

Uplink 18

The Geopolitics Issue

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Introduction

The holiday season is here, which means yet another batch of data confirming what *Uplink* has long predicted – namely, the moment the PS3 hit the magic price point of \$300 (the equivalent of \$200 in 2000 dollars), the three-console market would shrink to two. Since the price cut, the PS3 has significantly outsold the Xbox360, despite being \$50 to \$100 more expensive than the latter, and Microsoft's market share has plummeted from roughly one-third of world home console sales in 2006 down to about one-fifth in 2009. As a console-agnostic publication, *Uplink* sincerely hopes Microsoft learns its lesson, and never again skimps on hardware design, first party studios, or customer support. That said, Microsoft will have to wait until the beginning of the next console cycle (starting in late 2011 or early 2012) to seriously challenge its competitors.

The unifying theme of this issue is geopolitics, a.k.a. the study of the role of natural, social and economic geography in shaping human history. As the preeminent art-form of the transnational era, videogames are unusually sensitive to geopolitics, for three main reasons. First, videogames are a digital art-form. They cite, quote and pastiche a planetary library of music, scripts, images, texts and performances. Second, videogames have a far lower barrier to entry than other mass media. Not only are they easily copied and disseminated, but they depend more on universal categories such as player skill, rather than more specialized forms of linguistic or cultural knowledge. Third, games are not dependent on advertising revenue for their sales, which means they are accountable to a transnational audience in ways other mass media cannot match.

As a result, videogames were the first mass media to rethink and reinvent geopolitics for the post-Cold War era. This is nowhere more apparent than the videogame culture's reappropriation of one of the oldest geopolitical tropes of them all, namely piracy. Nowadays, piracy has become the favorite scapegoat of the mainstream Anglo-American media. Just as the US military-industrial complex wants to brand everyone on this planet as a terrorist, and just as the US medico-insurance complex wants to reduce all US citizens to lab rats, so too does the US media-telecom complex, a.k.a. Big Media, want to turn all of us into copyright criminals.

It is thus high time for those of us who live, work and play in the digital commons to transform the term “pirate” from corporate epithet to citizens' badge of honor. To that end, *Uplink* presents its very own pirate manifesto.

Next, we review two of the most pleasant gaming surprises of 2009 – Infinity Ward's

Modern Warfare 2 and Naughty Dog's *Uncharted 2*. Both are blockbuster titles, and both are excellent examples of how videogame culture is channeling geopolitics in politically astute ways.

A Pirate Manifesto

“Perspectives must be produced which set the world beside itself, alienated from itself, revealing its cracks and fissures, as needy and distorted as it will one day lay there in the messianic light. To win such perspectives without caprice or violence, wholly by the feel for objects, this alone is what thinking is all about.” – Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (my own translation)

We live in the epoch of digital culture. Each year, the means of digital production (computers) become cheaper, the speed of digital distribution (bandwidth) becomes faster, and the modes of digital organization (online communities and cellphone networks) become more ubiquitous. In the past, this was narrated in terms of specific aspects of digitalization – e.g. the rise of the digital media, key infrastructures of the transnational economy, or the invention of new forms of collective association and solidarity in the post-Cold War era. Today, it has become apparent that the single most profound change ushered in by the digital revolution is the sum total of all these processes – or rise of the digital commons.

The pre-digital commons, as the work of Peter Linebaugh and other historians have shown, gave us such wondrous achievements as human rights, parks and environmental protections, public libraries and education, and the ideal (if not always the reality) of justice for all. Today's digital commons has not simply built on these achievements, but has gone further, thanks to one of the most stunning role-reversals in world history.

For thirty-five years, neoliberalism, a.k.a. the ideology of market fundamentalism, held sway over most of the planet. Wall Street and its minions unleashed wave after wave of privatization, IMF-dictated austerity, and manic speculation across the planet, ravaging entire continents like the remorseless Chimera in *Insomniac's Resistance* franchise. One of the keys to neoliberalism's dominion was its control of the airwaves. Just as late 19th century Victorian liberalism deployed newspapers and the telegraph to secure its rule, late 20th century US neoliberalism deployed Hollywood broadcasting and US consumerism.

Yet there was one adversary neoliberalism could never tame or suppress: the digital commons. For decades, the commons patiently eluded the grasp of the digital capitalists, silicon rentiers and Wall Street Bubble-meisters, who thought their wealth and power meant that they alone controlled the weave of digital history. What they could not know was that the more they transformed the planet into a single interconnected market, the more the digital commons spun invisible webs of trust, solidarity and community. Quietly, with almost no fanfare, the digital commons took root in what Adorno would have called the cracks and fissures of the neoliberal world-system.

