, as well as relationships between different cultures more broadly. At the same time, the MMORPG genre implores participants to perform an identity other than the one they possess outside of the game, be it a slayer of mythical creatures, a diplomat in foreign lands, or a famed explorer, while sharing their conceptions of the in-game world with their fellow players. For those reasons, *Runescape* has the potential to change how its audience understands historical colonialism. As a subject of scholarly analysis, the game is rife with opportunities to study how players negotiate discursive representations of empire, and how dialogue with others they meet in-game informs their own understandings of cultural encounters.

Methodology

Much of the analysis in this article relies on observations through my own exploration of the in-game world. Regions discussed were chosen because they resembled historical places, as opposed to mythological realms. While it is true that every space in Gielinor contains aspects of fantasy, for that is *Runescape's* genre, some locales are too fictitious to draw a connection to the real world. Excluded, for instance, is the city of Prifddinas, made of crystal and inhabited by elves, as well as the Dwarven city Keldagrim. These areas and its mythical, often humanoid inhabitants doubtlessly embody ethnic stereotypes that warrant study in their own right (Monson, 2012). However, this article focuses on in-game regions inhabited by humans to advance the connection between Gielinor and real-world spaces across temporality. Furthermore, the choice was made to emphasize *Runescape's* human actors and the societies in which they reside because they, rather than any of the non-human characters, most potently perform coloniality. Discussion

on the Wushanko Isles is the exception because the mythical creatures and material culture represented on those islands support this study's understanding of Orientalism.

Articles from *Runescape* Wiki—the game's official encyclopedia—are also used to advance the argument. The website was consulted to retrieve transcripts from in-game quests. It was used most prominently in the final section on the Wushanko Isles to draw connections between that in-game locality and spaces that exist in reality. The observations in question were independently verifiable, and my own analysis showed them to be accurate. However, references to *Runescape* Wiki were included to denote ideas that were not originally mine, but those of *Runescape* community members who are owed credit for them. Ultimately, *Runescape* Wiki is a paratext maintained not by Jagex but by players—albeit in ways strictly moderated by designated editors for quality control. While this may call into question its reliability for some, the very fact that *Runescape* Wiki is player-driven makes it a valuable resource for understanding community perceptions of cultural representations deployed in-game.

Locating Gielinor in Time and Space

As a virtual fantasy realm, Gielinor is inherently difficult to pin down temporally and spatially. After completing the tutorial, players begin the game in Lumbridge. The town is almost certainly meant to represent Great Britain. The “bridge” suffix is associated with many English towns (i.e., Axbridge in Somerset, Boroughbridge of North Yorkshire, and Kingsbridge in Devon). Lumbridge castle, the town's most noteworthy feature, has architecture evocative of medieval Britain. Upon further exploration of the fortification one finds Duke Horacio and castle guardsmen, while the Herald of Lumbridge is outside it. “Duke” and “Herald” were titles used prominently in medieval Britain, further evidence of the setting.

These themes are present in other locales. The castle in Varrock, a city just north of Lumbridge, shares many architectural similarities with Lumbridge Castle including the whitewash stone walls, tower structure, battlements, and decorative heraldic shields. Its monarch, King Roald, appears in a traditional regal crown and royal mantle. Varrock is also home to the Blue Moon Inn. Inns were popular in medieval Great Britain, as was ale, the only drink that Blue Moon seems to serve. Falador replicates the theme with a castle, guarded by knights and squires. Its Rising Sun Inn serves ale and stout. While the latter is a quintessentially British drink, the evidence suggests that the word “stout” was not used for beer until 1677 (Lewis, 1995, p. 6; McWilliams, 2005, p. 230), past the traditional definition of the Middle Ages or medieval era as ending in the 15th to 16th century (Katajala-Peltomaa and Niiranen, 2014). Falador thus contains aspects of both medieval and early modern Britain.

Due west of Varrock and north of Falador is the town of Edgeville and its monastery. Though monasteries are a part of numerous religions, this one is almost certainly Christian. It houses monks adorning brown robes, the inconspicuous attire worn by Christian monks. The title of

“Abbot,” given to one monk, is Christian in its traditional usage. Lastly, though *Runescape* does not contain references to any factual religions, it does have its own fictitious gods. The devotees of this monastery worship Saradomin, whose symbol is a four-pronged star that resembles the cross of Christianity. The connection between Saradomin and Christianity is further cemented by the fact that many of the churches in *Runescape* have priests that worship Saradomin. This monastery arguably represents a Christian community, the prevailing religion in medieval Britain, further supporting the assertion that Lumbridge, Varrock, and Falador are British towns; the former two even contain churches, while players can at times find Saradomin himself in Falador’s White Knights’ Castle.

Evidently, *Runescape* has no shortage of references to medieval Great Britain, though we can also study other in-game regions to locate the player in time and space. North of Camelot - home to the character King Arthur, a subject of British legend - is Rellekka, meant to represent medieval Scandinavia. Round shields in traditional Viking motif adorn buildings including the long hall, the most prominent feature in Rellekka. Long halls were equally common features in Viking Age Scandinavia, important socially, economically, and ritualistically (Eriksen, 2019, pp. 9, 81–109). Locals in Rellekka’s long hall can be found feasting, an activity with ritualistic importance in Scandinavian cultures (Nardo, 2010; Winroth, 2014; Zori et al., 2013, pp. 60, 72). Mythology also connects virtuality to reality. At certain times of the year, Fenrir, Sköll, and Hati—wolves from Norse mythology—appear for players to slay. Lastly, seafaring has great significance in Rellekka just as it did for Viking explorers. The virtual town even has vessels that



Figure 1. Longships in Rellekka. Screenshot by the author (2022). Runescape is a copyright of Jagex Ltd.

resemble Viking Age longships (**Figure 1**).

