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# Cybernetic Irony: Racial Humour from Mecha-Hitler to Nuclear

## Gandhi

*Darshana Jayemanne and Cameron Kunzelman*

### Abstract

This chapter investigates relations between race and humour in digital games. Registering these complexities, we then focus on irony with particular focus on ‘Nuclear Gandhi’: the widespread gamer meme that an overflow error in *Civilisation II* caused Gandhi to appear as a hyper-aggressive character which, ironically, clashed with the historical record from which the game drew design and aesthetic legitimacy. However, *Civilisation* eminence Sid Meier has recently stated that this is false: the humorous Nuclear Gandhi is in fact a complex entanglement of technical, social and cultural factors. Drawing on Bhabha’s discussion of ‘sly civility’, we theorise Nuclear Gandhi as ‘cybernetic irony’ in which the collective element of humour is mediated by techno-racial claims to objectivity.

**Keywords:** Irony, cybernetic, Civilisation, Sid Meier, Homi Bhabha, sly civility, race, humour

### Introduction

If you could go back in time, would you try to kill Hitler? For many, the answer to this pop-philosophical quandary would change upon stepping out of the time machine to see Hitler stomping towards them in a walking tank, firing four gatling guns.

Battlemech Hitler in *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992) answered the need to make the arch-villain a gameplay challenge, but the character’s affect is (or at least, has become) ridiculous rather than fearsome in this game, which is canonical in forming the ‘first-person’ viewpoint in digital games. *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus* (Machine Games 2017) is far more studied in its comedic mediation of the Reich leader. Hitler is indeed surrounded by nightmarish supersoldiers reminiscent of his first appearance in the series. He is protected on a Venusian base that

comically exceeds the realities of the real-world 'space race'. This remarkable advancement is due to the Nazis' use of technologies stolen from an ancient order of Jewish scientists known as the *Da'at Yichud*, and has led to Axis victory in World War II and, by the 1960s, Nazi occupation of the United States. This horrific scenario and its attendant racial politics are often expressed through humour: in front of an American diner, we can witness two robed and hooded Klansmen attempting to impress an iron-clad Reich soldier. The latter sends them packing, disgusted with their sub-par racism and cloddish attempts at German language.

The game design obliges the typical AAA 'difficulty curve' in the Venus level by introducing new more challenging enemies, and a new space-faring level design. The city is suspended above the sulfuric clouds, offsetting the by-now familiar swastika-festooned versions of various terrestrial cities. Machine Games flip the encounter with the Nazi leader, who is not an armoured superhuman but a bathetic figure presented in the mode of ironic farce. Player character BJ Blazkowitz has infiltrated the Venusian base disguised as an actor auditioning for a part in a movie written by the Nazi leader. The play is about 'Terror-Billy' - the propagandist view of BJ and his adventures killing Nazis in the previous *Wolfenstein* game. BJ is, ironically, in disguise as an actor auditioning to be the hyper-violent avatar he has always been.

In contrast to *Battlemech Hitler* of 1992, this vision of Hitler is still comical, but less ludicrous than bathetic. He is shown to lack self-consciousness about urinating and vomiting; the auditioning actors, his assistant and the guards studiously pretend not to notice. He casually murders one of the actors who displeases him, and his assistant smiles and crosses the name off her clipboard. The murder is conducted with a WWII-era Luger pistol, and Hitler's movie will use a highly dated 1940s cinematic style. In spite of the high-tech sky city interplanetary base that displays insuperable colonialist and expansionist power, he still seeks for ways to project himself on a world that is changing beneath him.

