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Simulating the Caribbean: an analysis of the computer game Tropico

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Abstract

Studies in Caribbean communication have been absent in discussing the role of simulacra as part of communication. This paper attempts to address the absence, through analysing the computer game Tropico, arguing simulacra are crucial for understanding communication of the Caribbean. To achieve this I organise the paper around two main sections. The first focuses on defining simulacra, looking at three different philosophers: Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, and Gilles Deleuze. Discussing their differences, the paper suggests a Deleuzian approach is preferable. From here, I propose the illusion of resemblance provides an open for analysing simulacra. In the second section, I analyse Tropico, considering the presence of developmentalism and narratives of landscape in the game-play. This is with the purpose of demonstrating the characteristics of a simulacrum, also illustrating discourses articulating the Caribbean in Tropico. I conclude by arguing Tropico can give one wider insights in the communication of the Caribbean, and the active role simulacra play.

Introduction

The paper is an attempt to understand both the characteristics of simulacra and their active role in the communication of the Caribbean through analysing the computer game *Tropico*. The paper is organised into two main sections. Firstly, discussing three different approaches to simulacra – Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, and Gilles Deleuze – and arguing why a Deleuzian approach is preferred. The section also considers an approach to analyse simulacra. Secondly, I examine Tropico, through considering the presence of developmentalism and narratives of the landscape in the game-play. I label these as the coded discourses of Tropico, demonstrating the characteristics of the game being a simulacrum, while also reflecting on how Tropico articulates the Caribbean. I conclude by arguing that Tropico can give one wider insights in the communication of the Caribbean, and the active role simulacra play.

Simulacra: Baudrillard, Jameson, & Deleuze

To understand simulacra it is best to consider the differences between representation and simulation. Representation, as a mode of thought, presupposes 'there is some objective, present, real, and external world that is then re-presented by thought' (Colebrook 2003: p1). To believe one is representing the Caribbean, would presuppose there is an 'actual' Caribbean to represent. In other words, ones defines representation through making a copy, which aims to represent the 'real', making representation a second order to the 'real'. One can also regard simulation as second-order to the 'real', differentiated from representation through its false appearance from the 'real'. In these definitions simulation, and representation, work on a truth/false dichotomy; simulation linking to the false, and representation linking to the truth. However, the division between representation and simulation is more problematic than this account, as simulacra question the realness of the 'real'. Both cases assume there is a real, and the only problem is through the interpretation of the real, done either through representation or through simulation. As Claire Colebrook argues, 'It makes no sense to say there is a real world which we then perceive through representations. It is not as though there is a world in itself which we grasp and synthesise through time. The world is a temporal flow or duration, never identical to itself; but there are points of imaging where one flow intersects with another' (2003: p163). The implication means one does not interpret the real and then represent the real. The world is actual-virtual, making it difficult to detach representations and simulations from the real. In the case of this paper, Tropico becomes part of the actual-virtual image of thought of the Caribbean, produced through it being a simulacrum. To understand this position, one can look at defining simulacra through different approaches of Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, and Gilles Deleuze. Revealing the limitations of Baudrillard and Jameson's

simulacra, and arguing why a Deleuzian approach is preferred, as Deleuze achieves a departure from representation discourse.

For Jean Baudrillard (1983 & 1994), simulacra allow him to identify the trajectory of the post-modern, signifying the age of the hyperreal. In the hyperreal things are more real than real. An example of a simulacrum is Spielberg's Jaws; where one could only be disappointed meeting a real shark after the film. How could a real shark live up to the one seen in the film? The film makes Jaws more real than real, its hyperreal. To trace the trajectory of the post-modern, and our entry into the hyperreal, Baudrillard provides a four stage successive model leading to the simulacrum:

1. It's a reflection of a basic reality
2. It masks and perverts basic reality
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (1983: p11)

For Baudrillard, he defines simulacra as bearing 'no relation to any reality whatever', but straight away, the definition comes into serious problems. While understanding the significance of simulacra, and how they do not imitate reality, Baudrillard invokes the language of the real. Even when Baudrillard proclaims we have moved into the age of the hyperreal, he depends on their being a (past) real to define the hyperreal. As the real slips away, we rely on the language of the real, leaving Baudrillard with the dilemma of whether all we have had is simulation, or if simulation replaces a real that did exist, something he sidesteps in his work (Massumi: 1987). I will return to this important dilemma after discussing Frederic Jameson's definition of simulacra.