Europe is not the only continent depicted in *Runescape*. The desert city of Al Kharid appears to represent a locality in Africa or Asia. Al Kharid Palace houses Emir Ali Mirza. The title of “Emir” was commonly used in the Arab world to denote a high-ranking ruler, supporting the argument that Al Kharid stands in for a Muslim society in addition to many residents having traditionally Islamic names. Ali Mirza is but one; there is the merchant Farque, a guard named Fayez, Grand Vizier Hassan (also a prominent title in the Muslim world), Karim the kebab purveyor, and a spy named Osman. Some of them sell commodities that imply Al Kharid is an important trading hub, perhaps modeled on a Silk Road commercial center. Al Kharid traders deal in gems and silk, goods available along the historic trade route. In fact, Buddhist art featured both commodities, and monks used these to adorn monasteries (Liu, 2010, pp. 54–64, 79), just as the elite warriors of Rus kings were rewarded with bejeweled silk garments (Beckwith, 2009, pp. 16–17). It is difficult to narrow Al Kharid’s setting further, especially given the long-standing and widespread distribution of these items along the Silk Road.

The desert becomes a lonelier place south of Al Kharid, though it contains a few important settlements including Menaphos and Sophanem. The silk, gems, opulent rugs, and camels in the former imply positionality in the Arab world. Some of these themes continue into Sophanem, but that city also contains more specific references that lend merit to the proposition that it represents Egypt. Sophanem’s temple has a high priest, an important figure in Ancient Egyptian religion. Stone panels outside the temple depict the ankh, the symbol of life in Ancient Egypt (Pinch, 2002, pp. 128, 227), while the interior contains a gold ankh artifact. Architecture further advances the theme. Pyramids are among the largest monuments in the vicinity. The door on one of these pyramids features a depiction of a cat; taller than the player, the size of the carving implies that cats are important to this society, just as felines were revered in Egyptian mythology (Pinch, 2002, pp. 132–135). Another pyramid has doors depicting the Ankh, with a Sphinx stationed outside of it (**Figure 2**).

Players can sail to Karamja, a tropical island that parallels the Caribbean. Rum, a commodity inseparable from the colonial history of the Caribbean region (Foss, 2012, pp. 24–29), is distilled and sold in Karamja. Across the bar is a banana plantation, an institution that was integral to Caribbean colonial economies by the 16th century. However, rum and banana production alone are not enough evidence to argue that Karamja represents the Caribbean and not, for instance, South America. Bananas had a global history spanning 6900 years before arriving in the New World (Piatti-Farnell, 2016, pp. 32–39), while some historians have argued that Brazil produced rum before the beverage was ever distilled on Caribbean islands (Foss, 2012, pp. 24–27).



Figure 2. Background: Pyramid in Sophanem with a door depicting the ankh symbol. Foreground: Sphinx and silk stall. Screenshot by the author (2022). Runescape is a copyright of Jagex Ltd.

Further evidence for the Caribbean parallel is found in Brimhaven—a Karamjan settlement for pirates and thieves. The inhabitants appear to be based on European buccaneers who plundered the Caribbean region in the 16th and 17th century. Many of these former mercenaries for European colonial powers established convenient bases along the Caribbean coast to support their piracy operations (Wilk, 2006, pp. 27–32; Lehr, 2019, pp. 66–144). Similarly, Brimhaven is a coastal town in which many inhabitants bear similarity to popular cultural depictions of pirates, for instance, individuals wearing bandanas or tricorn hats resembling the headwear of fictional *Pirates of the Caribbean* character Captain Jack Sparrow (**Figure 3**). Others have hook hands or don a parrot on their shoulder. Furthering their connection to European buccaneers, Brimhaven’s pirates and thieves are Caucasian; on the other hand, the local tribesman Kangai Mau, found at a Brimhaven restaurant, is represented as Black (**Figure 3**).

Thus, *Runescape* is set in a world that borrows aspects from diverse historical eras and spaces, resulting in a temporally confusing collision of cultures. This finding is in line with Lammes’ (2003) analysis of colonial exploration in *Civilization*.



Figure 3. From left to right: Kangai Mau, Brimhaven Pirate in bandana, Player, Brimhaven Pirate in hat. Screenshot by the author (2022). Runescape is a copyright of Jagex Ltd.

Virtual Colonialism

Having attempted to locate various in-game spaces in time and place, I now draw parallels between some activities in *Runescape* and the expansion of European empires, arguing that players participate in virtual iterations of colonialism for in-game advancement.

Exploitative Archaeology in “Pyramid Plunder”

The “Pyramid Plunder” minigame is located in Sophamen. Therein, players raid tombs for “Thieving” experience points (XP), leaving with artifacts redeemable for further rewards. Rarely found are the “Pharaoh’s Sceptre” and pieces of the “Black Ibis Outfit,” references to religion in Ancient Egypt (Pinch, 2002, p. 17, 128, 168).