In 1984, the digital commons could be glimpsed only in the elite reaches of a few scientific establishments and the pages of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. As late as the mid-1990s, its most prominent manifestation was a few hundred million email accounts, and only a few savvy social movements (most notably, the Zapatistas in Mexico and assorted environmental groups) had begun to grasp its political potential.

Today in 2010, the digital commons has become a transnational reality. Its networks,

cellphones, digital cameras, and videogames have smashed the broadcasting monopolies of one-party states and corporate newsrooms alike. Its cellphone solidarities have ignited social revolutions and spawned developmental states throughout Eastern Europe, Latin America, South East Asia, China and Eurasia. Its videogames and social networks unite the planet. It is where 3 billion of us live, work, play and communicate, and best of all, billions more will be joining us over the next five years.

Ironically, despite their claim to be agents of modernization, the hegemonic media industries of neoliberalism – we will call them Big Media for short – have refused to acknowledge the digital commons. Instead of embracing the future, Big Media has waged its own version of the US Terror War in a doomed attempt to preserve its past dominance. But the target of this terror war is not the chimerical figure of the terrorist, but the equally chimerical figure of the pirate.

Why is this so? Because after decades of fleecing consumers, Big Media is on the run.

For almost a century, Big Media has delivered some of the worst news reporting and lousiest programming on the airwaves. This is not the result of any moral failing on the part of its executives, or poor judgement by its owners. It is because Big Media earns its profits by chasing after the annual \$450 billion (this is Zenith Optimedia's 2008 estimate) spent worldwide by corporations on advertising expenditures or “ad spend”. This is about two times greater than the sum total of all the media directly purchased by consumers worldwide. Put bluntly, we consumers do not get the mass media we pay for, we get the mass media that corporate ad spend has bought and paid for.

The digital age is a mortal threat to this state of affairs. The media revolutions of the 20th century – radio, film, television, and cable TV – all had the same basic model: a single pipeline financed by advertising money. To oversimplify a long and complex story, only a few giant oligopolies had the financial muscle to build such pipelines, and once they were operational, consumers had literally nowhere else to go to get their media content.[1]

Not anymore. In the digital age, the pipeline model has been replaced by proliferating and overlapping webs of broadband, satellite and wireless access-points. Consumers are increasingly downloading what they want, and when they want it, on the device of their choice. But instead of investing in the new media or pioneering new business models, Big Media has spent most of its energy buying off the US Empire's political class, showering hundreds of millions of dollars on campaign donations and lobbyists.

In the 1980s, the US Congress allowed Big Media to become even bigger and more monopolistic. This did nothing to improve the quality of the media, but did pad its profit margins handsomely. By the 1990s, Big Media's lobbyists were writing some of the most atrocious copyright legislation ever passed into law (e.g. the 1998 DMCA).[2] When Big Media wasn't suing file-sharers for the heinous crime of downloading a few songs in MP3 format, it was lobbying foreign governments to pass toxic trade and intellectual property treaties which would allow Big Media to exploit captive markets overseas.

Thanks to these efforts, Big Media has wrought a true miracle. It has created more criminals than any other institution in human history.

How did it achieve this feat? Simply, Big Media has redefined piracy as any form of cultural sharing which does not allow it to extract monopoly-rents for its overpriced, shoddy, and frequently exploitative products. Where Wall Street's market fundamentalism destroyed the illusion of the free market of capital, by running wild in Olympian-sized speculative follies which then required titanic government bailouts, neoliberalism's copyright fundamentalism has

destroyed the fiction of the free market of culture, by criminalizing any cultural transaction which does not enrich Big Media's shareholders.

If you share, you're a criminal. If Big Media had its way, most of humanity would be in jail right now.

Ever borrow a library book? A nefarious deed of copyright criminality! Pay top dollar for a new book. (Can't find a new copy? Not our problem.) Ever watch a DVD with a friend? An outrageous act of socialism! Charge them the full ticket price for the use of your TV and DVD player. Be sure to charge extra for food. Give eight-year-old children free textbooks? The nerve of those little parasites! Chain them to a bunch of textile machines until they've paid for their schooling.

These may sound like wild exaggerations. But they do not extrapolate very far from the real-life agenda of neoliberalism. Libraries are being destroyed by budget cuts for public services, while e-book services want to charge you for downloading classic texts which ought to be the non-commercial heritage of all humanity. Movie companies are constantly trying to criminalize media file-sharing by fans and artists. Neoliberal politicians want to subsidize entrepreneurs and elite schools while slashing funding for public education, thereby driving non-elite teenagers into dead-end, non-unionized service jobs for the rest of their lives.

Accumulate, accumulate, and to hell with human beings and the ecology – this is the Prime Directive of capitalism.