As Hans-Joachim Backe argues "This ambivalence in the portrayal of Hitler (as well as historical events and characters in general) situates the game less in a historiographical than a satirical tradition—one which, as I argue, is drawing heavily on the carnivalesque tradition" (2018). Apart from the carnivalesque, *Wolfenstein's* decades-long shift from armoured to bathetic Hitler also reflects Susan Buck-Morss's notion of the 'spiral of aesthetics and anaesthetics' (1992) – the

vacillation between inexpressive, armoured body and hyper-expressive gesturality she sees as characteristic of authoritarianism. Hitler's grotesque inability to contain himself is contrasted with his paranoid obsession with relations of surface and depth in others: he snarls that actors have the same capabilities for illusion and deception as spies, and speculates on the potential non-Aryan ancestry of the actors in spite of their appearance. At the end, BJ gets the part by actually enacting homicidal violence on a guard. Hitler finds this cutscene performance of exactly the sort of thing that players really did in the last game very convincing.

It's a lot! We haven't even mentioned that BJ was executed by beheading earlier in the game after being captured (due to betrayal by his abusive white supremacist American father), but was saved for more Nazi-slaying fun when he had his severed head grafted onto a Nazi supersoldier's body. Or that, later in the game, players can uncover a postcard sent by Hitler himself, mentioning how he dreamed that he encountered BJ Blazkowitz in 'one of those mechanical robots General Strasse built for me... I will find the man to play Terror-Billy soon' - a reference to the climactic encounter as played out in *Wolfenstein 3D* (Capel 2017).

A Hitler who more than achieves his totalitarian goals in WWII is still just a race-obsessed despot and is far from the racial super-being imagined by Nazi race theory. On the other hand, BJ is in fact exactly who Hitler accuses him of being (a spy, an actor, a Jew, a supersoldier, BJ Blazkowitz, 'Terror-Billy', the protagonist of a piece of media set in the 1940s, and the player character). Ultimate antagonist and player character BJ are both presented *ironically*.

As a term, irony is notoriously slippery, as can be perceived in the Oxford English Dictionary's first and second definitions of the word. We understand irony both in its form as "the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect" *and* as "dissimulation, pretence" (OED). In these combined registers, we see irony as working on both the surface level to generate humour, and as a kind of hiding or concealment of intent. This dual investment of irony elucidates how something can be both funny *and* contain tools of deconstruction of the structure it is operating within.

Irony is also of interest because it is a trope that has--at least since Schlegel, who termed it 'permanent parabasis'--the potential to disturb systematising work in philosophy and philosophical aesthetics (Roy 2009). As the philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote in his famous

analysis of Socratic irony in Plato, “irony does not consist in the dissolution of a sophistic charm or in the dismantling of an occult substance or power through analysis in questioning”, but instead “consists in a certain inconsistency, a certain impropriety, this nonidentity-with-itself always allowing it to be turned against itself” (Derrida 2004, 119).

Wayne C. Booth, writing from a literary perspective, outlines a series of steps by which irony is understood. These chart a movement from the realisation of a meaning beyond the surface meaning to a speculative attitude towards the intentionality of the speaker once it is decided that they cannot be speaking in earnest. Readers make a decision on the ironist’s ‘knowledge or beliefs’ which help us ‘finally choose a new meaning or cluster of meanings with which we can rest secure’ (12). This security rests in the shared understanding of a community of listeners: for Booth, it is important that we grasp the double meaning of irony in the context of a social whole. Irony is an:

astonishing communal achievement... Its complexities are, after all, shared: the whole thing cannot work at all unless both parties to the exchange have confidence that they are moving together in identical patterns. The wonder of it is not that it should go awry as often as it does, but that it should ever succeed. (13).

The ironies of Terror-Billy and Mecha-Hitler may well appear absurd or offensive to generalist audiences, but the irony is apparent to gamers. Versed in *Wolfenstein* history, Machine Games’ characterisations are much more likely to appear in ironic mode (in addition to the carnivalesque elements discussed by Backe).