Before looting urns and gold chests while evading mummies,³ one must pass the “Guardian Mummy.” The Mummy sighs out of annoyance when the player interacts with him, “Not another one...Another ‘archaeologist.’” He represents the gatekeeper to exploitative resource extraction,

initially denying players entry when they wish to gain access to the Pyramid for personal gain, “I’m not going to let you plunder my master’s tomb you know.” His use of scare quotes asserts awareness that the term “archaeologist” has been abused for profit. Ultimately, however, he relents, allowing players to access areas with “things you humans might consider valuable,” offering 5 minutes to collect artefacts before being kicked out.

Just as Mukherjee (2018, p. 506) demonstrates how video games incorporate players into colonial discourses of possession, through Pyramid Plunder, the player participates in a virtual iteration of exploitative archaeology—the plundering of a country’s cultural resources by outsiders. Scholars have critiqued similar practices in the field of archaeology, taking issue with colonial powers claiming artifacts from colonized nations, in hopes of conceptualizing a postcolonial archaeology (Lydon and Rizvi, 2016; Díaz-Andreu, 2007, pp. 118–130).

Colonial Contact in the Tribal Totem Quest

Kangai Mau is an indigenous member of the Rantuki tribe, found in the pirate enclave Brimhaven. He confides in the player, “men come from across, steal our land, and settle on our hunting grounds” (Runescape Wiki, 2020b). His statement parallels Caribbean indigenous inhabitant experiences with European colonists—men who crossed the ocean to steal land and resources.

Kangai Mau’s encounters with colonialism become more apparent when he elaborates on his story. In the *Tribal Totem* quest,⁴ players recover a totem important to Mau’s people that was stolen by Lord Handlemort of Ardougne. Mau describes Handlemort as an “explorer which means he think he have [sic] the right to come to my tribal home, steal our stuff and put in his private museum” (Runescape Wiki, 2020b). Lord Handlemort represents the colonialist figure who exploits his affluent social position to commit archaeological plunder. He showcases the indigenous artifact as a trophy of his conquest, paralleling European colonizers who plundered cultural objects from conquered lands for display in private and public museums (Arnold, 2017, pp. 109–122). The narrative incorporates an attempt to undermine colonial hegemony by lending a voice of protest to the subaltern actor (Mukherjee 2018, pp. 510–11). In turning to the player for help, however, Kangai Mau is represented as an agent without agency. The narrative instead echoes Eurocentric accounts that portrayed Caribbean locals as needing European assistance—narratives that colonizers used to justify expansionist projects as salvation for supposedly “uncivilized” communities (Martin, 2016, pp. 255–257).⁵

Colonial Cartography and Diplomacy in the Legends’ Quest

In *Legends’ Quest*, players prove themselves worthy of entering the elite Legends’ Guild. The quest involves mapping Karamja’s remote Khazari Jungle and procuring a gift from its

indigenous inhabitants for display in the Guild. It is argued that these tasks parallel aspects of historical colonial projects and that, by participating, players advance the Eurocentric tenets of empire in-game.

Representations of Karamja's indigenous inhabitants in *Legends' Quest* reflect colonial understandings of the civilized/uncivilized binary. After accepting the quest, one wanders south of Brimhaven toward the Khazari Jungle, passing locals living in thatched huts. The primitive atmosphere of the village is reinforced by the appearance of locals, some of whom are almost naked and wield relatively simplistic weapons such as spears. These visuals call to mind Eurocentric descriptions of purportedly "uncivilized" Caribbean inhabitants in colonial era travel accounts (Cocks, 2007, pp. 216, 223–225; Thompson, 2007, p. 13). The dialogue in *Legends' Quest* is explicit about exploring this binary. The "Jungle Forester" just outside the Khazari Jungle, who players must speak with to continue, even claims that the player is "long way from civilization!" (Runescape Wiki, 2021g).

As players gain distance from Brimhaven—a relatively developed society representative of European modernity with its bar, restaurant, and stores—they are confronted with increasingly anachronistic spaces and inhabitants. This phenomenon can be explained through Eurocentric diffusionism, which submits that civilization and its accompanying knowledges are produced in the European world—the core—and spread to peripheral regions, portraying Europe as innovator and the geographic Other as imitator (Blaut, 1993). This is the relationship between Brimhaven and the jungles surrounding it.

Legends' Quest arguably portrays colonial exploration in a positive light. The player becomes the cartographer mapping an uncharted tropical jungle. The process of constructing maps of lands perceived as exotic has imperial connotations; as Mukherjee asserts, cartography has been central to expanding one's empire in such video games as *Age of Empires*, *Empire: Total War*, and *Rise of Nations*, and *Empire Earth* (2018, pp. 507–08). Similarly, in *Runescape*, the player partakes in map-making for the benefit of the Legends' Guild, a Eurocentric institution complete with knight statues and suits of armors with depictions of dragons. One also embodies the colonial diplomat, 'helping' indigenous inhabitants in a way that appears to justify conquest through soft power as mutually beneficial for colonizer and colonized (Carey, 2011). Players even proclaim their supposedly diplomatic intentions as soon as they map and enter the Khazari Jungle, telling a local named Gujuo, "I want to develop friendly relations with your people" (Runescape Wiki, 2021g). After helping his tribe replace their lost totem, Gujuo offers the player a Gilded Totem as a token of the tribe's appreciation, which is given to Guildmaster Radimus Erkle to gain entry into the Legends' Guild. The gilded symbolizes the player's diplomatic conquest of a colonial Other. Erkle is impressed by the artifact, displaying it prominently "so that many other great adventurers can admire your bravery," his actions not dissimilar from those of seventeenth-century European elites who displayed plundered colonial artifacts as trophies of conquest (Arnold, 2017, pp. 109–122). The player—now legendary by association with the Guild—benefits from the colonial project just as much as the institution. *Legends' Quest* is