Purchase, purchase, and to hell with quality or community – this is the Prime Directive of capitalism's culture-industry.

The market fundamentalism of the former is the copyright fundamentalism of the latter.

That is why, instead of bemoaning this state of affairs, *Uplink* heartily embraces the culture-industry's term “pirate”.

Yes, Big Media, we are your worst nightmare come true: we citizens of the digital commons are pirates. We are outside your law, because your law is unjust. It is the despotism of greed, camouflaged in the rhetoric of consumer choice.

There is no choice without freedom. But neoliberalism's freedom is the freedom of the few – those who already own everything – to take everything from the many – those who own nothing at all. Beneath its consumer-friendly veneer, market fundamentalism seeks to transform everything human beings have ever made, or will make in the future, into a commodity.

But when everything is reduced to a price tag, then nothing is worth anything anymore. Any crime against humanity and any despoliation of the environment can be legitimated with the simple excuse, “It was profitable to do so”. Trashing the ecosphere will eventually exterminate all human life on the planet, but that's not a cost which shows up in the weekly balance-sheet, does it? Mustn't disappoint the shareholders at the next conference call!

Instead of following the dictates of total greed, the digital commons follows the logic of total access. Instead of monopolizing the trading-routes of information, the commons opens up the possibility of equal informational exchange for all.

Real pirates don't plunder, real pirates share. The overwhelming majority of what Big Media demonizes as piracy is simply sharing, i.e. the non-commercial redistribution of digital copies of music, film, television, literature, media, games and much else besides.

When physical goods are shared, they are taken from (or donated by) someone, and then given to someone else. But digital sharing is different: it does not create scarcity. When you share a file, you are allowing someone else to make a perfect copy of the original. Your ability to use the source file is in no way diminished.

Of course, if someone acquired a digital copy and then tried to re-sell that copy, that would indeed be unlawful, though the charge would not be theft, but potential infringement of the creator's license to control such sales. But this is not how the overwhelming majority of file-sharing works. Each year, the costs of creating, storing and distributing files decreases, to the point that charging for access becomes less and less relevant, and finally more trouble than it is worth.[3]

To paraphrase web visionary John Gilmore, the Internet interprets both censorship and pay walls as damage, and routes around them.

This is not to argue we are headed for a completely non-commercial culture. Markets and monetary systems will be with us for some time to come. The point is that the digital commons is accelerating the emergence of non-commercial forms of cultural production, distribution and consumption, on a transnational scale.

What neoliberalism never understood was that most aspects of human life never have been – and never will be – financialized. After all, money-making isn't what makes us human. Even bank accounts earn money of their own accord, via the miracle of compound interest.

What makes us human is our capacity for friendship and romance, for joy and sorrow, for nostalgia and anticipation, for child-raising and remembrance, for story-telling and teaching, for creativity and play – for a thousand things which have no price tag, and are therefore priceless.

That's why our piracy is not interested in taking the oligarchic spoils of Big Media and handing them over to another set of oligarchs. We have something far more dangerous in mind: the abolition of oligarchies altogether – a polite way of saying, ending the dominion of capital over the mass media, a crucial step in ending its domination of human society.

Where Big Media seeks to monopolize culture, pirates seek its democratization. Where Big Media believes in one market under the hegemony of exchange-value, pirates believe in one humanity under conditions of equal exchange. Where Big Media hails privatization, pirates laud plebianization. Where Big Media wants to abolish the past and the future, via the perpetual marketing of an unfree present, pirates want to liberate both past and future, right here in the present.

The digital commons is where humanity is beginning to dream its transnational future.

Raise your flags high, fellow pirates, because the time has come to set sail on the oceans of open source. Avast, for there be corporate/bankster plunder to reappropriate, game-worlds to create, and a transnational commons to build!

1. It is true that a few of those pipelines were initially built and operated by nation-states, especially in Europe, where social democratic governments invested heavily in quality public broadcasting. The problem is that the pipeline model is fundamentally vulnerable to creeping “regulatory capture” by powerful commercial and oligopolistic interests. After 1990, the the deregulatory agenda of the EU's indigenous variant of neoliberalism, a.k.a. euroliberalism, transformed the EU's main public broadcasters into increasingly commercial and advertising-friendly enterprises. Similarly, China's CCTV is state-owned, but is as dependent on advertising revenue as any private broadcaster.

