REDEMPTION OUT OF HISTORY. CHRONOTOPICAL ANALYSIS OF *SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER*

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In this paper I will use chronotopical interpretation of *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos Montréal, 2018), the latest installment in the long-standing *Tomb Raider* series, to explain the reason behind the game's inability to address ideological issues underlying the series. As the final part of the *prequel trilogy*, introduced with the premiere of the *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013), the game concludes Lara Croft's coming of age story. The protagonist turns from an idealistic student stranded on the mysterious island, featured in the first installment, into a fully formed and determined adventurer, casting away her father's long shadow and triumphing over the sinister Trinity organization. The game, taking place in magnificently presented, although somehow stereotypical, jungles of South America sends Lara on a quest to stop the imminent end of the world, and to discover a lost city where remnants of pre-colonial grand civilizations live secluded from the modern world. At the end of the game, Lara was supposed to reach the position of independent and confident adventurer she occupies in the first game of the series.

LARA CROFT'S ATTEMPT AT DECOLONIZATION

The game development team, with the lead designer Jill Murray—author of the critically acclaimed anti-colonial instalment of the *Assassin's Creed* series *Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Montréal, 2013; Hammar, 2017)—took an opportunity to revisit some troublesome aspects of the franchise in a spirit similar to the treatment of series sexist imaginary in the *Tomb Raider* from 2013. The game fully acknowledges that Lara Croft's modus operandi is the legacy of European imperialism (Breger, 2008), and looting cultural artifacts from indigenous non-European peoples is just a modernization of the Victorian lost treasure trope (Mathison, 2008), replacing colonial greed with archeological curio-

Shadow of the Tomb Raider

sity. At the beginning of the game, Lara's callousness in obtaining archeological treasures triggers an (un)natural catastrophe which destroys an innocent Mexican town and starts the countdown towards the apocalypse. The game plot serves as a redemption arc: the heroine is simultaneously fighting Trinity, the organization trying to take over the world through the usage of ancient artifacts, and trying to revert her grave mistake from the prologue, possibly sacrificing herself in the process. She is also supposed to gradually move from the position of Western colonizer into an ally of the indigenous people, more interested in the preservation of local heritage than in her personal pursuit of knowledge and fame.

The main part of the game is set in the Peruvian jungle, and built around the legend of the lost city of Paititi—a supposed major settlement of the Inca empire, unsuccessfully searched by European explorers ever since the 16th century. The theme is consistent with the previous instalment of the prequel trilogy, all revolving around lost ci-

vilizations (Yamatai Kingdom in the first, and the sunken city of Kitezh in the second). As its predecessor, it disturbs the dichotomy of aboriginal creators of the lost city contrasted with outsiders: instead, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* introduces a palimpsest of colonial spaces. Lara Crofts visits three major locations, bearing witness to three waves of colonization. First, after surviving a plane crash and vicious fight against a terrifying jaguar, she arrives at Kuwaq Yaku. It is a modern Peruvian shantytown deep in the jungle, deeply scarred by the arrival and subsequent withdrawal of a US oil company. The consequences of unchecked exploitation are presented through the portrayal of the village as poor, disorganized, plagued with crime and violence—and littered with empty barrels and other visual signifiers of the ecological and economic downfall. The second layer is San Juan mission: a former Jesuit outpost signaling European colonization in the 17th century, currently half-abandoned and heavily damaged by an earthquake. The mission turns out to be litera-

lly built upon ruins of the former civilization, and its secret basement hides a product of the contact zone (Pratt, 1992): a strange amalgam of Christian imaginary and grotesque mummies, the game quite consistently ties with the native culture. Finally, there is Paititi itself, though the lost city is not presented as Incan, but as a place settled by migrants from the Mayan empire, yet another amalgam of two distinct pre-colonial cultures, as settlers were joined by Incas fleeing Cusco after the Spanish invasion.

The game provides interesting interplay on the human sacrifice motif, commonly associated with South American native empires. Paititi is ruled by the Cult of Kukulkan, a decadent and

artifacts framed as adventure in general, and Lara Croft's vocation in particular. With this, it address concerns voiced on numerous occasion by game scholars and critics alike (Breger, 2008; Bezio, 2016; Murray, 2019; Walker, 2018a)—or, at least, tries to do it. As multiple reviewers pointed out (Drumm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Lacina, 2018; Plante, 2018; Von Republic, 2018; Walker, 2018b), the game falls short of its decolonizing premise, as it clings to the idea of the white savior and still features a rich English woman disturbing graves in places she considers exotic, and allows Lara to collect various valuables and treasures without any remorse. A few reviewers find the fact Lara *goes native* with Inca and Maya-inspired costumes borderline offensive, and the *immersive mode*, introducing voice lines in native languages instead of English feels ridiculous, as Lara holds her part of all conversations in perfect Queen's English. Finally, the redemption arc seems shallow and forced: the idea of Lara cleaning a mess of her

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IT IS QUITE EASY TO PINPOINT MAJOR REASONS BEHIND THE *SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER* **SHORTCOMINGS: IT FAILS TO MOVE BEYOND THE IMPERIALISTIC BASIS OPEN-WORLD GAMES ARE BUILT UPON, AND IT REMAINS A FANTASY OF APPROPRIATION AND IDENTITY TOURISM, PROVIDED FOR THE WESTERN AUDIENCE EXPERIENCING THE POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION OF SOUTH AMERICA FROM THE COMFORT OF THEIR OWN LIVING ROOMS**

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millenarist religious order that maintains the social order through the practice of human sacrifice. But the cult itself is a fabrication of European missionaries, who infiltrated the city in search of the all-powerful artifact and started the evil religion oppressing Paititi residents to this day. The leader of the cult is also the only Paititian who moves freely outside the town and possesses another identity as an archaeologist and the leader of Trinity organization—the ultimate rival for Lara Croft.