Frederic Jameson defines a simulacrum as of a copy of a copy, giving the example of photorealism (Jameson 1984). Photorealism is the painting of a drawing taken from a photograph, making it a copy of a copy. An example is one could take picture of a table and then use the photo to paint a picture of the table. However, Jameson's definition defines simulacra through the language of representation. To copy means there is a model to copy from, suggesting a traceable original. In the above example, the table becomes the original, and the presence of an original allows us to distinguish it from the simulacra. While offering a useful insight, Jameson diminishes the significance of simulacra through considering them in

terms of representation. His is a model of representation and we cannot conceive of simulacra through models of representation. Instead, simulacra question the very possibility of representation, challenging such notions of an original. It is here we find Deleuzian simulacra.

Deleuze's simulacrum emerges from his attempt to reverse Platonism, which 'means denying the primacy of original over copy, or model over image; glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections' (Deleuze 2004: p80). His answer to the previous dilemma, whether simulacra replaces the real, or all that has ever been, is an affirmative yes to both (Massumi 1987). *Simulacra both produce the real and are the real*. Deleuze argues against conceiving of an original, which we have departed from, but rather how we have transformed ourselves through simulacra. For him, simulacra are a positive force, contributing in the 'continual creation of the world' (Zepke 2005: p30). They present themselves through differentiation, and a 'simulacrum affirms its own difference' (Massumi 1987). Therefore, in a Deleuzian paradigm, simulacra are given primacy. Yet how are we to approach simulacra? Can simulacra be analysed?

Deleuze insists simulacra do not resemble, and any resemblance appears is illusionary (Deleuze, 2004: p155). We cannot analyse simulacra for their resemblance, as they have none. An exercise examining resemblance would falter through returning to the ideals of representation. An example of the illusion of difference is two identical twins. One can say they resemble one another, but the resemblance is an illusionary resemblance, as the resemblance is only possible because of their difference. Each twin is a simulacrum, affirming its own difference. Yet, the illusion of resemblance does offer an opening for analysis, and we can consider the illusion of resemblance in terms of experience. One experiences the illusion of simulacra as 'every simulation takes its point of departure from a regularized world, comprising apparently stable identities or territories. But these "real" entities are in fact undercover simulacra that have consented to feign being copies' (Massumi, 1987). Working from this, we can move toward suggesting a 'method' of analysis, attempting to deconstruct the simulacra which have consented themselves to being 'copied' to produce the game. I propose simulacra are composed of coded discourses, which illustrate their preferences and biases. In terms of Tropico's, the game is produced through coded discourse, assembled around two main - interrelated - coded discourses. These are developmentalism and narratives of landscape. Both of these coded discourse act to articulate the Caribbean in Tropico, reaching out for other simulacra to produce the game, creating the illusion of resemblance.

However, before I analyse these coded discourses, I will briefly introduce some background information about Tropico's makers and game-play.

Background Details of Tropico

Tropico is part of a series, containing the original game Tropico (discussed in this paper), the extension pack (Paradise Island), and Tropico 2 (Pirate Cove). The fact that there is more than one Tropico indicates a degree of success in the marketplace, and implies Tropico is not merely a remote game only a few gamers know about. The makers also developed the SimCity and Railroad Tycoon series, influencing the game-play of Tropico; the back case of Tropico states 'Tropico takes the addictive building game-play of such hits as SimCity 3000 and Railroad Tycoon 2.' Their influence is an affecting factor contributing to the production of Tropico.