2. Here is an open letter sent December 9, 2009 by Senate Majority leader Harry Reid to the Chinese government, scolding them for their lack of fealty to Big Media. Incredibly, the same bought-off politicians who unleashed the most gigantic and destructive financial speculation in human history have the shamelessness to call China's hardworking masses, who earned each and every yuan the old-fashioned way – by working hard for them on the world-market – of being thieves:

“Another issue that has long troubled the U.S.-China relationship is intellectual property theft. The creation of works protected by intellectual property -- from music, movies, and software, to auto parts, clean energy products, and pharmaceuticals -- is one of the hallmarks of the US economy. High levels of intellectual property piracy in China have led many in the United States to believe that there may be a Chinese policy to undermine American competitiveness in sectors where we are strong, while simultaneously benefiting from open access to the U.S. market. This belief is bolstered by policies that specifically restrict access of U.S. cultural goods and that require technology transfer by U.S. manufacturing companies as the price of entry to the market. Whether or not this belief fairly characterizes official Chinese government policy, there is no doubt that continuing high levels of piracy, and the maintenance of restrictions on the access of U.S. companies and products to the Chinese market, contribute to imbalances that are not politically sustainable.

Rampant intellectual property theft in China will not be resolved merely by a press release or a new policy pronouncement. China needs to take steps and make progress on a continuous basis. Improved IP protection in China is in China’s long-term economic interest. If China hopes to move up the value chain, it must end rampant theft from those who create value.”

Web: <http://www.tradereform.org/content/view/2214/52/>

Accessed December 20, 2009.

3. Ironically, while most file-sharing is the direct opposite of theft, a great deal of what neoliberalism celebrates as digital property could easily be classified as robbery, simply because so much of it is the private hijacking of codes and tools which are public property. No person or corporation should have sole ownership of the tools of the digital commons, anymore than any person or corporation should be able to own the use of language or the right to vote.

Call of Duty 4's Modern Warfare 2: Infinity Ward Gets It Right

In the past, *Uplink* has been extremely critical of the tendency of shooter franchises to bog down in lackadaisical repetition. This usually took the form of stereotypical WW II narratives (a.k.a. *Call of Duty* syndrome), or else the US Empire's reactionary fantasies of martial hegemony (a.k.a. *Halo* syndrome, though ironically enough, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare 1* also fell victim to this debility). *Uplink* is pleased to report that the latest *Call of Duty* videogame, *Modern Warfare 2* (hereafter referred to as *MW2*), marks a welcome return to form.

One of the reasons for this is that the designers at Infinity Ward were willing to learn from the very best, i.e. to adopt the playbook of Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid 4* (2008). Whereas Kojima's masterpiece critiqued neoliberalism's commodification of bodies through the metaphor of nanotechnology, *MW2* critiques neoliberalism's commodification of real estate through the propaganda clichés of the US Terror War: the war-bubble of the former is the property-bubble of the latter.

Instead of belaboring this premise with unnecessary escort missions or extraneous cut-scenes, game director Jason West wisely chose to strip down the narrative to a pure adrenaline rush, a strategy which perfectly matches *Call of Duty's* jumpy, quick-moving style of game-play.

It is all carried off with surprising narrative skill, to the point that many US gamers will not necessarily understand the joke. If Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert ever wrote a videogame script, the result would be *MW2*.

The first hint of this is an introductory scene set in a future Afghani battle-zone, where we

witness the destruction of an office tower by a US air-strike (both an inversion of 9-11 and a premonitory Dubai reference), and the transformation of a local school into a battleground (a fairly accurate depiction of what neoliberalism has done to public education). Next is a foray into a snowy mountain fortress in Kazakhstan, a glancing blow at Davos and the skiing resorts of the global banking elites.

Then there is the infamous “No Russian” level, where terrorists (lead by an arch-villain named Makarov, one of the bit characters of *MWI*) massacre civilians at a major Russian airport, and pin the blame on an American CIA agent who was infiltrating the terrorist group. This level received a fair amount of negative media attention, including an official import ban on the game by the Russian authorities, though Russia needn't have worried. The game-play in no way glorifies terrorism, but emphasizes the profound sterility and pointlessness of the violence. To be sure, the sequence is not as effective as Hideo Kojima's famous “The Sorrow” level in *Metal Gear Solid 3*, which forces players to battle against the ghosts of all the soldiers they have previously slain. However, it does humanize the Russian victims, and makes players empathize with Russia's real-life struggle against the terrorists responsible for such ghastly crimes such as the Beslan school siege. The real point of the level is to highlight the spectacular destruction of the airport's tourist trinkets, duty-free goods and glass-and-steel shops, a.k.a. the economic implosion of the global mall.

The theme of real estate comes into its own during the next level, set in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. The favelas are slums which are the product of long-standing class struggles in Brazil between the landless poor and the land-grabs of the rich. Significantly, the game-play emphasizes the difference between innocent civilians and terrorists – if players kill innocent civilians, they fail the mission. Then the scene abruptly shifts from the geopolitical periphery of neoliberalism to its core, in the form of a full-fledged invasion of the USA by alleged ultranationalist Russians.