As the short summary exposes, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* undertook a substantial effort toward problematizing the narrative of European exploration and appropriation of non-European

own making is very quickly abandoned in favor of the traditional narrative of the heroine saving the helpless locals from the evil and greedy priest with magical powers—a paradigmatic colonial narrative originating in the Victorian lost race romance (Rieder, 2012).

It is quite easy to pinpoint major reasons behind the *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* shortcomings: it fails to move beyond the imperialistic basis open-world games are built upon, and it remains a fantasy of appropriation and identity tourism, provided for the Western audience experiencing the postcolonial condition of South America from the comfort of their own living rooms. Such game features can be subsequently tied to the unredee-

mable imperial character of mainstream games production and its role in upholding global Empire, in Hardt and Negri's sense (Breger, 2008; Fuchs *et al.*, 2018; Harrer, 2018; Dyer-Witheford and Peuter, 2009). It can also be argued that the ideology informing the genre *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* represents is inherently tied to the novels for adolescents, produced in the heydays of the British Empire—a claim I made elsewhere (Majkowski, 2016; Mukherjee, 2018; Lammes, 2010). In this paper my main aim is to go beyond such observations—valid as they are—to present how the spatiotemporal architecture of the game, analyzed through the lenses of Bakhtin's chronotope, contributes to the game failure as a serious criticism toward *Tomb Raider* series troublesome legacy.

THE TROUBLE WITH THE CHRONOTOPE

So far, the concept of the chronotope has been given little love in Game Studies, despite the general consensus about the spatiotemporal character of digital games, an aspect stressed out by the very pioneers of the discipline (Aarseth, 2007; Fuller and Jenkins, 1995; see Aarseth and Günzel, 2019 for contemporary discussion). I believe there are several reasons behind game scholars' reluctance to rely on the concept introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin in his writings from the 1930s. Firstly, it does not fit any of the three major areas of inquiry popular when studying game spaces. It is not an ontological concept, while the prime interest of game scholars is with the ontological status of digitally-created spaces and their relationship with the user, understood in terms of exploration (Günzel, 2007, 2019; Leino, 2012; Michael, 2008), subjugation (Magnet, 2006; Mukherjee, 2015), or dwelling (Kłosiński, 2018; Vella, 2019). It is also too imprecise to serve as a basis for formal analyses of overlapping spatial layers and temporal aspects of a gameworld (Juul, 2004; Wei et al., 2010; Zagal and Mateas, 2010). Finally, the chronotope is not a narrative tool and even though it is a way

to describe how space is embedded with meaning, it neither describes the way coherent stories can be extrapolated from spatial clues (Fernández-Vara, 2011; Jenkins, 2004), nor does it support the concept of media-independent storyworlds manifesting in digital games (Ryan, 2004; Ryan and Thon, 2014).

I believe there are two additional reasons why the concept is hardly employed even in studies of ideological and historical conditions for spatiotemporal relationship in digital games. The first one is purely incidental: the rise of organized Game Studies, with its distinct ways of knowledge circulation in the form of conferences and journals, happened when the interest in Bakhtin was already in decline in Anglophone academia. It was the time the *Bakhtin cult* started to fade away, with the legend of the solitary and secluded Russian genius put into question with accusations of plagiarism, contested authorship of several texts, and the discovery of censorship interventions into his texts (Hirschkop, 2001; Ulicka, 2001 for summary). Moreover, the reception of Bakhtin's central concept of the carnivalesque lost its almost messianic fervor, as it was universally questioned as factually inaccurate, naively optimistic or politically impotent (see Mrugalski and Pietrzak, 2004 for summary; see Klevjer, 2006 for discussion in digital game context). It is only understandable game scholars from the first decade of the 21st century did not invest time and energy in studying the legacy of a fallen academic demigod, introducing more promising concepts from Foucault or Lefebvre for spatiotemporal analysis.

But there is also a more substantial difficulty with the application of the chronotope, stemming directly from the first problem: it demands time and effort to grasp what the term, famously called "almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely)" by Bakhtin himself (1981: 84), actually means, and how it can be operationalized—especially when moving it out of literary studies. What follows is by no means a definitive formulation, or even a very

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informed one, of course. But in my interpretation, to properly address the concept, it is important to consider it simultaneously from the perspective of epistemology, historical poetics, and ethics, as a Bakhtinian understanding of spacetime provides a nexus to resolve the fundamental contradiction of his main intellectual inspirations: abstract German Neo-Kantian epistemology school, especially writings of Ernst Cassirer and Hermann Cohen, and the concrete, every-day, pre-intellectual ethics proposed by thinkers associated with the Orthodox Third Renaissance in Russia (Ulicka, 2008).

This fundamental difficulty is related to an apparent ease in understanding the term, as Bakhtin opens *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel* (1981) with a proper definition: "We will give the name chronotope ('literally, time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, 1981: 84). What follows, though, is a strange and meandering discourse with many apparent detours, including long digression on novelistic heroes or strange passages devoted to "series" of eating and defecating in Rabelais. Meantime, chronotope changes its meaning: from the pretty straightforward description of spatiotemporal relationship within

a novel, to a fundamental directive underlying entire genres, to the condition upon which the subjectivity of a literary character is created, to a very particular depiction of certain novelistic themes, to a basic condition of understanding, as Bakthin concludes: "every entry into the sphere of meaning is accomplished only through the gates of chronotope" (1981: 258).