However, we argue that gaming gives rise to a new form of irony which we term ‘cybernetic irony’. Where Booth outlines a sender-receiver model (albeit mediated by the social component required for the security of the final meaning), in digital games we argue it is necessary to trace a more complex interplay of the heterogeneous elements – cultural and technical – of which digital games are particularly capable. To illustrate this, following a brief general discussion of racial humour in games, we move from “Terror-Billy” and “Battlemech Hitler” to an analysis of “Nuclear Gandhi”. Nuclear Gandhi is a joke arising from the perceived representation of Gandhi in *Civilization II*. The analysis necessarily ranges across game rules, narrative and cultural reception. Engaging with the work of Homi Bhabha and Sid Meier, we will argue that Nuclear

Gandhi is “funny” because he ironically breaks the raced and colonised “rules” of representation within the game space. This contrasts with the simulationist and objectivist fantasy of the grand strategy game design and complicates Booth’s notion of ironic ‘reconstruction’, resonating with what Bhabha has termed ‘*sly civility*’.

## **Racial Humour and Games**

Before returning to the question of irony, we will discuss some of the broader entanglements between race and humour in digital games. All of the dynamics that Billig (2005) identifies in Occidental thought on humour (superiority, incongruity, and relief) are legible in AAA videogames, which for years have been accompanied by a steady drumbeat of problematic, exploitative or unreflective depictions of race. This is also reflected in the wider games culture.

Here, we will give a few examples of problematic racial humour in games, broken down by racial humour *in* particular games, and racial humour in the wider *games culture*. The goal here is to be indicative rather than comprehensive. Digital games culture is a powerful locus for fantasies about both race and technological futures, but this can often lead to humour that may be inadvertent – as may be expected from an industry in which racial representation remains intensely problematic (Browne 2020).

### *Racial Humour in Games*

Logics of inherent racial propensities and capabilities are common game design tropes, and often align with cultural and ethnic signifiers in the construction of virtual worlds (Hammar 2017; Mukherjee & Hammar 2018). These techniques can help to address a range of design problems in digital games. The dynamic audio-visual worlds of videogames often call for distinctive silhouettes and colour schemes as an aid to the legibility of character and level designs. This gives rise to *serial aesthetics* (Ndalianis 2004) where studied repetition underwrites gameplay consistency: a given group of entities in the game world are of a given ‘race’, and have certain qualities assigned to them. This strategy may have design payoffs, but with regard to race has often sanctioned emphasis on and exaggeration of specific audio-visual characteristics which

can range from mawkish to recreating the worst aspects of racial caricature. Tara Fickle has called this convergence of representational and algorithmic forms the ‘run-time behaviour’ (2019, 7) of racial logics.

Racially-coded characters are often used as repetitive enemies in games from fantasy to military shooters, to be mown down without remorse or reflection. To call such tropes into question is to be accused of ‘ruining the fun’, called overly serious and a spoilsport, reminded that it’s ‘just a game,’ a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has ever read the comments on an article about video games. However these gameplay and narrative structures, which often instantiate what Murray (2017) has identified as narratives of white peril and crisis common in games, can lead to overtly humorous results in their very attempts at earnestness. Perhaps the most egregious example of this is the *Homefront* series, which imagines a United States in the process of being conquered by a foe that is poorly defined apart from distinctive East Asian racial coding. For another example, we can turn to Souvik Mukherjee’s point about the “Persona non grata” level of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011), which features combat between US and Russian forces. The level takes place in Himachal Pradesh. Much mayhem ensues as powerful weapons of war are brought to bear far from the home territories of the contending American and Russian powers--but it would seem that the enormous Indian army was elsewhere at the time. These racially charged scenarios are flatly ludicrous, but delivered in the po-faced ‘realist’ modality of the military shooter game.

Similarly, in spite of the vast R&D resources devoted to developing game character models, techniques for representing black and brown bodies and looks are often notable for their absence or their implicit coding through presets in character creation systems (Phillips 2020, see also A.M. Darke’s critique of racial character models available from popular 3D asset stores and Open Source Afro Hair Library). The intersection of racial logics with digital games produce situations in which the capabilities of both those systems become mutually-reinforcing, creating systems of simulation, representation, and play that present players with hard-coded racialisation. They are often conduits of the reproduction of stereotyping, as is exemplified by Augustus Cole from the *Gears of War* franchise, who Kishonna Gray has called “hypermasculine, hyperphysical, and hypersexual” and is built from narrative tropes about Black men that extend back to the plantation era (Gray 2020, 48). We may also think of the troll ‘race’ in *World of*

*Warcraft*, which remediates racial, ethnic and religious traits such as from Caribbean diasporic cultures in worldbuilding and character design (Higgin 2009), or the ‘gamic orientalism’ (Goto-Jones 2015) of games like *Shadow Warrior*.