The back-story of the game positions the player as a newly installed dictator of the obscure and imaginary Caribbean island of Tropico, described as 'small, underdeveloped, [and] relatively impoverished' (Godgames, 2001: p4). The aim of the player's dictatorship is to create a state of prosperity for the island's citizens. The chronological setting of the game is also important to consider; beginning at 1949, which is a significant period in both Caribbean politics and global politics. The period in the Caribbean saw the rise of decolonisation, resulting in some Caribbean states gaining independence, while in global terms, the 1949 setting symbolises the shift from the World War 2 era to the emerging dominance of Cold War international politics. With this background detail in mind, we can now discuss the two coded discourses in the game-play.

Developmentalism in Tropico

To historicize the chronological setting of Tropico, the period can be thought as one developmentalism and drive towards modernity for 'third-world' and 'underdeveloped' states. Gardner and Lewis refer to 1949 as the beginning of the 'post-colonial period', which saw the invention and undertaking of vast projects of 'development and economic growth.' Modernization theory emerged as part of this period, offering states progressive development models to modernize, characterized by mapping development on an essentially evolutionary linear path (Gardner & Lewis 1996: p6-12). The paper argues modernization theory affects Tropico, coded within the game-play. We see the presence of modernization in Tropico, through the simulation of different stages of development, structured on an evolutionary linear

path of development. The 1949 setting of Tropico also correlates to Gardner and Lewis's 'post-colonial period,' situating the historical setting in time when modernization theories were gaining significance as a discourse to encounter and invent the 'underdeveloped' or 'third world.'

To demonstrate the simulation of modernization discourse, and models of development, in Tropico, I shall compare the game-play with W.W. Rostow's development model (Rostow, 1961). Rostow's model is used here to demonstrate the illusionary resemblance of modernization discourse in Tropico, correlating the stages in Rostow's model to the stages in the game-play. However, before this, we need to recognise Rostow's model is its own pure simulacrum, which has consented itself to being copied. Rostow's model is then not the imitation of actual development, but another imitation of development, which gains power through being implemented. Within his 1961 model states are envisioned to pass through five different stages: Traditional Society, Preconditions for Take-off, Take off, Drive to Maturity, and finally the Age of High Mass-consumption. The significance of the model is while different states can be at different stages; all are thought to be on the same linear trajectory. Tropico begins the game-play by locating the player in between stage one and stage two, leaving behind the traditional society and progressing towards the preconditions for take-off - subsistence farming not being an option of the game-play. The player is provided with the beginning of a cash-cropping industry, allowing the player to invest and build industries – focusing largely on external trade. These industries are predominantly plantations (sugar, timber, bananas, etc…). Once the cash-cropping industries gain enough capital accumulation the island can progress onto the take off stage. At this point the player can develop manufacturing factories, although they require the building of electronic supplies. As the plantations and manufacturing industries develop the player progresses onto the drive for maturity, which sees increasing diversity in the economy. However, beyond this point, Rostow's model no longer correlates to the game-play of Tropico. Whereas Rostow predicts the state will achieve high mass consumption, Tropico fails to reach this stage. The nearest the game comes to a high mass consumption society is the development of a tourism industry, only offering mass consumption for the tourists and not the citizens.

In both Rostow's trajectory for development and Tropico's game-play, we see the presence of linear models. While the models affirm their difference as simulacra, they are problematic. The models prove incapable of considering the effects of history before they begin, and offer no

suggestions to what happens after reaching the final stage in the model. They also contain an explicit universalism, as Hardt and Negri mention in *Empire*, the development model is based on an illusion, as the 'discourse of development conceives of economic history of all countries following one single pattern of development' (Hardt & Negri, 2000: p282). In Rostow and Tropico, we encounter the world through development; it becomes the all encompassing theme or grand narrative to form modern societies and states. However, we can realize the simulation of development in Tropico as a pure simulacrum, which does not imitate actual development, but is another imitation of development. In many respects, the development simulated in Tropico, is the development that failed to materialise in the post-WW2 Caribbean.