To further complicate things, it is important to consider that the first usage of the word chronotope happens in *The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism* (1986)—which, despite the seriously-sounding title, is a brief note focusing mostly on Goethe, a part of the unpublished and partially lost book of Bildungsroman Bakhtin was trying to write in the 1930s. Here, chronotope means something entirely different: the way historical time is present in the work of art through the depiction of space—literally, how art "saturates landscape with time" (Bakhtin, 1986: 36). Here Bakhtin claims that the ability to perceive space as a repository of the past was a unique artistic ability of Goethe, closely related to the Romantic change in the understanding of history. Therefore, it was unheard of before the 19th century—a claim directly contradicting Bakhtin's own analysis of a chronotope in ancient Greek adventure romance presented in Forms of Time... Finally, that last essay was originally written in 1937-38, but heavily edited while prepared for publication in 1973, two years before Bakhtin's death, and only then supplemented with concluding remarks regarding the universal character of the chronotope. For all those reasons, the term is quite open for various interpretations, well beyond the straightforward concept of a direct spatiotemporal relationship presented in a work of art, which in turn decides its narrative genre—though certainly this last understanding is valid and well-justified.

BUT WHAT IS THE CHRONOTOPE, ACTUALLY?

Bakhtin's concept of "chronotope" is rooted in early cognitive science—even though in *Forms of Time...* the author ties it—in a quite casual manner—to Einstein's physics. As is well-documented (Holquist, 2002; Morson and Emerson, 1990; Steinby and Klapuri, 2013; Ulicka, 2008), the Russian scholar first encountered the concept during a lecture from Alexey Ukhtomskii, a pioneering neuroscientist who claimed that all cognition has spatiotemporal character, and the human brain is conditioned by external conditions to perceive spatiotemporal stimuli in a certain order of importance. As this conditioning is modified by the changes in life conditions, it undergoes historical changes: historical epochs can be divided according to changes in perception (see Ulicka, 2008 for detailed discussion). This hypothesis allowed Bakhtin to distance himself from the Kantian distinction between perception and thing-in-itself, as in the chronotope theory the former is shaped directly by the latter. For that reason, the chronotope formed a basis for Bakhtin's concept of literary realism, as a historically rooted way to understand external phenomena, constantly transforming, since it is driven by changes in social and living conditions resulting in new ways to address the human condition—a vortex of ideas Bakhtin calls "ideology". Understanding one's ideological position as created by historically-rooted, concrete spatiotemporal perceptions of reality allows for artistic recreations of such position in the form of a literary (or game) chronotope, which, in turn, produces all possible (and impossible) actions and events of the plot through chronotope. The individual configuration of actions and events featured in a novel might vary, but they always produce a protagonist capable to act in a way the chronotope enables—therefore operating within the ideology informing the chronotope.

Such interpretations resolve apparent contradictions in Bakhtin's many descriptions of the chronotope. Firstly, it allows to distinguish between two kinds of chronotope: the large dominant ones governing the overarching ideological structure of the narrative—such as "adventure chronotope" or "bildungsroman chronotope", documenting an epoch's general perception of space and time, and small chronotopes of certain motifs, such as "the road", "the parlor", "the threshold", or "the provincial town", presenting concrete sites where ideology manifests through (Holquist, 2002; Ulicka, 2018). It also allows to reconcile chronotope as time manifesting through space from *Bildungsroman...* and chronotope as the spatiotemporal relationship presented in the novel from *Forms of Time...*, as Goethe's unusual ability to "see time in space" is a testament to changes in the large chronotope, with Romanticism introducing the concept of historical perspective.

For Greek adventure novels, space is largely abstract, and the passage of time does not affect characters, as the ideological concept of spacetime is related to happenstance: time manifests exclusively through action, and space acts as stage for this action. Meanwhile, for Romantic fiction, time is made apparent through visual clues of past human activities, commonly in forms of ruins and other visions of decay. As a consequence, for early adventure romance the plot is shaped exclusively by current events, resulting in the popularity of "small chronotopes" of a road, or a threshold, all signifying the possibility of sudden change. For post-Romantic adventure novels time becomes historical, tying past events to the present, leaving its mark on space and tying past activities to present ones.

This last issue is a crucial one: the spatiotemporal composition is not an abstract way to measure the passage of time, but a way to introduce human activity into the work of art. It does not only frame the only possible way for the character to change over time (Holquist, 2002; Morson

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and Emerson, 1990), but most importantly it also allows for meaningful action, informing such change. Here, I am following a brilliant formulation laid down by Liisa Steinby (Steinby and Klapuri, 2013: 105-149). As the chronotope determines possible and impossible actions for a character, not only constituting this character but also providing a tool to combine aesthetical and ethical perspectives: "Chronotopes open up to the characters a certain time-space of possible action, which is conditioned by a locality or a social situation but still leaves the individual the freedom of ethical choice." (2013: 122).