required to access certain future quests, including *The World Wakes* which impacted lore so significantly that a Jagex Moderator described it as “the most important [quest] to date” (Runescape Wiki, 2021f). Players stand to benefit greatly from completing *Legends’ Quest*, if only because ignoring it means an impaired understanding of the game.

Virtual Resource Extraction in the Wushanko Isles

In December 2012, Jagex introduced the Player-Owned Ports (POP) minigame wherein one acquires a port from which they launch voyages to the “Eastern Lands,” also known as the Wushanko Isles. Successful voyages return with resources minutes to hours later. Over time, player-portmasters upgrade sailors, ships, and buildings to construct more efficient fleets, optimizing the acquisition of commodities. It is argued that the minigame parallels European imperialism in the Age of Exploration. The official description (Runescape, 2012) of the targeted lands as “Eastern,” as well as describing “the bizarre and beautiful wonders,” immediately casts the area and its inhabitants as cultural Others. In this way, the territory is framed as prime real estate “to... find exotic treasures.”

It is difficult to geographically place the Wushanko Isles. Some of its lands are shaped like parts of Hawaii, while others bear similarity in shape to New Zealand (Runescape Wiki, 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; 2021e). If the Isles are taken to reference those islands, histories of European expansion and trade into the Pacific support that assertion.⁶ However, analyzing other characteristics of the Wushanko Isles leads to more ambiguous conclusions. For instance, Isle rulers are titled “Khan.” Khans have an extensive history in the post-classical and early modern eras, especially in regions of Asia and Africa. Khans did not, however, have a notable history in New Zealand or Hawaii, nor in the other Pacific islands. Further adding to the ambiguity, some localities in the Wushanko Isles have names that correspond to a range of different languages. “Hyu-Ji” is Korean (Runescape Wiki, 2019b). “Goshima,” “Ashihama,” and “Hanto,” three other islands, appear to be Japanese (Runescape Wiki, 2019a; 2020a; 2021a). “Thalassia,” on the other hand, is a Greek word. Arguably, then, the Wushanko Isles represent a homogenization of culturally diverse regions - largely produced in-game through an Orientalizing process (Said, 1979) - rather than a historically accurate depiction of any specific region. Mukherjee (2018, pp. 516-17) arrived at similar conclusions regarding the inaccurate portrayal of Orientalized cultures in other video games.

The commodities gathered in POP further the aura of cultural exoticism and advance colonial motifs. The first resource encountered is bamboo. Though its cultivation has spanned the Asia-Pacific region (Banik, 2015, p. 169), the plant is most strongly associated with China for its historical importance therein (Lucas, 2013, p. 63). Jade, another POP commodity, has a history as a highly sought-after resource; China was especially interested in Burmese jade in the 15th century, while British colonizers attempted to take over the lucrative trade in the late 19th century (Tagliacozzo and Chang, 2011, pp. 463–467). The highest commonly obtainable POP

resource is “Azure”—probably a reference to the gemstone lapis lazuli which has been traded in Asia for millennia. The stone was mined in northern Afghanistan and transported to Ancient Egypt around 2750 BCE, while Kushan and Sogdian merchants traded it to the Chinese for use in Buddhist temples around 300 CE (Tracy, 2011).

While traders and merchants are among the crew for hire in POP, players are not sending expeditions solely to trade given that the minigame is described as an activity wherein one’s ships venture to the “Eastern Lands...to explore, do battle” (Runescape, 2012). At least some of the resources will be obtained through violence. For instance, for a higher chance of success some voyages require warrior-class crew members, implying that forceful resource extraction will take place. Whether commodities are obtained through violence or trade, players stand to gain immensely from resource acquisition because these goods act as currency used to upgrade POP buildings and fleets. Upgrading allows one to send out a greater number of ships that complete missions more efficiently, thereby bringing back more commodities. In these ways, the player's actions in POP parallel colonizers’ use of New World resources to advance European economies to the detriment of the colonies and those subjugated therein (Mintz, 1986).