On closer inspection, however, these ultranationalists aren't really Russian soldiers, but real estate speculators: the invaders occupy the luxurious McMansions spawned by the housing bubble, and turn the US military's high-tech command and control system against itself. The player must slug it out with the invaders inside the suburban sprawl, fast food restaurants, and retail outlets of northern Virginia. The result is real estate devalorization on an epic scale, a spectacle designed to literally and figuratively hit home with the youthful gamers who work in the real-life versions of those restaurants and retail outlets, and who did indeed purchase *MW2* by the droves. Fittingly, the action culminates in a shoot-out for the White House, political terrain occupied by the agents of neoliberalism since 1979.

But Infinity Ward does not stop there. What happens next crosses over from a satire of US neoconservatism into a full-blown bashing of neoliberalism. Amidst the confusion of the attack on Washington, Lieutenant General Shepherd launches an operation to extract Captain Price, a British special forces soldier and the hero of *MWI*, from a Russian gulag for a secret mission. But why would Price even be in a Russian gulag in the first place, given that he helped defeat Zakhaev, the villain in *MWI*? A conversation between Price and Shepherd gives us a clue:

Background visuals show computerized map of Siberia. On the sound-track, we hear the voices of “Soap” MacTavish, Captain Price and Lieutenant General Shepherd.

MacTavish: “General Shepherd you're online with Captain Price.”

Shepherd: “Back from the brink, Captain.”

Price: “Out of the frying pan, is more like it. This world looks more like hell than the one I just left.”

Shepherd: “We thought we'd recovered the ACS before the Russians could crack it. We were wrong. Then Makarov turned the US into his scapegoat. Next thing you know there's flames everywhere. What's this image you're sending me?” *Visuals show schematics of a Russian submarine.*

Price: “You wanna put out an oil fire, Sir, you set off a bigger explosion right next to it. Sucks away the oxygen. Snuffs the flame.”

Shepherd: “Price, you've been locked away too long. Better get your mind right, son.”

Price: “Shepherd, are you willing to do what is necessary to win?”

Shepherd: “Always.”

Price: “We've got ourselves a pretty big fire. Gonna need a huge bang.”

Shepherd: “You've been in the gulag too long, Price. Focus on taking out Makarov.”

Price: “No time, Sir, we need to end this war today.”

Shepherd: “I'm not asking you, Price. This is an order. You're to –” *Click as Price snaps the connection.*

Price: “Looks like we lost our connection.”

The mystery deepens when Price and his team infiltrate a Russian submarine base, presumably to prevent Makarov from firing its missiles. However, once Price gets inside the submarine, he opens the silo doors and fires a nuclear missile at Washington DC. Thankfully, the missile explodes in outer space above the capital, sparing most of the physical infrastructure but triggering an EMP (electromagnetic pulse) which knocks out all aircraft and disrupts all communications on the battlefield. Has Price gone completely mad? How could he manage to launch a Russian missile without the aid of the Russian government?

The mystery is finally resolved by the penultimate sequence, wherein the player-character must infiltrate Makarov's sprawling summer-house in the Caucasus mountains to retrieve some crucial computer data. The mansion is a reference to the bubble-era McMansion, while the location is a nod towards Georgia's lunatic colonial war on South Ossetia in 2008, mercifully cut short by Russia's successful peace-keeping mission. But when the data is finally retrieved, the player is rewarded not with a congratulatory cut-scene, but by rankest betrayal: Shepherd pulls out a pistol and shoots the player-character dead.

Shepherd has been gaming the Terror War all along, using Makarov and the ultranationalists as proxies for his own devious agenda of transforming the planet into a cauldron of permanent war. That is, where Makarov pinned the blame for his massacre of other Russians on the Americans, Shepherd launched the Russian submarine missile as a “false flag” operation to convince the US government to give him near-unlimited power. In fact, all of the previous missions were compromised by Shepherd's plan from the very beginning – including Price's conversation with Shepherd, which was an elaborate ruse, a stage-play meant to deceive the US or other intelligence services monitoring the transmission.

But what Shepherd hadn't counted on was the fact that Price had already been betrayed by his own government once, and realized he was being set up as the disposable fall-guy one more time. One of the best moments of *MW2* occurs when Price frantically radios the player-character seconds too late, warning them Shepherd is their real enemy. Alas, all we can do at that point is watch the life ebb away from our characters, while Shepherd burns their bodies with gasoline (incidentally, the cigar Shepherd uses to light the fire is another *MGS4* reference).