PLAYING WITH CHRONOTOPE

Even though Bakhtin analyses exclusively literary chronotopes, his final remarks from *Forms of Time...* about the chronotopical basis of any understanding, opens up the possibility to apply such reasoning to other narrative forms, digital games included. Moreover, as with many other Bakhtinian concepts and terms, his reasoning presented above seems better suited for game analysis than for literature, as the medium is built around the notion of action (Galloway, 2006; Mukherjee, 2017), a term central to Bakhtinian philosophy. In this case, the way chronotope constitutes possibility for action understood as the interplay between external conditions and free choice in literature is subject to interpretation—while in a digital game it is actually enacted, and the tension between voluntary and involuntary aspects of a concrete activity performed in certain spatiotemporal conditions forms one of central pillars upon which Game Studies were built.

Despite that immediate connection, the Bakhtinian chronotope was first introduced into Game Studies in a limited way as a tool for genre analysis. Goeffrey Rockwell, to my knowledge the first scholar proposing Bakhtinian framework for studying digital games, points out the geneaological usage of the chronotope, claiming the study of spatiotemporal relationship within a game is a handy way to distinguish between game genres (Rockwell, 2002). It is also the direction Marc Bonner, as well as Alexey Salin and Ekaterina Galanina, follow, though with certain alterations. In his unpublished presentation given during Games and Literary Theory 2018 conference, Bonner points out that digital games as a medium reconfigure spatiotemporal relationships, challenging Bakhtin's assertion about the dominant role of time in the chronotope and introducing an "open world chronotope" of games, where narrative temporality plays second fiddle to the spatial navigation (Bonner, 2018).

Salin and Galanina echo this observation, analyzing similarities and differences in adventure chronotopes in literature and games and concluding that even though many spatiotemporal properties of adventure novels and digital games are similar, there is an important difference in the relation between space and time in those media. Because the novel is a narrative unfolding over time, it is dominated by the temporal aspect, with space presented as discrete and subjugated to the demands of the plot. In digital games, it is space that is continuous, with narrative time divided into discrete units and introduced only when certain spatial conditions are met (Салин and Галанина, 2020). In a talk presented during the Philosophy of Computer Games 2019 conference, Salin went even further, claiming digital games produce their own "cyberchronotope", organized by the logic of spatial navigation (Salin, 2019).

Dean Bowman (2019) is less preoccupied with genealogical aspects of the chronotope—in the analysis of *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013) he focuses on the chronotope as a means to create subjectivity, pointing out that the game (and other so-called "walking simulators") introduces unusual spatiotemporal relationship to break out with the mainstream position the player is forced to occupy in most commercial games—as a male, active, and violent subject. By introducing the domesticated and enclosed spacetime of home, *Gone Home* changes the way the player's subjectivity is produced, alongside with its ideological basis, thus it "arguably constructs a kind of feminine enclave in the male-dominated spaces of modern videogames" (Bowman, 2019: 165).

Similarly, Astrid Ensslin and Tejasvi Goorimoorthee put forward the bildungsroman chronotope, the other distinct spatiotemporal frame Bakhtin analyses, to study games focusing on journeys of personal development. They point out that "in line with the Bakhtinian chronotope, the games highlight movement through life as a walkable space in terms of both a temporal process and a narrow or confined corridor (Passage), physical topography designed for goal-directed linear movement from origin to destination (The Path), and the process and result of travelling long distances (Journey)." (Ensslin and Goorimoorthee, 2020: 382). The paper suggests further connections between games and the concept of chronotope through the intersection of fictional spacetime of the game and the biographical time of the player.

My point of departure is similar to the positions described above. I share Bakhtin's conviction that all meaning is presented and accessible through its concrete spatiotemporal position. I believe digital games produce their own kind of spatiotemporal framework of understanding, which subsequently can be divided into genres—and those, in turn, form a basis for the way the character's subjectivity is created. I will start my

analysis with the way *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* introduces past human activities through spatiotemporal marks, then I will move to the analysis of spatiotemporal properties of the game world, and finally I will analyze the way the central character is dependant on chronotopical convention—and how it influences the possibility of postcolonial critique.

BURNING, CRUMBING AND COVERED IN SLIME

As other parts of the series do, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* presents a gameworld full of spatial indicator of historical time, in forms of ruins and remnants. Lara Croft is an archaeologist, after all, and the series title refers to a tomb, the most iconic reminder of the passage of time. Therefore, it is only valid to start this interpretation with the analysis of the small chronotope of the tomb.

The tombs Lara Croft raids are anything but straightforward mementos of the past, though: they are elaborate labyrinths, connecting the past with the present through complex system of traps and spatial riddles, created in the past, but influencing the heroine in the present. Thus, the game establishes a dialogue between Lara and the ancient designers of the tomb, as the heroine answers questions left by the long-dead architects through the reconfiguration of space. It is worth noting the same dialogue is established between the player, solving puzzles, and the game designers who created them, equating the game narrative and the praxis of play through the game chronotope (see Karhulahti and Bonello Rutter Giappone, in press, for a discussion on relation between puzzle-solving and game narrative).

The basic mode the spatiotemporal relation the game establishes is not direct action, though, but observation: even if the gameplay is quite dynamic, the successful exploration of the tomb relies on the player's ability to understand spatial logic behind the labyrinth and then successfully
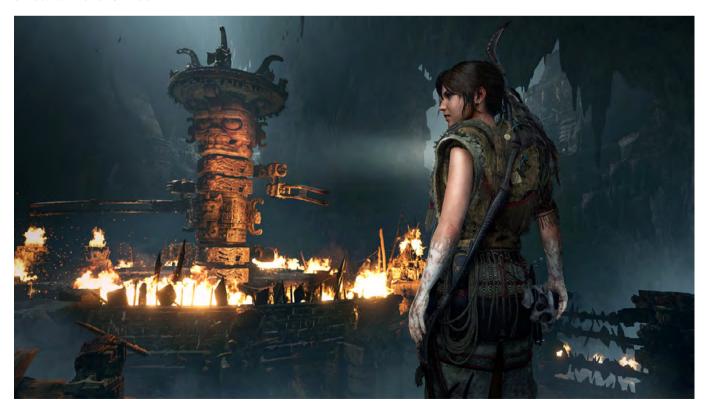
traverse it. This demand the game requests from the player is yet again apparent within the narrative: in *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* Lara frequently comments on her surroundings, providing the player with additional clues when their progress is stalled for a certain period of time—i.e. if the player spends too much time without progressing in space.