### *Race and Humour in Game Culture*

Gaming’s emphases and lacunae make it a notable locus in which racial discourses are played out and played with. Billig argues that humour has a disciplinary social function that carries certain ideological assumptions: ‘The superiority, incongruity and relief theories were essentially individualist rather than social theories’ (2005, 195). Such limitations are liable to be incorporated into empirical studies of humour as unquestioned assumptions, but critical and social theory can be helpful here by reminding us of comedy and humour as *ridicule, unlaughter, embarrassment*: ‘Everyday codes of behaviour are protected by the practice of embarrassment... What is embarrassing is typically comic to onlookers. Social actors fear this laughter... ridicule has a universal role in the maintenance of order’ (200-201). Drawing on C.L.R. James’ work on the ludic context of cricket, Billig writes:

He prefaced his book on the history of cricket with an epigram adapted from Rudyard Kipling: ‘What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?’ (James, 1964: 11). His point was that cricket experts, who supposedly know about the game but who have not studied social and political history, do not properly understand the game. When they watch a match, there is so much they cannot notice. The specialist, who principally knows but one subject area, does not properly know that area. It is the same with humour. To understand the social and psychological significance of humour, one needs more than a knowledge of the specialist research. (Billig, 4)

Racial humour in games similarly calls for a widened lens that places instances within a cultural context. This includes official cultural productions such as the non-serious way that game advertising handles minorities (Peck et al. 2011), but it also extends to vernacular gaming culture.



Gaming has been notable as a cultural and methodological touchstone for regressive movements that seek to ‘hack the social’ (Milner 2011). The gamelike behaviours and tactics displayed by groups such as Gamergate are one manifestation of the use of racial humour to embarrass and ridicule, but they are reflections of more spontaneous moments in gaming culture. ‘Trash talk’ in games often subjects gamers to racist ‘jokes’ in the heat of play (Gray 2013); well-known gaming influencer Felix Kjellberg played a stunt by using the platform Fiverr to pay two Sri Lankan men to hold up signs displaying anti-semitic messages (Spangler 2017).

At the height of the 2020 #BLM protests against racist policing in the United States, which coincided with widespread COVID-19 lockdowns in which game spaces became a common venue for social events, *Fortnite* hosted a discussion on racial issues titled “We the People”. The platform used a special non-competitive instance of the game which truncates players’ usual range of action to screen the documentary. Nevertheless, some attendees of the screenings used an emote that simulates a thrown tomato in a manner that was at odds with the gravity of the issues being discussed. From a tweet thread by games journalist Justin Carter:

I wish I could judge the thing based on its content, but honestly got distracted in part by other players who were just dicking around with their gear and paragliding and zip lining off shit... At one point Killer Mike was talking with Jemele Hill. Meanwhile some players threw tomatoes at the screen. Someone was hitting everyone with a giant motorcycle... I dunno what I was expecting but honestly given Epic’s history with black voices and the dance emote controversy, they coulda done a LOT more with this (Carter 2020).

This scenario shows the increasing complexity of racial dynamics in digital games, and their entanglement with social phenomena. However where we have certainly seen examples of Billig’s ridicule, unlaughter and embarrassment as a disciplinary force acting on diverse players in digital games, we have also seen examples where this has not been evident in the work of game developers. In spite of the resources brought to bear in the making of *Modern Warfare*, the laughability of an absence of Indians in a level set in India did not in practice exert much disciplinary force over the developers or the many players who bought the game. In the case of *Fortnite*’s “We the People” event, *in spite of* the clear intent of Epic Games, in what Fickle

would call the ‘run-time behaviour’, players found affordances in the game to diminish the solemnity of the topic and the eminence of the speakers.