Curating an upgraded fleet also allows the efficient acquisition of “trade goods,” including plate, lacquer, chi, spices, and pearls; each has its own Orientalist connotations. Plate is smithed into Tetsu armor, which resembles the equipment of a Samurai—medieval Japanese warriors (Turnbull, 2003). Chi is used to craft the Kiba and Makigai, magical Seasinger weapons. Both words are rooted in the Japanese language—“fang” and “spiral shell,” respectively.⁷ In reality, chi is the vital energy for living things, key to the Chinese philosophical understanding of life (Cheng, 2003, pp. 615–617). Lacquer, used in-game to craft Death Lotus equipment, was historically used in pottery and furniture in Japan and China. Japanese lacquerers were at their most active between the 17th and early 20th centuries (Pekarik, 1980). Pearls, used in POP to make jewelry, were valuable Silk Road products that conveyed status (Beckwith, 2009, pp. 16–22). Traders from the Roman Empire looked to India for high quality pearls (Liu, 2010, p. 40), while Emperor Wudi of ancient China (reigning between 140–87 BC) sent missions to the shores of the Indian Ocean to procure them (Jacq-Hergoualc’h, 2001, p. 30). Finally, spices were a key Silk Road commodity, especially desirable in medieval Europe where they were valued for the status their consumption conferred, as well as for their usage in humoral medicine (Freedman, 2008). Thus, each of these Player-Owned Ports trade goods (or the products they result in) evoke cultural exoticism vis-à-vis Orientalism. Just as painting exploited societies as culturally Other was important to justifying historical colonial conquests, *Runescape*’s Orientalization of the “Eastern Lands” through geographic indicators and commodities constructs the region as a readily exploitable space for players to advance in-game progress.

The benefits of Player-Owned-Ports advancement are not limited to the confines of the minigame. Tetsu, Death Lotus, and Seasinger rank among the top equipment classes. Those using trade goods to produce this equipment can sell it to other players to advance economically. Even crafting these items yields considerable amounts of XP for minimal effort, allowing faster

leveling up and further incentivizing participation in the minigame. Thus, POP parallels European imperialist resource extraction. Players represent the colonial administrator sending ships to lands depicted as foreign. Ships return with commodities that contribute to the player's personal advancement, just as European powers used New World commodities to fuel their own economic advancement.

Jagex expanded access to the Wushanko Isles in 2016; no longer limited to exploring vicariously through fleets, players could now themselves travel to the Arc region of the Isles. While much of the player's previous understanding of the region came from information provided by POP crew members, experiencing it first-hand allows users to visually perceive the spaces that POP describes in mostly textual ways.

Exploring the Arc reveals islands laden with Orientalist cultural representations. In the main island of Waiko, players encounter a market with a backdrop of palm trees, bamboo, and huts, immediately painting the space as tropical. In the vicinity are two statues described as "Moai." Historically, the Polynesian Rapa Nui people carved Moai statues on Easter Island between 1250 and 1500 for ritualistic purposes (Fischer, 2005, pp. 33–34). However, Polynesia is not the only region referenced. Nearby is a house belonging to the Khan of Waiko. Traditionally, Khans were rulers in the Mongol and Mughal Empires. Far from simply evoking any one society, Waiko incorporates tokenistic themes from Asian cultures across time and space to present a homogenized representation of the "Far East."

The island of Aminishi is similarly made up of elements from various Asian cultures. The most notable feature is the Temple of Aminishi, where creatures are slain for rewards. Therein reside the humanoid monsters Sotapanna and Sakadagami, alongside the dragons Anagami and Arhat. These terms refer to the four stages of awakening in Buddhism (Buswell and Lopez, 2014, pp. 65), suggesting that the Temple of Aminishi is based on a Buddhist temple. The cultural orientations of the Temple are harder to pinpoint. For instance, Anagami and Arhat could be based on dragons from either Chinese or Japanese mythology. On the other hand, Sotapanna warriors wield katanas—Japanese weapons—offering a more definitive cultural referent. The main boss, Seiryu the Azure Serpent, asserts ties to multiple cultures. While the azure dragon is important to Chinese mythology (Roberts, 2010, p. 33), the name "Seiryu" is the Japanese word for this creature (Brown, 2014, p. 13). On the other hand, the mini-boss Ahoeitu is a figure in Polynesian mythology. This multitude of cultural referents suggests that the Arc is exoticized via Orientalism, setting it up as a land of colonial Others for exploitation by the player.

Aside from exploring main islands, players can also sail to "Uncharted Isles." These are isolated spaces with randomly generated commodities. Much like their inhabited counterparts, Uncharted Isles are Orientalized through the inclusion of Moai statues, extractable bamboo, and "Tajjitu," a valuable in-game currency that resembles the Ying-Yang symbol of Chinese Taoist philosophy. One can also fish for wobbecong—a shark found in the coastal waters of modern-day Australia, Japan, Indonesia, and New Guinea (Corrigan et al., 2008), placing the Uncharted Isles squarely in the Asia-Pacific region. Tropicity is another theme advanced vis-à-vis palm

trees, sandy beaches, azure oceans, and volcanos (**Figure 4**). Orientalism and tropicity work in tandem to paint the Uncharted Isles as a foreign picturesque ripe for lucrative resource extraction, depicted in ways not unlike descriptions of the Americas by colonial-era European explorers (Cocks, 2007; Thompson, 2007).



Figure 4. An Uncharted Isle, complete with resources ready for extraction. Screenshot by the author (2022). RuneScape is a copyright of Jagex Ltd.

The treatment of Arc currencies advances imperialist exploration cyclically. Resources harvested on the Uncharted Isles are sold to Waiko merchants for “Chimes.” That currency can be spent on another—“Supplies”—which players pay to Quartermaster Gully to journey to a randomly generated Uncharted Isle with more resources. The commodity-currency exchange perpetuates a cycle in which resource extraction funds further exploitation of unexplored islands, paralleling imperialist exploration wherein European sailors sought “new” lands and used the monetary gains of empire to expand further.