The coded development in Tropico is also unable to reflect on the significance of colonialism and the legacy left on the Caribbean. As Herb Addo argues, developmentalism in this guise presents itself as if the world before 1945 did not exist (Addo, 1996: p129). Through starting the game-play in 1949, Tropico continues this characteristic of development discourse, risking removing colonialism from the historical imagination of the Caribbean. However, as I demonstrate in the next section, Tropico cannot remove the influence of colonialism, as the simulation of the landscape associates itself with both colonial discourses of the Caribbean, and also narratives of landscape in general. Although before, we require a summary of Tropico's simulated development.

As stated earlier, simulacra form an illusion of resemblance, creating a harmony of simulation. We see this occurring in Tropico, forming part of the harmony of development. The game reaches out to models of development, and as a result actualizes its own model of development in the game-play. We cannot say Tropico imitates development, but is itself another imitation of development. Yet developmentalism codes the game, presenting itself through the options of the game-play. The result of this inbuilt coding is Tropico forms an uncritical assemblage with development discourses, particular those of the modernist school of thought. The game becomes part of the development discourse Arturo Escobar (1995) identifies, but should also be recognised as something more. Through forming part of the development discourse, it connects with it and transforms it. In Deleuzian terms, Tropico deterritorialises and reterritorialises development discourses, forming another connection in the rhizome of development. This occurs because simulacra are positive, they embody the power to create, and continually create. The result means simulacra proactively create discourses of development, affirming their difference and attaining a positive force. In carrying on with the notion

simulacra as a creative force, we can consider the significance of the landscape in Tropico and how it eludes to both the Caribbean's colonial history and narratives of the landscape.

The Landscape of Tropico

While the historical setting in Tropico is from 1949 onwards, the simulation of the landscape in Tropico conjures up a resemblance of the colonial encounter with the Caribbean. Here I argue Tropico allows the player to 're-act' the colonialisation of the Caribbean. In contrast to the 1949 chronological setting of the game, the island of Tropico is portrayed as a site of emptiness [see screenshot below]. Where the player begins their game in an almost deserted island covered in forest.

[Screenshot copied with the permission of Godgames Ltd][1]

The portrayal of emptiness projects the imaginary landscape as a source of future potential. During the game it is the player's aim to transform the land, and release the potential through forms of cultivation. The desire to cultivate the landscape not surprisingly links back to colonial narratives of the Caribbean and preferences for nature. In terms of understanding narratives of landscapes in general, and specifically the Caribbean landscape, I have found it helpful to draw upon the works of Mimi Sheller (2003), and Ian G. Strachan (2002). Sheller has usefully implied three major periods of 'seeing' the Caribbean from a Northern Atlantic perspective, which are 'the discovery period', 'the scenic economy', and 'the 19th century renewed emphasis on the "wild"' (Sheller, 2003: p37-38). From the perspective of Tropico, the most relevant is the 'scenic economy', which is 'constructed around comparative evaluations of cultivated land versus wild vistas' (Sheller, 2003: p38). Whereas Sheller traces the shift from narratives of the Caribbean favouring the cultivation of the land towards romantic and

emotive narratives of the landscape, Tropico asserts the dominance of cultivation and the practical uses of nature. The romanticisation of the Caribbean landscape is almost absent in Tropico, and to expand upon the cultivation drive in the game-play, I discuss colonial narratives of the Caribbean and perspectives promoting cultivation of the land.