As such, while concurring with Billig’s call to place individual instances of humour within the wider context, we would yet further widen the lens to encompass social and nonhuman actors. To further investigate these complexities, we now turn to the case of Nuclear Gandhi, in which an ‘irony’ arises that is not in the final analysis attributable either to developers or players, but in a mutual misrecognition of the status of a nonhuman entity.

### **Sharpened Reality**

Sid Meier’s 2020 autobiography *Memoir!* is an elaborate journey through the esteemed game developer’s 40-year career. One of its final chapters is named “Funny Business,” and the first half of it is dedicated to lightly touching on both humour in games in general and humour in Meier’s own projects specifically. He explains that humour can “engage the audience with a sharpened version of reality” and that it has a “counterintuitive ability to make serious moments more potent” (Meier and Newton, 259). He gives a range of examples of how this has worked, from developer inserts in games to joke achievements in more recent work, before settling on the “funniest” one across the games he has made: “Nuclear Gandhi” (261).

The games in the *Civilization* series are about competing factions (“civilizations” or “civs”) who are competing to reach victory conditions. These civilisations each have different affinities and statistics, and they are represented by historical icons who are “generally their most well-known historical figure” (261). For example, in the most recent entry of the series, *Civilization VI*, the Egyptian civ is led by Cleopatra and the Mongolians are led by Genghis Khan. Meier revealed that this act of summarising an entire political apparatus into statistics and a singular figure, a key feature of the *Civilization* games, ran into issues where it came to the historical figure of Gandhi. After all, a noted pacifist was an odd fit for a game that included ballistic and nuclear warfare as gameplay options and win conditions for each faction. This disjuncture between cultural history and game mechanics created a scenario for a different kind of Gandhi to emerge.

Meier walks us through a long story about Gandhi as represented in the code of *Civilization*. He alleges that military aggressiveness was mapped as a value between 1-12 for all civs in the game. In an effort to represent Gandhi as averse to warfare, the developers of the game set his initial military aggressiveness value to 1. A complication was introduced when that original value interacted with the dynamics of the game; adopting the governmental structure of democracy lowers military aggressiveness by 2, placing Gandhi's military aggressiveness at -1. However, due to the way the code of the game functioned, this caused an overflow error. Instead of going into a negative value, the military aggressiveness merely "turned over" and restarted at the top of its possible range of 255. This meant that Gandhi was no longer a pacifist, but instead a hyper-violent warmonger who literally could not be more aggressive. This would lead to scenarios in which Gandhi would "turn into a vicious warmonger and begin nuking everyone in range" (262). This irony was, of course, funny. Players expected Gandhi to act one way based on their preconceptions of how he was supposed to act in the game, and he operated in a way that was diametrically opposed to that. Meier seems to take particular delight in describing the memes that have been made of a Gandhi who is willing to use nuclear weapons.

The revelation in *Sid Meier's Memoir!* around Nuclear Gandhi is an explosive one: none of this happened. The overflow error was never present in *Civilization*. India was not more aggressive than any other civ. While Gandhi would threaten nuclear war with the player as a tactic (like other civs do), this was to achieve "deterrence through mutually assured destruction" (263-265) pursuant to the India civ's algorithmic desire to prevent war. While players might have experienced threats of nuclear warfare from Gandhi as odd, at the level of code the faction was much the same as any other. Meier traces the life of this fictional story about Nuclear Gandhi across web pages, wikis, and forums until it was eventually laundered into "fact" by press coverage at the gaming site *Kotaku* in 2014, where it has since proliferated as fact across the media landscape (and even in a computer science class at Harvard University) until the release of *Memoir!*

Meier ends his analysis of this strange historical anecdote with a question: "What makes this particular story [about Nuclear Gandhi] so fascinating that it continues to generate traffic every time it's mentioned?" (265). He suggests a few reasons: it's a techy story, and people feel smart when they share it; it's a word-of-screen story that gets recycled regularly; it humanises the

developers because they made such a cataclysmic mistake. Outside of these reasoned explanations is another, more primal one that floated at the end of a paragraph: “And there’s the humor, which adds an extra jolt of longevity to anything it touches. Gandhi firing nukes is, and always has been, inherently funny, no matter how rarely it actually occurs” (265).