In the finale of the game, Price and MacTavish follow in the footsteps of Kojima's Solid Snake, by throwing their military careers and official loyalties away, and undertaking a near-suicidal mercenary mission to bring Shepherd down. With perfectly-pitched irony, the game ends where it began, namely a secret mission in the forbidding desert of Afghanistan. Only this time around, Price and MacTavish are hunting Shepherd and his praetorian guard. Astonishing as it

sounds, the player-character steps into the symbolic shoes of the real-world Pashtun insurgents who are in the process of defeating the US colonial occupation of Afghanistan.

Price's words before the finale, capably voiced by veteran British actor Billy Murray, are the prescient epitaph of the US Empire:

“This is for the record: History is written by the victor. History is filled with liars. If he lives, and we die, his truth becomes written – and ours is lost. Shepherd will be a hero. Because all you need to change the world is one good lie and a river of blood. He's about to complete the greatest trick a liar ever played on history. His truth will be the truth. But only if he lives, and we die.”

The conclusion is a transparent homage to one of the most famous moments of gaming culture, Valve's superlative “Surface Tension” level in *Half Life* (1998). But where Gordon Freeman had to save the world by himself at the end of *Half Life*, the player-character in *MW2* is part of a multinational three-person team, a subtle nod to the rise of multiplayer gaming. Let's hope all three characters will return for the next iteration of the franchise.

Uncharted 2: Naughty Dog Hits Postcolonial Paydirt

In 2007, game studio Naughty Dog released *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, one of the first top-tier action titles for the Playstation 3. The game was an enjoyable action romp loosely based on the 1930s and 1940s adventure and science fiction serials, with a passing nod towards their Spielbergian remakes. While *Uncharted* delivered splendid in-game visuals, topnotch dialogue, and refined jumping mechanics, its game-play was limited, and its storyline had some key weaknesses.

Simply, the game never quite translated its narrative promise into a game-play premise. Protagonist Nathan Drake was a likeable rogue, but the script and character development broke down midway through the game. Most of all, what should have been an ingenious mid-game twist – the discovery that the secret treasure everyone is scrambling for is the bearer of a terrible curse – was undone by the story's lack of postcolonial history. There was no narrative continuity between the ruins of a vanished Spanish colonialism, the remains of a Nazi treasure-hunting expedition, and the obvious parallels to the disintegration of today's US Empire.

Ironically, *Uncharted* ended up being too similar to the formulaic Hollywood adventure serial for its own good. The classic formula works like this: a guileless American hero stumbles into the wreckage of other peoples' colonialisms, but somehow manages to set things aright, like FDR in WW II. What such narratives overlooked was the sordid history of the US colonial occupations of the Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico, as well as its imperial interventions in Latin America. This is most painfully apparent in the plot twist at the end of the game, a distant echo of the “heroic white man saves world from villain-of-color” trope typified by Buck Roger's battles with Ming the Merciless.

Uplink is happy to report that *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* does more than just fix the flaws of its predecessor. Naughty Dog has permanently raised the bar of the 3D action-adventure game. The scriptwriting, voice-acting, facial animation, and set design are some of the best of any contemporary videogame, the characters are credible and complex, and the finely-honed game-play keeps pace with the riveting storyline.

Most of all, *Uncharted 2* gets postcolonial history right. It does this by setting two of the

staple character-types of the 20th century action adventure film – the archeologist and the treasure-hunter – in motion towards their colonial prehistory. At the dawn of the capitalist world-market, Portuguese and Spanish colonialists plundered Meso-America for its gold and silver ornaments, while British and Dutch colonialists did the same throughout India and Indonesia. Once the gold was exhausted, these colonial Empires switched over to an accumulation model based on agrarian exports and mining, financed by the unpaid labor of African slaves, South Asian coolies and European indentured servants. This required a more sophisticated system of labor control, which then necessitated research into local cultures, traditions and histories. In general, this research was deployed as a means of colonial rule, or as its ideological justification; it took centuries for anti-colonial intellectuals and social movements to recuperate and reappropriate their own histories in more emancipatory ways.

Uncharted 2 critiques the legacy of colonialism in two ways. First, it transforms the theme of treasure into game-play. By swinging, climbing or exploring hard-to-reach areas, the player can collect a total of 101 optional treasures. After obtaining each, a 3D image of the item is depicted in the inventory screen. These treasures are facsimiles of real-life archeological finds (various coins, masks, religious items, etc.). While they are not necessary for completion of the game, they do reward players who wish to master the game's level design, and showcase the complexity and creativity of the world's precapitalist cultures. Another set of treasures can be earned by completing *Uncharted 2*'s superbly-designed multiplayer and online cooperative missions.