Further alluding to empire, players who find an island with a favorable distribution of harvestable commodities can plant a flag to “claim” it, unlocking the ability to return to the same locality once daily. Given that European nation states routinely claimed supposedly undiscovered lands as their own in the Age of Exploration, the player’s ability to claim an island parallels historical instances of Euro-colonial expansion.

Some types of resource extraction allude to imperialism in especially potent ways. While Uncharted Isles most commonly generate object resources, they sometimes generate people. “Gu ruin” warriors are but one example. Dressed in attire that resembles traditional Japanese Samurai equipment, they wield a katana in one hand and wakizashi in the other; both weapons were historically used by Samurais. Players can slay these warriors for more resources. This example, perhaps more than any of the others, evokes imperialism because people from faraway lands are treated as resources. They are generated and harvested as easily as sharks or bamboo, useful only for the monetarily valuable items they may yield when killed. Their lives are disposable, just as assigning lower value to colonial subjects was a common theme in the expansion of European empires. Colonial officials viewed the lives of indigenous inhabitants and African slaves as similarly expendable—as little more than a means to generate profit for the metropole (Drescher, 2009, pp. 5, 99, 296; Johnson, 2001, pp. 19, 78–79, 118, 207).

Expanded access to the Arc enabled more intimate encounters between the self and the subjects of empire. Players stand to benefit immensely from this more personal form of exploitation. Generous XP rates are the main benefit of collecting Uncharted Isles resources. One can train Mining, Woodcutting, Fishing, Farming, Divination, and Cooking, and Uncharted Isles yield some of the best available XP rates for these skills, incentivizing participation in the exploration of those islands. Jagex even stated in their official news release of the Arc that one would find “really high-level skilling... in the Eastern Lands and you’ll have to keep on exploring the Uncharted Isles for a chance to find it” (Runescape, 2016), encouraging high-intensity exploration towards account progress.

The player character thus exploits human and non-human commodities in the Wushanko Isles—be it through Player-Owned-Ports or exploration of the Arc’s Uncharted Isles. The goal is personal gain, both monetary and optimal XP rates, contributing to efficient account progress. In exploiting the Wushanko Isles, one participates virtually in activities that closely resemble Age of Exploration imperialist projects.

Conclusion

This article has explored parallels between select activities in *Runescape* and historical colonialism. It has argued that *Runescape* provides opportunities for the player to partake in exploitative archaeology, colonial cartography, imperial diplomacy, and resource extraction projects, prominent themes in the history of empire. I have asserted that participating in these activities significantly benefits the advancement of the player’s account.

Analysis of the evidence has sought to show how representations of historical colonial encounters are a basis of engagement in *Runescape*. It has also attempted to develop a guiding framework for the further study of MMORPGs in relation to how players materialize within the game and engage with their surroundings along the axis of colonialism. In studying how

historically based MMORPGs portray relationships between colonizers and the colonized, we stand to learn how representations of empire are circulated discursively through mass media avenues, as well as how game developers ask consumers to view the past. Given the game's role-playing and massively multiplayer genres, this framework can also be used in future research to illuminate how understandings of colonialism are circulated and transformed through the player's interactions with community members.

Notes

1. This article concerns *Runescape 3*, as opposed to the reboot *Old School Runescape* which was released in 2013.
2. Created accounts far outnumber players active at any given time; one could expect around 100,000 active players. On March 9, 2022, at the time of writing, over 97,000 were active as observed by the author using the player count on *Runescape's* main page.
3. The latter two are central to Egyptian mythology, while the references to the Pharaoh and mummies cement the assertion that Sophamen is representative of Egypt (Pinch, 2002, pp. 17, 58, 86, 152–53).
4. While certainly not the most important quest, the completion of every quest (231 as of September 30, 2021) is required to obtain the fabled “Completionist Cape,” a prestigious symbol of players who have completed every major requirement in the game.
5. British officials, for instance, represented imperialism as a way of gracing the colonies with British rule, bringing so-called order and morality to the New World (Carey, 2011).
6. The Wushanko Isles may even represent the Pacific region at large, which had a prominent history of European colonization. European powers, especially the British, French, and Dutch, consistently explored the Pacific islands between the 16th and 19th century (Behlmer, 2018; Kemp, 2011).
7. Translated via a Japanese-English dictionary.

References

- Arnold K. (2017). *Cabinets for the curious: Looking back at early English museums*. Routledge.
- Banik R. L. (2015). Bamboo Silviculture. In Liese W., Köhl M. (Eds.), *Bamboo: The plant and its uses* (pp. 113–174). Springer.
- Beckwith C. I. (2009). *Empires of the Silk Road: A history of Central Eurasia from the bronze age to the present*. Princeton University Press.
- Behlmer G. K. (2018). *Risky shores: Savagery and colonialism in the Western Pacific*. Stanford University Press.
- Blaut J. M. (1993). *The colonizer's model of the world: Geographical diffusionism and Eurocentric history*. Guilford Press.
- Brown A. (2014). *The genius of Japanese carpentry: Secrets of an ancient craft*. Tuttle.
- Buswell R. E.Jr., Lopez D. S.Jr. (2014). *The Princeton dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton University Press.
- Carey H. M. (2011). *God's empire: Religion and colonialism in the British world, c. 1801–1908*. Cambridge University Press.