### *Sly Civilisation*

Our understanding of the phenomenon of Nuclear Gandhi emerges from a similar question to the one asked by Meier . What drives this story to be shared? What gives it such broad cultural cachet in the comedic universe of video games? Our questions extend beyond this as well. Why is it that Gandhi, specifically, creates a platform for this humorous relationship to appear between the player and the game?

Here we turn to Homi Bhabha’s discussions of ‘sly civility’ and ‘mimicry’. ‘Sly civility’ originates from an Archdeacon Potts from 1818 in reference to the colonisation of India by the British (Bhabha 1994, 99). Again focusing on the relation between coloniser and colonised, sly civility refers to the capability of the colonised person to “wear” the coloniser’s terms of existence like a mask that could slip or be thrown off at any moment. Much like the concept of mimicry, sly civility is predicated on the coloniser’s anxiety that there is always an excess of the colonised person; they are the same but not quite. In this context, however, Bhabha positions this relation as one predicated on the coloniser’s despotic demand for appealing narratives from the colonised (99), a demand which is always positioned as angled toward complete understanding or what Édouard Glissant would call ‘transparency’ (Glissant, 1997).

Bhabha’s opening to his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” provides additional articulations that allow us to understand the shape of this argument. In conversation with Edward Said, Bhabha argues there are two poles of the colonial project. On one side, there is a desire for stasis and stability. Colonisers impose strong structures and standards on colonised peoples to establish and continually shore up the colonial project through the functions of schools, social clubs, military operations, and any number of other ideological apparatuses. On the other side, there is the “counter-pressure of the diachrony of

history” (Bhabha 1984, 126), a disrupting force that produces change in the face of the always-attempted stasis of colonial rule. Between these two terms, Bhabha locates mimicry as a mode of the colonised subject, an “ironic compromise” (126) that produces “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (126).

Bhabha develops the concept of mimicry as a way of accounting for the inherent destabilisation of colonial rule that the colonial ideology brings with it. In creating a colonial subject, he argues, the coloniser generates subjects of uncanny resemblance. The colonised become “almost the same but not white” (130) – exhibiting the mannerisms and standards of the colonial power but emanating from a different set of embodied knowledges and cultural practices, introducing an ironic position in which an entire people *understand* the rules of colonisation and yet are ambivalent toward them. “Mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*” (128), and in so doing introduces a condition under which the colonising force cannot ever truly know when the colonised figure is producing the words or ideologies of colonisation sincerely; in this way, the colonised figure “looks back” at the coloniser through irony.

This reading of two concepts in Bhabha gives us a perspective through which to read Meier’s text. This surprise inherent to Nuclear Gandhi is the symptom of the reproduction in the micro situation of a larger systemic coloniser ideology which is dominant in the United States and Europe, the markets that *Civilization II* was aimed at. After all, what is surprising about Gandhi’s aggressiveness is not that he attacks the player with nuclear weapons; all opposing civs will do this, given the right circumstances. The surprise is grounded in the slyness, the mask slippage, in which Gandhi’s “real” existence in code has revealed itself to be radically different than whatever the mental model of the player would assume. In short, Nuclear Gandhi’s code, his digital DNA, makes him a liar in the eyes of the player, a fixation that Bhabha tracks through 19<sup>th</sup>-century British colonial anxiety (100). This has further been ramified as a joke in the code of subsequent Firaxis games *Civilisation V* (Pitts 2012) and *VI* (Jackson 2016), and in innumerable memes and thinkpieces since *Civ II*. For both the creators and implied players of *Civ* games, the joke remains “We thought he would be one way, and yet he is another.”