Second, archeology is transformed into postcolonial geopolitics. Indeed, each new space Drake investigates turns out to be the site of escalating political and social conflict. The first of these sites is located in the contemporary semi-periphery: Drake and two co-conspirators break into a Turkish museum in order to find a clue necessary to find Marco Polo's legendary missing treasure. The sequence is an artfully-disguised version of that staple feature of videogames, the introductory training level. The player is not allowed to blast their way through the level, but must master the use of nonviolent stealth and cover techniques.

Each subsequent space features an additional element of game-play, while matching this game-play to a geopolitical context. The space of the Turkish museum is clearly a reference to the politics of museums, and their claim to represent the national or pre-national past. Next, Drake visits an archeological dig in the jungles of Borneo, where he has to openly battle the hired thugs of a rival treasure-hunter and uncover the secret of Marco Polo's past (i.e. another artfully-disguised staple of the videogame culture, the combat tutorial). This is the stage of archeological fieldwork, where new historical objects are uncovered.

Finally, the space of the museum (stealth genre) and the space of field-work (action genre) are fused in the cities and mountains of Nepal, where most of the game takes place. It is also where Drake's battle against the mercenaries merges seamlessly into the real-life anti-colonial revolutionary war which has raged in Nepal for some time. For decades, Nepal was a deeply impoverished, semi-feudal state governed by a monarchy, until its long-suffering peasants finally rose up in a ferocious guerilla war in 1996. In 2006, a peace deal was signed which paved the way for an end to the monarchy and the inception of parliamentary rule.

The choice of Nepal presented Naughty Dog with a formidable narrative challenge. Simply, any mass media representation of the semi-peripheries or true peripheries of the world-system runs the risk of degenerating into a toxic Orientalism, either by exaggerating the innate nobility of the less-industrialized peoples, or else condemning them for their irredeemable backwardness. (Incidentally, this danger is not limited to First World media productions, but

applies to all media cultures, including those of the semi-periphery.)

Uncharted 2 ingeniously transformed this danger into a narrative opportunity, by rewriting the treasure-hunt into the categories of postcolonial history. In effect, the designers fused the stealth genre and the action genre into the postcolonial action-adventure epic.

Much of the credit is due to game director Amy Hennig. Hennig, who also wrote the script, ensured that every single aspect of the game – storyline, characterization, and dialogue – was linked to some aspect of postcoloniality. Just consider the stupendous train sequence which occurs midway through the game. This was the first railway sequence in a videogame which depicts realistic mass and momentum – that is, objects and people on the train sway left and right, exactly like real life. However, the sequence is not just a technical tour de force, it is also a transparent homage to India's Bollywood film industry: symbolic shots of trains are one of the most characteristic and enduring icons of South Asian cinema.

A lesser game might have sabotaged the sequence with unnecessary flashbacks or clumsy transitions. But the entire sequence flows smoothly from beginning to end, ramping up the difficulty level in precise lockstep with the increasingly epic scenery. The result fuses Hollywood-style visual panache with Bollywood-style suspense.

What ties it all together is the scintillating game-play. *Naughty Dog* must have carefully studied *MGS4*'s perfectly-honed balance between stealth and action, because *Uncharted 2*'s control system is exquisite. With just a few simple button-presses, players can run, dodge-roll, leap to cover, peer around corners, and even shoot at enemies while clinging to walls and ledges. Drake's stealth attack rewards patience and tactical subtlety, while the weapons have enough variety and firepower to satisfy action aficionados. Most satisfying of all, Drake's physical movements, occasional reactions and gestures are animated with extraordinary realism and attention to detail.

While climbing, Drake will not plunge randomly to his death, but will signal that another ledge or perch is accessible by looking around and raising an arm in the appropriate direction. Instead of requiring the player to continually press a button while climbing – a source of endless frustration in other action games – Drake automatically hangs from beams or cling to ledges. It takes a solid button-press to drop from climbs, and if the fall isn't too steep, Drake will automatically roll to survive.

The exquisite controls are matched by some of the best scriptwriting, voice-acting and characterization of any recent videogame. There is not a single dud line, wrong intonation, or false moment in the entire game. One of the most subtle but rewarding touches is the complete lack of “dead air” during the climbing sequences: Drake is always talking or bantering with a companion, sometimes in person, sometimes via radio. Nor are his companions lowly sidekicks, they are fully-realized characters fleshed out with superb voice-acting. In the few moments Drake is genuinely alone, he will occasionally make realistic quips and asides appropriate to the situation.