- Cheng C-y. (2003). Qi (Ch'i): Vital force. In Cua A. S. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Chinese philosophy* (pp. 615–617). Routledge.
- Cocks C. (2007). The pleasures of degeneration: Climate, race, and the origins of the global tourist south in the Americas. *Discourse*, 29(2), 215–235.
- Corrigan S., Huvneers C., Schwartz T. S., Harcourt R. G., Beheregaray L. B. (2008). Genetic and reproductive evidence for two species of ornate wobbegong shark *Orectolobus* spp. on the Australian east coast. *Journal of Fish Biology*, 73(7), 1662–1675 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1095-8649.2008.02039.x>
- Crowe N., Bradford S. (2006). 'Hanging out in Runescape': Identity, work and leisure in the virtual playground. *Children's Geographies*, 4(3), 331–346 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280601005740>
- Crowe N., Watts M. (2014). 'When I click "ok" I become Sassy—I become a girl'. Young people and gender identity: subverting the 'body' in massively multi-player online role-playing games. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 19(2), 217–231 <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2012.736868>
- De Sousa Y. F., Munro A. (2012). Truck, barter and exchange versus the endowment effect: Virtual field experiments in an online game environment. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 33(3), 482–493 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2011.12.011>
- De Wildt L., Aupers S. (2019). Playing the other: Role-playing religion in videogames. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(5–6), 867–884 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418790454>
- Díaz-Andreu M. (2007). *A world history of nineteenth-century archaeology: Nationalism, colonialism, and the past*. Oxford University Press.
- Drescher S. (2009). *Abolition: A history of slavery and antislavery*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dyer-Witheford N., De Peuter G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Eriksen M. H. (2019). *Architecture, society, and ritual in Viking age Scandinavia: Doors, dwellings, and domestic space*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fischer S. R. (2005). *Islands at the end of the world: The turbulent history of Easter Island*. Reaktion Books.
- Foss R. (2012). *Rum: A global history*. Reaktion Books.
- Freedman P. (2008). *Out of the East: Spices and the medieval imagination*. Yale University Press.
- Game Developer. (2017). Jagex claims three Guinness World Records for RuneScape. https://www.gamasutra.com/view/pressreleases/302859/Jagex_claims_three_Guinness_World_Records_forRuneScape.php
- Glasspool L. (2016). Making masculinity: Articulations of gender and Japaneseness in Japanese RPGs and Machinima. In Pulos A., Lee S. A. (Eds.), *Transnational contexts of culture, gender, class, and colonialism in play* (pp. 99–125). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Griffiths M. D., King R. (2015). Are mini-games within RuneScape gambling or gaming? *Gaming Law Review and Economics*, 19(9), 640–643 <https://doi.org/10.1089/gltre.2015.1995>
- Guins R. (2014). *Game after: A cultural study of video game afterlife*. MIT Press.
- Guo Y. (2009). *The development of a model for empirically testing virtual item purchase behaviour in virtual worlds: Theory and results*. PhD Dissertation. University of East Anglia.
- Higgins T. (2009). Blackless fantasy: The disappearance of race in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. *Games and Culture*, 4(1), 3–26 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008325477>
- Hutchinson R. (2016). Virtual colonialism: Japan's others in SoulCalibur. In Pulos A., Lee S. A. (Eds.), *Transnational contexts of culture, gender, class, and colonialism in play* (pp. 155–178). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Jacq-Hergoualc'h M. (2001). *The Malay Peninsula: Crossroads of the maritime Silk Road (100 BC - 1300 AD)*. Victoria Hobson (Trans). Brill.
- Johnson W. (2001). *Soul by soul: Life inside the antebellum slave market*. Harvard University Press.
- Katajala-Peltomaa S., Niiranen S. (2014). Perspectives to mental (Dis)order in later Medieval Europe. In Katajala-Peltomaa S., Niiranen S. (Eds.), *Mental (Dis)order in later Medieval Europe*. Brill.
- Kemp S. (2011). *European colonialism in the Asia-Pacific: Its rise and fall*. Trocadero.
- Lammes S. (2003). *On the border: Pleasure of exploration and colonial mastery in civilization III play the world*. Digital Games Research Association.
- Langer J. (2008). The familiar and the foreign: Playing (Post) colonialism in world of warcraft. In Corneliusen H. G., Rettberg J. W. (Eds.), *Digital culture, play, and identity: A world of warcraft reader* (pp. 87–108). MIT Press.
- LaPensée E. (2021). When rivers were trails: Cultural expression in an indigenous video game. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 27(3), 281–295 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1746919>
- Lehr P. (2019). *Pirates: A new history, from Vikings to Somali raiders*. Yale University Press.
- Leonard D. J., King C. R. (2009). Replaying empire: Racialized violence, insecure frontiers, and displaced terror in contemporary video games. *Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World*, 1(2), 2–14 <https://doi.org/10.7227/erct.1.2.1>
- Lewis M. J. (1995). *Stout*. Brewers Publications.
- Liu X. (2010). *The Silk Road in world history*. Oxford University Press.
- Lucas S. (2013). *Bamboo*. Reaktion Books.
- Lydon J., Rizvi U. Z. (Eds.), (2016). *Handbook of postcolonial archaeology*. Routledge.
- Martin J. W. (2016). The united fruit company's tourist business and the creation of the "Golden Caribbean," 1899–1940. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 8(2), 238–262 <https://doi.org/10.1108/jhrm-01-2015-0004>
- McWilliams J. E. (2005). *A revolution in eating: How the quest for food shaped America*. Columbia University Press.
- Mintz S. W. (1986). *Sweetness and power: The place of sugar in modern history*. Penguin.
- Monson M. J. (2012). Race-based fantasy realm: Essentialism in the world of warcraft. *Games and Culture*, 7(1), 48–71 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012440308>
- Mukherjee S. (2017). *Videogames and postcolonialism: Empire plays back*. Springer.
- Mukherjee S. (2018). Playing subaltern: Video games and postcolonialism. *Games and Culture*, 13(5), 504–520 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015627258>
- Nardo D. (2010). *The Vikings*. Lucent Books.
- Navarro-Remesal V. (2018). Gender, sex and romance in role playing video games: Dragon's Dogma, Fable III and dragon age: Inquisition. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 177–191 https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs.10.2.177_1
- Pekarik A. J. (1980). *Japanese Lacquer, 1600-1900: Selections from the Charles A. Greenfield Collection*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Penix-Tadsen P. (2016). *Cultural code: Video games and Latin America*. MIT Press.
- Piatti-Farnell L. (2016). *Banana: A global history*. Reaktion Books.
- Pinch G. (2002). *Handbook of Egyptian mythology*. Abc-Clio.
- Pratt M. L. (2007). *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*. Routledge.
- Rhea Antonia Vichot. (2019). *Virtual worlds as contact zones: Development, localization, and intergroup communication in MMORPGs*. PhD Dissertation. University of Southern California.