**Conclusion: Nuclear Gandhi as ‘Cybernetic Irony’**

Gaming legend has long held that a coding error had made the Gandhi character more prone to war than other factions, and this has been repeated as a kind of comical, ironic fact in the years since it began to circulate as rumour. The peace-loving real human is represented in the game as a warmonger. We have a “real” image of Gandhi, and the game version does not match up.

Haha!

It would be too easy to read the case of Nuclear Gandhi as a fiction built on top of a structure of widespread feeling. After all, the question of the relationship between code and the thing we play is often opaque, and so it would not be surprising to hear that some weird thing caused a particular bug to crop up in play. However, it is crucial to remember that *it never took place*. Gandhi was never more violent than other factions. The entirety of the ironic relation was produced in the heads of the players, and the story simply appeared to ground and give a logical reason for why that falsehood existed. It is a journalistic and vernacular discourse based on a fictional and procedural rhetoric that never was.

Nuclear Gandhi is a very different ironic phenomenon from Battlemech Hitler and Terror Billy. To understand why, we can return to Booth's stages of ironic reconstruction: first, we recognise that the surface meaning cannot be the intended meaning, then we reconstruct the ironic meaning. In the case of Machine Games and its ironic look back at the history of both gaming and state-mandated racism, the process of reconstruction seems to result in a ‘stable’ irony that allows the player to understand their relation to the humour before them. In contrast, the moment of ‘reconstruction’ in the Nuclear Gandhi (hereafter NG) story is fundamentally ambivalent even though, in Booth’s terms, those sharing the NG idea had confidence that they were ‘moving together in identical patterns’. Nor is it a case of ‘unstable’ irony (where the statement resists interpretation as ironic) or ‘infinite’ irony (where all statements are potentially ironically undermined): On the one hand, NG is ‘successful’ insofar as Gandhi, a political figure famed for peaceful protest, acts in a violent manner; on the other, an additional irony lies in the ascription of this behaviour to a computational error which Meier reveals never existed.

Critically, NG arises from the *sly* reconstruction of meaning between technical and cultural systems, a double-meaning that unsettles the implicit coloniser-colonised relationship. This problematises Booth’s notion of the collective aspect of irony. NG is only possible as a discourse

because both the foggy beliefs about the historical figure *and* the propensity for technocratic explanation dovetailed to lend it plausibility and share-ability. Reworking Booth, in NG we see an initial moment of questioning or incredulity (Gandhi shouldn't be violent!) 'secured' in the wider culture by a misrecognised technocratic explanation. In Bhabha's terms, the suspicion is always that the mask can slip to reveal the truth: it's just a computer program and, comfortingly, was never about race at all. This misrecognition we term *cybernetic irony*.

Cybernetic irony may be worth more study by humour scholars (to determine if it is indeed a new form of irony or if it can be assimilated to existing categories) and by game scholars (it is impossible to understand NG as a manifestation of 'real' rules and 'half-real' representation, as the former do not pre-exist the latter and the program was running just as intended). Discussions of irony often have a tendency to point beyond their immediate context to wider issues, and the cybernetic irony of NG indicates the wider reasons why games are so prone to pratfalls around race: in their tendency to utilise certain techniques of computational representation, they often reify race in ways that have been shown to be inadequate by research in fields such as critical race studies (Moten 2008) and decolonial and postcolonial studies (Chakraborty 2015; Quijano 2000).

The cybernetic irony of NG resembles the processes of enclosure and 'usufruct' through which Harney and Moten characterise the relation between the social contract and European exceptionalism: 'the social contract specified the individuation of its parties. Individuals now must be formed in order to enter into contract... it is not simply the individual, but rather the individual capable of self-improvement who must and can enter into the contract' (88). A microcosmic reflection of the social contract, NG is predicated on his becoming 'useful' as a play token subject to abstract rules and as a subject of continual self-improvement. There are innumerable inconsistencies and absurdities that result from Gandhi's *actual* gameplay positioning in *Civ 2* that have not led to NG-type discourse (for example, that a single continuous 'Indian' civilisation invariably ends up as a technocratic state obviates the scenario in which historical Gandhi was acting,; or the reality that NG was legitimately pursuing a set of win conditions that nowhere reflect Gandhi's political philosophy).