Through successful navigation, Lara creates an additional spatiotemporal link: the tomb, hitherto forgotten and mysterious, is reintroduced into historical narrative, as presented by in-game notes and thorough mapping of the complex. The relation with the past, established through saturating the gamespace with time, is therefore anamnetic: Lara's actions establish a link between the present and the forgotten past, providing additional lessons in morality in the process. This part of the series problematizes Lara's carefree attitude toward exploration of ancient tombs by repeatedly punishing her both at gameplay level (tomb

exploration is by far the most difficult part of the game) and within the narrative. It is tomb raiding that causes Lara to accidently trigger the end of the world, while the expedition to a tomb that was supposed to hold the artifact capable of stopping the apocalypse ends in a fiasco.

A similar logic governs open game spaces—Kuwaq Yaku, San Juan Mission, and Paititi, presenting three layers of historical time existing simultaneously. In the most contemporary settlement of Kuwaq Yaku, the past is represented not only through ever-present reminders of US colonial attempt, described above. The village itself is built near the ruins of an ancient temple, a reminder of more glorious days of the native people. Though the building is in a state of hopeless disrepair—a living reminder of the passage of time—it turns out to be the literal portal into the past. Lara has to go through the passage hidden behind the temple wall, and follow the path of trials, to reach the lost city of Paititi, where the glory of Incan and

Shadow of the Tomb Raider

Mayan cultures remains intact. Even though the game suggests Paititi and Kuwaq Yaku exists within the same time and space, the passage connecting them forms a semi-magical path, segregating the worthy from the undeserving of visiting the past. The trials Lara has to face are performed as a series of spatiotemporal puzzles, constructed in a way similar to the architecture of the tomb chronotope, already interpreted as dialogue between past and present. It is worth noting the game demands the player to navigate this path only once: when the spatial link between Kuwaq Yaku and Paititi is established, the player can travel between them freely, using a fast travel feature.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider

Paititi itself is an area untouched by the passage of time. Even though Lara Croft finds occasional reminders of the past there—most prominently in the form of hidden tombs—and can reconstruct the history of the Mayan colonization from scattered clues, the largest city ever introduced in the *Tomb Raider* series differs from both Kuwaq Yaku and San Juan mission, as it is not presented in a state of disrepair. The settlement is well-kept, with a fully functional temple not bearing any signs of ruination. The gamespace relation to the past is therefore established through

an opposite strategy here: instead of showcasing ruination of historical objects, the game performs their full restoration. This way, the two ends of historical timeline *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* introduces are presented through spatiotemporal means: in Paititi, the player witnesses the pre-colonial culture in a state before its destruction, and Kuwaq Yaku presents the postcolonial condition it was reduced to—with San Juan Mission serving as an intermediary link, presenting visual tropes of European colonialism in its most direct form. To drive this point home, the game reverses the logic of restoration and destruction regarding actions possible for Lara Croft. When entering Paititi, the place where the past is restored, she has to adjust to native customs and abandon modern clothing and firearms—this functionally ruins her capabilities as a playable agent. Meanwhile, Lara is at her full capabilities while in Kuwaq Yaku and San Juan—therefore the actions available for the protagonist are tied to the destructive properties of colonization.

Within the presentation of time through spatial means—the chronotope as presented in Bakhtin's *Bildungsroman…*—postcolonial overtones are therefore obvious, with the presentation of the indigenous paradise in constant treat from outsiders, and exposing various layers of colonization in both Kuwaq Yaku and San Juan mission. This topic is reinforced through the way Lara Croft (and the player) interacts with the visual signifiers of historical past, constantly resulting in their inevitable destruction. Not only does Lara disable or trigger ancient traps, she is constantly causing various structures to collapse, get flooded, or burned—in the most spectacular moment of the game, she even blows up a refinery, a remnant of US coloni-

zation. In that regard, she acts precisely the same way European colonizers did, causing irreversible damage to whatever little is left of the indigenous heritage sites. In a way, she is history personified: she brings what is forgotten from the past to light, at the price of the destruction of the very object she has taken interest in (Mignolo, 2003).

There is an additional, more troubling aspect of spatiotemporal representations, though: the

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role of nature. As the game constructs the logic of inevitable destruction and decay to stress its postcolonial critique, it simultaneously creates the society of Paititi as a primordial one. It is an innocent community, troubled by the intrigues and greed of Western explorers, represented by the Trinity organization hiding behind the doomsday cult of Kukulkan. This motif is reinforced by the role of savior Lara Croft has to fulfill. This way, despite its good intentions, the game easily caters to the colonial "noble savage" trope. Paititians are innocent, technologically backward, honorable, and naïve people deprived of agency—it is a white explorer's mission to save them from the clutches of the evil cult.