- Robe I. (2018). *Inescapably social: Dimensions of self-construction in the virtual social world of runescape*. Masters Thesis. East Tennessee State University.
- Roberts J. (2010). *Chinese mythology: A to Z*. Chelsea House.
- Ruberg B. (2020). *The queer games avant-garde: How LGBTQ game makers are reimagining the medium of video games*. Duke University Press.
- Runescape. (2012). Player-owned ports. <https://secure.runescape.com/m=news/player-owned-ports>
- Runescape. (2016). The arc & uncharted ISLES | Invention XP | Flourishing fairy outfit. https://secure.runescape.com/m=news/the-arc--uncharted-isles--invention-xp--flourishing-fairy-outfit?jptg=ia&jptv=community_news
- Runescape Wiki. (2019a). Hanto. <https://runescape.wiki/w/Hanto>
- Runescape Wiki. (2019b). Hyu-Ji. <https://runescape.wiki/w/Hyu-Ji>
- Runescape Wiki. (2020a). Ashihama. <https://runescape.wiki/w/Ashihama>
- Runescape Wiki. (2020b). Transcript of tribal totem. https://runescape.wiki/w/Transcript:Tribal_Totem
- Runescape Wiki. (2021a). Goshima. <https://runescape.wiki/w/Goshima>
- Runescape Wiki. (2021b). The Arc. https://runescape.wiki/w/The_Arc
- Runescape Wiki. (2021c). The Hook. https://runescape.wiki/w/The_Hook
- Runescape Wiki. (2021d). The Scythe. https://runescape.wiki/w/The_Scythe
- Runescape Wiki. (2021e). The Skull. https://runescape.wiki/w/The_Skull
- Runescape Wiki. (2021f). The world wakes. https://runescape.wiki/w/The_World_Wakes
- Runescape Wiki. (2021g). Transcript of legends' quest. https://runescape.wiki/w/Transcript:Legends%27_Quest
- Said E. (1979). *Orientalism*. Random House.
- Šisler V. (2008). Digital Arabs: Representation in video games. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(2), 203–220 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1567549407088333>
- Tagliacozzo E., Chang W-C. (2011). *Chinese circulations: Capital, commodities, and networks in Southeast Asia*. Duke University Press.
- Thompson K. A. (2007). *An eye for the tropics: Tourism, photography, and framing the Caribbean picturesque*. Duke University Press.
- Tracy J. D. (2011). Trade across Eurasia to about 1750. In Bentley J. H. (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of world history*. Oxford University Press.
- Turnbull S. (2003). *The world of the warrior*. Osprey Publishing.
- Vandenbosch L., Driesmans K., Trekels J., Eggermont S. (2017). Sexualized video game avatars and self-objectification in adolescents: The role of gender congruency and activation frequency. *Media Psychology*, 20(2), 221–239 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2016.1142380>
- Wilk R. (2006). *Home cooking in the global village: Caribbean food from buccaneers to ecotourists*. Berg.
- Wills J. (2019). *Gamer nation: Video games and American culture*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Winroth A. (2014). *The age of the Vikings*. Princeton University Press.
- Wolswijk H. (2012). Theft: Taking a virtual object in RuneScape: Judgment of 31 January 2012, case no. 10/00101 J. *The Journal of Criminal Law*, 76(6), 459–462 <https://doi.org/10.1350/1740-5580-76.6.459>
- Zori D., Byock J., Erlendsson E., Martin S., Wake T., Edwards K. J. (2013). Feasting in Viking Age Iceland: Sustaining a chiefly political economy in a marginal environment. *Antiquity*, 87(335), 150–165 <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003598x00048687>