Nolan North, as the voice of Drake, delivers a performance so good it deserves to become the platinum standard for all future action-adventure games. Emily Rose and Richard McGonagle deliver outstanding performances as the voices of Elena and Sully, respectively, while Claudia Black deserves kudos for her work as Chloe, a spirited Asian-Australian treasure-hunter with an agenda of her own. Meanwhile, Steve Valentine's oily Flynn and Graham MacTavish's malevolent Lazarevic are the perfect foils for our heroes. There is also the quietly charismatic Schaefer, an elderly German mountaineer who has settled in rural Nepal, capably voiced by Rene Auberjonois. Last but not least, there is Tenzin, who at first seems to be merely

Schaefer's assistant. In fact, Tenzin all but steals the show, thanks to some nifty voice-acting by Pema Dhondup. Dhondup is a second-generation South Asian active in the media industry, whose parents came from the Tibetan-speaking area of India.[1]

One of Naughty Dog's savviest design decisions was to employ authentic Nepali and Tibetan dialogue in the storyline, but leave it entirely untranslated (Nepali-speaking fans of the game quickly posted their own translations of the dialogue).[2] This is not just excellent game-design – Drake's bewildered reaction to Tenzin and his Nepali hosts becomes our own – but is a subtle hint to the player to do some quick online research.

The names “Schaefer” and “Tenzin” are not accidental, but have significant historical referents. At one point in the game, Drake and Tenzin discover the remains of a Nazi expedition in search of the lost kingdom of Shambhala. In point of historical fact, Nazi Germany created an “Ahnenerbe” organization in 1935, as one of the more obscure tentacles of the SS (its full name was the Ahnenerbe Forschungs und Lehrgemeinschaft, or literally, “Society for the Study and Research of the Ancestral Heritage”). The Ahnenerbe sent an archeological expedition to Nepal in 1938, lead by a zoologist named Ernst Schaefer, who had trekked extensively through Nepal. After the war, Schaefer wrote up a report on the expedition entitled *Fest der weissen Schleiern* [“Festival of the White Veils”].[3]

The name “Tenzin”, on the other hand, is a nod towards Tenzin Norgay, the celebrated Nepali sherpa who led Edmund Hillary to the peak of Mt. Everest.[4] Similar to the Tenzin of *Uncharted 2*, Tenzin Norgay spoke Nepali as well as Tibetan. As it turns out, this is just the first of three ingenious rewritings of Himalayan-related figures or media tropes. The second is the myth of the abominable snowman, which *Uncharted 2* rewrites into the ferocious guardians of Shambhala. The third is the hidden paradise of Shangri-la, most famously depicted in Frank Capra's adventure epic, *Lost Horizon* (1938). But whereas Capra's Shangri-la was an utterly reactionary phantasm, an idyll of Imperial whiteness, *Uncharted 2* depicts Shambhala as a dystopia of madness and war.

In the final chapter of *Uncharted 2*, we discover that the treasure Shambhala hides is not a jewel, but a natural resource – the crystallized sap of a strange tree. The sap has remarkable healing powers, and transforms ordinary soldiers into fearsome warriors. However, it is also highly volatile and prone to explode. Even worse, it eventually turns those who consume it into uncontrollable monsters. It is, in short, the perfect metaphor for the violence of colonialism: an anagram for the centuries of gold, sugar, tea, rum, and latest of all, petroleum extracted by colonialism and neocolonialism, which generated untold power and wealth for the few, while inflicting inconceivable misery on the many.

Thankfully, *Uncharted 2* avoids the flaw of most other action-adventure stories – the scapegoating of other peoples' imperialisms by the whitewashing one's own. If the central villain, Lazarevic, is *Uncharted's* version of the private military companies or PMCs famously denounced by Hideo Kojima, neither does the game shy away from the issue of historical responsibility.

At the end of the story, Drake has to face up to the responsibilities of his actions. It is not just that he unwittingly allowed Lazarevic to gain access to Shambhala, and must defeat the latter. It is that others would follow in Lazarevic's footsteps, and wreak still greater havoc. Drake – and by extension, we as players – must shut down the war-machine of neocolonialism for good, by turning its own explosive potential against itself.

Endnotes

1. Pema Dhondup runs an independent media production company called Clear Mirror Pictures specializing in Tibetan-related media services. Web: <<http://www.clearmirrorpictures.com/index.htm>>. Accessed January 12, 2009.

2. These two discussion threads provide complete translations:

Web: <http://www.gamespot.com/ps3/action/uncharted2amongthieves/show_msgs.php?topic_id=m-1-51863476&pid=955125&page=0>. Accessed January 12, 2009.

Web: <<http://boardsus.playstation.com/playstation/board/message?board.id=uncharteddf&thread.id=83632>>.

3. Web: <<http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/n-s/nazimyths.html>>. Accessed January 12, 2009. A photo of the real-life Schaefer and a description of the expedition is available here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1939_German_expedition_to_Tibet>. Accessed January 12, 2009.

4. Web: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tenzing_Norgay>. Accessed January 12, 2009.

Stay tuned for Uplink 19: The God of War Issue!