Such narrative creates yet another temporal link within the gamespace: between childhood and adulthood. Even though initially presented as immature, Lara turns out to be an adult who has to take responsibility for child-like natives, to deliver them from the machinations of doctor Dominguez, her evil doppelganger from Trinity. Not only does the game build on the trope of the nurturing mother clashing against the destructive father: as it constantly reminds the player, Lara has

to endure horrible tribulations in order to fulfill her mission, and this adds a narrative of anti-conquest to the mix. Anti-conquest is a concept introduced by Mary Louse Pratt to describe an attitude of European explorers and missionaries to describe their own adventures in terms of the sacrifice they are suffering to deliver primitive tribes of Africa or the Americas through the means of modern science and rational reason, thus justifying subsequent colonial intervention as a moral obligation (Pratt, 1992).

Thus, the first fundamental contradiction within the game is exposed. Not only does it conflate the concept of the passage of time as decay with the idea of the passage of time as maturation. Within historical time it offers quite a relentless critique of the South American postcolonial condition. Meanwhile, in a biographical time, present as both Lara's progressing story and as a metaphor of innocent childhood being the primordial state of humanity, there are strong references to Victorian colonial adventure novels, with its central theme of a lost race waiting for the white savior (Hanson, 2002; Katz, 2010; Rieder, 2012).

TRAVERSING THE CHRONOTOPE

Both Bonner (2018) and Salin and Galanina (2020) point out the fundamental difference between literary and game chronotope as a change in relationship between spatial and temporal component. For Bakhtin in the literary chronotope the dominant element is time (Bakhtin, 1981: 85)—while, according to all three game researchers, the latter is characterized by the dominance of space. Even though *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* is certainly built with this principle in mind—that is, the progression of the plot and narrative time is strictly dependent on player's position within the game space, and rarely triggers without the player's direct command—there are certain differences between the two spatiotemporal architectures included in the game.

Some parts of the game are organized according to the principle described by Bonner as "open world chronotope": the player roams freely in the vast and impressively rendered gamescape, free to observe its features and engage in various activities, as Lara looks for various collectibles, deals with shopkeepers and engages in casual conversation with local population—dialogues not important enough to deserve their own cutscenes. It is also the space of multiple sidequests, with Lara looking for a certain point in space to perform a desired action and help a person asking for her assistance. The dominance of space is almost absolute within this chronotope: even if certain tasks are performed, and subquests fulfilled, the spatiotemporal composition remains unchanged, as if the passage of time does not happen. Following Salin and Galanina suggestion, I will call this type of spatiotemporal organization within an open world a "navigation chronotope", as the main activity available to Lara is navigation through the gamescape. Within this large chronotope there are two recurring small chronotopes: the jungle and the settlement, separated by the presence of NPCs [Non-Playable Characters] capable of having a conversation.

Beside vast spaces of the navigation chronotope lie pockets of spacetime organized by different rules. Those are the small chronotopes of the tomb and of the arena, where combat happens. They are always removed from spaces of general human activity, so innocent civilians never intersect with enemies Lara must destroy. It is worth noting those two spatial categories overlap sometimes, as several tombs are guarded by mysterious subterranean humanoids, viciously attacking Lara for the better part of her adventure, only to be turned into allies in the finale. In both cases spatiotemporal logic is different from the one informing navigation chronotope, as timing becomes a crucial element of the play experience. In multiple tombs the player has to not only solve spatial puzzles but also perform according to a rhythm introduced by various devices to avoid swirling blades or pendulums and similar deadly contraptions. In those areas, time becomes a far more important aspect of the chronotope—as is the case of combat arenas. *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* features stealth mechanics allowing the player to quietly eliminate opponents and avoid direct combat. To do so, the player needs to study how enemies' positions change over time—and learn their routine. And when the actual combat starts, everything becomes time-dependent: the player has to move between covers, avoid enemy attacks, and time their own actions. The spatial organization of the arena—recognizable at first glance—is very compliant to the temporal aspect of combat, it is built to facilitate certain movements and actions of game agents. The same spatiotemporal organization governs the architecture of the tomb, where acrobatic feats have to be performed in a certain rhythm and order. I call this spatiotemporal logic "exertion chronotope", as it demands non-trivial effort from both Lara and the player. As already analyzed, this large chronotope contains small chronotopes of the tomb and of the arena.

It is therefore my conviction that *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*—as many other open world games—is a composition of two different chronotopes, facilitating two different modes of action on both gameplay and narrative levels. As already stated, the main activity within the navigation chronotope is to wander across the surroundings in search of various visual clues: collectibles, quest-givers, quest goals, and so forth. This chronotope is a safe space, as the time flow is under the player's total control, with all NPC actions looped and static environment. Lara is never in danger in there, whether she is wandering through the lost city of Paititi or the unexplored Peruvian jungle. This spatiotemporal composition enables a slow, reflexive mode of gameplay based on two main activities: observation and accumulation. To successfully operate, the player has to distinguish between important and unimportant parts of the

Shadow of the Tomb Raider

scenery and activate all important parts. As time is looped there, with game agents performing the same activity over and over again, such activation rarely results in change within this spacetime other than collecting additional goods or information. Even with their quests fulfilled, NPCs remain in the same loop, as if nothing has changed. And for good reason: with a looped time completely subjugated to space, no change is possible without a profound reconfiguration of space. In this case, said reconfiguration is usually equated with expansion, as Lara unblocks a path leading to yet another navigation chronotope, without any further changes introduced. When the heroine opens the portal to Paititi, denizens of Kuwaq Yaku do not change their routine, and the player can resume any subquests or search for remaining collectibles later in the game.