Ian Strachan, in *Paradise and Plantation*, describes the tendency of colonists, and western epistemology, to view nature as a wasteland, promoting the cultivation of land. Writers over a long period, such as John Locke and James Anthony Froude held this view, where the former saw cultivation as improvement upon nature, and the latter felt it was the colonist's job to consider the potential and promise of the Caribbean forest (Strachan 2002: p62-72). Thomas Carlyle, in his *Occasional Discourse*, exemplifies this mindset, where the West Indies are regarded as nothing until the white man had discovered and cultivated them: 'Till the white European first saw them [the West Indies], they were as if not yet created, - their noble elements of cinnamon, sugar, coffee, pepper black and grey, lying all asleep, waiting the white Enchanter who said to them awake!' (Carlyle, 1849: p671). Tropico forms an illusionary resemblance with such views of the Caribbean landscape and land in general. The creation of Tropico only begins when one commences cultivation. The Caribbean is once again a wasteland with potential, where the player is now the one who awakes the virtual landscape of the Caribbean. The result of starting the game in a state of emptiness draws similarities to colonial narratives of the Caribbean and biases of landscape. The conceived emptiness of the Caribbean becomes a narrative to exert control over the landscape, eradicating what has been before, although, in Tropico, the player can always restart the game, and once again begin their cultivation project.

However, even if we can connect the game-play of Tropico to colonial narratives and notions of cultivation, we cannot propose it resembles colonialism. If we propose this, we would be suggesting Tropico copies a model Caribbean. In other words, Tropico does not represent the history of Caribbean colonialism. This is clearly the case, and we cannot or should not make this claim. Rather, Tropico forms a harmony of simulation with colonial narratives and certain perspectives on landscape in a creative sense, empowering it with the power to produce itself as a simulacrum. These discourses of the Caribbean and Landscape are part of the productive force producing the game, and the result is Tropico is another imitation of man's interaction with nature. The paper could go on and discuss other simulacra in Tropico's game-play, but needs to progress towards some general thoughts about simulacra and the communication of

the Caribbean from Tropico.

Conclusion

I started this paper by stating I wanted to consider both the characteristics of simulacra, and their significance in the communication of the Caribbean. After defining Deleuzian simulacra, I used Tropico, as an example of a simulacrum containing coded discourses. Tropico is it not an imitating of reality, but another imitation affirming its own difference. This is how we should see simulacra; they don't imitate reality, but offer another imitation. Yet, because of there disparity, we are not left hopeless, as analysis is possible through contemplating their apparent illusion of resemblance. The illusion of resemblance then reveals the simulacrums preferences, which in the case of Tropico constructs the game-play around a bias for developmentalism and cultivation of the land. Tropico also demonstrates that the Caribbean is also consumed in the computer games market, a relatively new place for the consumption of the Caribbean.[2]

But what does this mean for the communication of the Caribbean? We can always say Tropico is an intentional simulacrum of the Caribbean, creating itself to bear no relation to reality whatsoever. Yet this misses the deeper progress involved in communication of the Caribbean, and the active process simulacra play. Intentional or not, simulacra actively communicate the Caribbean and they require recognition for their individuation. Two aspects can be draw from simulacra and their role. The first is Deleuze, in contrast to Baudrillard, brings to attention simulacra are 'not recent nor merely a cultural event' (Colebrook, 2002; p101). Simulacra are therefore not only characteristic of the postmodern world, but life in general. Meaning the history of Caribbean communication should realize the role of the simulacrum. The other is simulacra are the real, which in turn transform the real; the effect means simulacra transform the Caribbean. Simulacra create new lines of flights, new becomings for the Caribbean. We can therefore conclude simulacra are the continual becoming and (re)-creation of the Caribbean; although, the simulacra reach out for other simulacrum to copy, providing the illusion of resemblance.

Finally, acknowledging simulacra in analysis of communication allows us to progress away from models claiming to represent the Caribbean. Representation is unmasked for its true existence; its existence as simulacra. As Deleuze succinctly puts, 'the simulacra is not a degraded copy…it harbours a positive power, which denies the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction' (Deleuze, 1990: p262).

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[1] For permission of the screenshot I would like to thank the PR department at Godgames (www.godgames.com) for allowing the inclusion in the paper.

[2] For a sociological history of the Caribbean being consumed from its 1492 'discovery' see Mimi Sheller, Consuming the Caribbean: From Arwaks to Zombies (London: Routledge, 2003)

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