For Bhabha, colonial efforts at categorisation and administration represent a demand for narrative from the dispossessed: ‘*Tell us why you, the native, are there*’. However, this ‘colonialist demand for narrative carries, within it, its threatening reversal:

‘*Tell us why we are here*’. Such contradictory articulations of reality and desire – seen in racist stereotypes, statements, jokes, myths – are not caught in the doubtful circle of the return of the repressed. They are the effects of a disavowal that denies the differences of the other but produces in its stead forms of authority and multiple belief that alienate the assumptions of "civil" discourse... The ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from mimicry – a difference that is almost nothing but not quite – to *menace* – a difference that is almost total but not quite. (Bhabha 1994, 132).

Games are fertile grounds for the production of ‘humorous’ dynamics of superiority, incongruity and relief as processes of game design and racial subjectivation enter into orthogonal relations. Change the abstract resource model--say to represent institutions such as the opium or slave trades (Towns 2020; Trammel 2021)--and what you end up with may not really be *Civilisation* at all. NG’s cybernetic irony and negotiation of the ‘almost the same, but not quite’, is *Sly Civilisation* at play. Lisa Nakamura’s critique of cyberpunk fiction’s tendency towards ‘rebunking or reinforcing of race as an essential category’ (68) in 2002 could have been written about gaming in 2021.

It is also important to note that ‘cybernetic’ here does not connote only computational systems but feedback systems more generally (Jayemanne 2005). Racial logics are a remarkably powerful bridge between analogue and digital gaming. An example is very early borrowings from tabletop role-playing games in which ability scores are adjusted for the race of the character. In *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson 1974), an elf would have their ability scores adjusted in a different way from a dwarf or a human: all of these were ‘races’, particularly in the cultural field of *D&D*. *D&D* worlds have been remediated in many digital games from the first-person *Eye of the Beholder* (SSI, Inc. 1991) to the narrative-led *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle 1999): these games evidently have very different ludic characteristics, but racial logics are key to their legibility as *D&D*. This has been challenged, particularly recently, by independent tabletop game creators. Wizards of the Coast themselves have addressed racial issues in *D&D*, by removing the



association between metaphysical evil and two dark-skinned character types (orcs and drow or dark elves), but the logic of race is not challenged. Racial logic remains an integral structure across analogue and digital *D&D* (for example in the module *Curse of Strahd* (Crawford et al. 2020), which retains problematic depictions of Romani people, and the race categories in the digital game *Baldur's Gate III* (forthcoming)).

This discussion is itself acutely situated, written during a pandemic that has reinforced so many racial contradictions and a #BLM movement of sustained resistance to racial violence. Games both analogue and digital always do work to position players; that work often recapitulates oppressive processes of racial subjectivation in these very strategies. The cybernetic irony of NG is an example of the 'coproduction' (Benjamin 2019) of racial and technical apparatuses in contemporary culture. As Gray has put it, video games and gaming culture should be viewed as a particular interpretation and narration of racial dynamics that attempt to (re)organize assumptions and beliefs. A game about civilization, which perpetuates a narrative of "just fun," gets convoluted and performed as socially acceptable, rendering visible, colonial encounters invisible (2020, 30).

The term 'race' in gaming often carelessly conflates ideas of species, ethnicity, culture, nationality, among other terms: this stems from the propensity to imagine a pure playful 'substance' *that is then raced*. If Meier is right about humour giving a sharpened version of reality, it is for the wrong reasons: *Civ 2* is a simulation of history which eliminates the historicity of race. NG is 'funny' because it refuses to tell us why we are here.

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