The exertion chronotope enables a different mode of acting upon the game. Here, observation is subservient to control: to successfully beat action sequences, the player has to establish firm control over Lara's movement and actions, as well as dominate the seemingly unconquerable obstacles. Once it is done, they are rendered obsolete: killed enemies do not respawn, and traps are easy to bypass or defunct. It is due to this fact that the time-oriented exertion chronotope allows for change, and time passage is linear here: Lara progresses from beginning to end, instead of moving within loops of the navigation chronotope, a fact stressed by the linear progress through the exertion chronotope space—from the point of entry to an exit. The linearity of time allows for permanent change in narrative composition: once explored, a tomb often becomes inaccessible due to damage caused by Lara, and once conquered enemies vanish permanently. It is therefore no surprise that moving through exertion chronotope is also the only way to progress the game narrative and to witness meaningful consequences to Lara's actions and choices.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider's gameplay, as analyzed from a chronotopical perspective, is the-

refore an oscillation between a more passive mode based on the relaxed observation of space, and an active mode demanding focus on the temporal aspect of the game to remain in control. It is therefore no surprise those two chronotopes construct Lara Croft in two different ways and provide her with the means to perform two different sets of actions. The navigation chronotope produces what I will call *Reflexive Lara*: a level-headed and compassionate heroine, observing her surroundings and often engaging in dialogue to provide help to those in need. Her basic abilities are dialogical interactions with NPCs and the accumulation of knowledge or resources through careful investigation of the surroundings. Meanwhile, the exertion chronotope is where *Exertive Lara* resides: an action heroine capable of dispatching hordes of enemies and solving time-sensitive puzzles. She is also the one governed by the linear passage of time—therefore capable of changing her surroundings and herself. It is Exertive Lara who destroys ancient tombs and psychologically progresses from obsession over Trinity, through the sense of guilt, to thirst for vengeance, to the final sacrifice and self-acceptance. All these transformations do not affect Reflexive Lara, who remains unchanged through the entire course of the game. She appears already fully formed and capable, a quality stressed by the fact that she remains the sole active subject within the navigational chronotope. Meanwhile, Exertive Lara is frequently acted upon: attacked, chased, or forced to avoid death in crumbling structures. Therefore, it is Exertive Lara who faces personal trials forced upon her by the passage of narrative time, while Reflexive Lara solves only other people's problems.

This chronotopical composition is hardly unique to *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (see Karhulahti, 2013 for a discussion about kinestetic and reflexive modes of playing), and it is my conviction all open world games interlace navigation and exertion chronotopes. What makes this case interesting is the way the game tries to re-evaluate the ethical position of both characters constructed by this chronotopical composition. With Reflexive Lara, the game tries to frame observation as witnessing, through showcasing many consequences of European colonialism within the navigation chronotope. In a similar vein, Exertive Lara is depicted as the destroyer of both cultural heritage and any opposition, vengeful and borderline obsessive in her quest to stop Trinity.

> THE GAMEPLAY, AS ANALYZED FROM A CHRONOTOPICAL PERSPECTIVE, IS THEREFORE AN OSCILLATION BETWEEN A MORE PASSIVE MODE BASED ON THE RELAXED OBSERVATION OF SPACE, AND AN ACTIVE MODE DEMANDING FOCUS ON THE TEMPORAL ASPECT OF THE GAME TO REMAIN IN CONTROL. IT IS THEREFORE NO SURPRISE THOSE TWO CHRONOTOPES CONSTRUCT LARA CROFT IN TWO DIFFERENT WAYS AND PROVIDE HER WITH THE MEANS TO PERFORM TWO DIFFERENT SETS OF ACTIONS

The game fails to achieve this effect, though, since it is too reliant on digital game conventions, thus introducing a contradictory ideological framing of Reflexive Lara as first and foremost a collector of objects and knowledge, and Exertive Lara as a champion for the oppressed, fighting a just war against unquestionable villains. The dissonance between this double position Lara occupies, witness-destroyer and collector-champion, is especially painful, as it clashes postcolonial ambitions with a very reactionary colonial narrative of lost race romance.

LARA CROFT AS SUBJECT OF HISTORY AND

BIOGRAPHY

While describing the reasons behind Shadow of the Tomb Raider's inability to criticize colonial adventure tropes, it is important to consider how the main narrative arc interacts with the possibilities offered by two game chronotopes. The game creates a postcolonial world of oppression, and confronts it with a well-established protagonist, with an explicit aim to present the way Lara Croft progresses from being a self-absorbed tomb raider, a poster girl from imperial attitudes toward non-European cultural heritage, into a considerate and mindful curator of said heritage, treating indigenous people as equals. And it is a promise the game ultimately fails to deliver: the change in Lara's attitude seems not only ungrounded and ill-motivated but also superficial. The heroine remains who she was in the first place (a tomb raider), it is only the rhetoric framing her activities that changes. To uncover the source of this fiasco,

it is important to consider one final aspect of the chronotopical analysis: the interaction between historical and biographical time.

As Bakhtin (1981: 108-110) claims, the invention of the adventure chronotope in Greek novels introduced a new type of protagonist: a private person, whose trials and tribulations are played out at the scene of private life, as opposed to the strictly public and political subject of an epic, a travel novel, or an early form of biography. By following the conventions of an adventure narrative reappropriated for a digital game in the way described by Salin and Galanina (2020), *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* unwittingly follows the ideology of a private life while constructing its heroine. The exertive Chronotope, especially combat arenas, is non-specific for the concrete geographical area the game is set in, in a way Greek romance creates a nonspecific world as the backdrop for its protagonists' trials: indeed, very similar arenas are encountered in the previous entries in this

Shadow of the Tomb Raider

trilogy. The main plot also follows this direction: despite the setup, depicting Lara's archenemy as a benefactor of various South American communities and herself as a cause of people's misery, it very quickly drops the political angle to present Lara's personal quest for vengeance and redemption. Even the fact that the heroine has to assume the supposedly-public role of the killed Paititi queen changes nothing: through this position,

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HERE THE CENTRAL ISSUE LAYS BARE: WITHIN THE GAME THE PUBLIC AND POLITICAL IS CLEANLY SEPARATED FROM THE PRIVATE, AS THOSE TWO ASPECTS OF LIFE ARE PRESENTED THROUGH DIFFERENT CHRONOTOPES, PROVIDING DIFFERENT TEMPORALITIES AND DIFFERENT SETS OF POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Lara exercises vengeance upon her nemesis and then retreats into the safety of private life—*nota bene*, in the novel a luxury of an imperial subject, who is capable of withdrawing from dangers of history into the sanctuary of privacy (Jameson, 2006).

Meanwhile, the postcolonial criticism is expressed mainly within the navigation chronotope, through the way its space displays the temporal aspect. It is therefore the space of navigation, where fully-formed Reflexive Lara dwells, that is constructed as political commentary on the colonial legacy in South America. But all those imaginaries cannot influence the heroine, as within the looped time of the navigation chronotope any change—including transformation of the protagonist's ideological position—is impossible.

This contradiction is very apparent when time-travel episodes are considered. Only twice in *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* does Lara move against the currents of time. As already analyzed, she finds a way to the lost city of Paititi, the enclave of pre-colonial America. It is a feat done through spatial means, and it establishes a spatial continuity between Paititi and the rest of the gameworld. It is also easily replicable, as Lara moves in and out of the city with ease. The second time travel is a retrospection: a level detached from the rest of the game and impossible to revisit, where Lara replays her childhood memories. This sequence, one of a kind and separated from any other game chronotope, serves as an explanation for Lara's personal motivation and provides the narrative frame for the entire plot. It is also very private, as opposed to the public character of Lara's journey to Paititi.

Here the central issue lays bare: within the game the public and political is cleanly separated from the private, as those two aspects of life are presented through different chronotopes, providing different temporalities and different sets of possible actions. The game's historical time, subject of the postcolonial criticism, is therefore deprived of any possibility to influence the game plot. The plot's progression remains the province of biographical time, within which all emotional and psychological progress of the protagonist happens, equated with moving forward through the exertion chronotope (Ensslin and Goorimoorthee, 2020).

It is therefore my conviction that the fundamental inability to seriously discuss postcolonial legacy and the role of the *Tomb Raider* series in the upholding of imperial imagination stems from the chronotopical composition of the game. As a subject created by the game chronotopes, the version of Lara capable of change exists exclusively

within private biographical time, and postcolonial criticism is possible only within historical, public spacetime. Lara Croft can achieve personal redemption and emotional closure—but it cannot relate to the political aspect of the game, as the heroine occupies a comfortable position outside history. ∎

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REDEMPTION OUT OF HISTORY. CHRONOTOPICAL ANALYSIS OF *SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER*

REDIMIR LA HISTORIA. ANÁLISIS CRONOTÓPICO DE *SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER*

Abstract

In this paper I will use chronotopical interpretation of *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos Montréal, 2018), the latest installment in the long-standing *Tomb Raider* series, to explain the reason behind the game's inability to address ideological issues underlying the series. As the final part of the prequel trilogy, introduced with the premiere of the *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013), the game concludes Lara Croft's coming of age story. The protagonist turns from an idealistic student stranded on the mysterious island, featured in the first installment, into a fully formed and determined adventurer, casting away her father's long shadow and triumphing over the sinister Trinity organization. The ideology informing the genre *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* represents is inherently tied to the novels for adolescents, produced in the heydays of the British Empire. In this paper my main aim is to present how the spatiotemporal architecture of the game, analyzed through the lenses of Bakhtin's chronotope, contributes to the game failure as a serious criticism toward *Tomb Raider* series troublesome legacy.

Key words

Chronotope; Tomb Raider; Lara Croft; Bakhtin; Space; Time.

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Resumen

En este artículo llevaré a cabo una interpretación cronotópica de *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos Montréal, 2018), la última entrega de la extensa saga *Tomb Raider*, para explicar por qué el juego es incapaz de enfrentarse a los problemas ideológicos de la saga. Como última entrega de la *trilogía de precuelas*, que se estrenó con *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013), el juego concluye la historia del paso a la edad adulta de Lara Croft. La protagonista del juego pasa de ser una estudiante soñadora perdida en una isla misteriosa, como se exponía en el primer juego, a convertirse en una aventurera bien preparada y decidida que deja atrás la larga sombra de su padre y que triunfa sobre la siniestra organización Trinity. La ideología detrás del género que *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* representa está estrechamente conectada con las novelas para adolescentes escritas durante la época de mayor apogeo del imperio británico. En el presente artículo, mi objetivo es investigar cómo la arquitectura espacio-temporal del juego, con un análisis basado en las teorías de Bajtín sobre el cronotopo, contribuye a una lectura del juego que deja al descubierto su intento fallido de criticar el legado problemático de la saga *Tomb Raider*.

Palabras clave

Cronotopo; Tomb Raider; Lara Croft; Bajtín; Espacio; Tiempo.

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