A Beautiful Desolation:
Finding apartheid in South Africa’s imagined future

Rachel Lara van der Merwe, Ph.D.
Centre for Media and Journalism Studies
University of Groningen
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In the shadow of massive, well-funded industries like Hollywood, smaller national cinema and television industries have historically struggled to establish economic viability, let alone contribute culturally to the construction of national identities\(^1\). For video games with more extensive technological and infrastructural needs, the struggle has been even more difficult, \(^2\) especially when in competition with the dominant North American and Japanese industries.\(^3\) Nevertheless, independent game developers and publishers keep emerging around the world and with them burgeoning new industries. The existence of national video game cultures that contribute to the representation and construction of collective national identities, however, remains unclear and remarkably under-researched.

In my own home country, there is a distinct lack of “South African-ness” in the most successful video games produced here. South African (SA) game developers focus on designing games for a global audience while South African gamers primarily purchase foreign-made video games\(^4\). Research indicates that this dynamic is quite common around the world: in order to establish a successful national video game industry, game developers must appeal to a

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transnational audience first. So, when game developers do choose to incorporate a sense of national identity into their games, this decision is actually unusual.

This chapter focuses on a game that does just that: **Beautiful Desolation (BD)**. BD is a point-and-click adventure puzzler/RPG that begins when an alien technological edifice called The Penrose appears off the coast of SA. While exploring the structure, Mark Leslie is propelled into a future post-apocalyptic version of SA and must find a way home. The game was released in 2020 by SA studio **The Brotherhood**, run by brothers Chris and Nic Bischoff. It followed two successful independent games for the studio (**Stasis**, 2015 and **Cayne**, 2017), but **BD** was their first game to be set in SA with SA characters and explicit references to SA culture. While their previous games were only released on Steam for PC, **BD** was also ported to the Playstation 4 and Nintendo Switch, signaling the Brotherhood’s ability and desire to reach a much broader audience. Despite criticism about the quality of the console ports, the game was generally positively received (Metacritic 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Steam, 2020) and widely reviewed. 

While other reasonably successful and explicitly African RPGs exist, such as **Aurion: Legacy of the Kori-Odan** from Cameroon, most game developers have not had the means to port the games to console. This makes **BD** unique in its capacity to promote the SA video game industry on the global market and in its ability to contribute to national identity and...
representation/construction. Using the former factor (industry success) as context, in this chapter I focus on the latter: how does BD imagine SA? I explore how the visual, verbal, and procedural rhetoric of a recent, relatively successful SA video game engages and performs SA national identity within the context and confines of existing global industries. My analysis reveals an imagining of SA infused with colonial and apartheid values that conflicts with contemporary struggles to more fully decolonize SA, and I argue the global video game industry encourages the continued production of games with such values.

**Context: Building a Nation with Video Games**

Foundational to my argument are three propositions supported by existing research. First, national media industries play a role in cultivating a nation’s sense of self, and national identity serves a role both internally (internal cohesion) and externally (performing a cohesive identity to the world). Second, due to the cost and infrastructure necessary to produce video games, it is difficult to establish a financially-viable national video game industry unless it garners significant engagement globally. This proves challenging due to the dominant Japanese and North American media infrastructures. Third, the logics of many successful triple-A games are fundamentally colonial even when they implement more diverse representation.

Before I weave these together into my argument, I briefly unpack each, beginning with the observation that national media industries play a role in cultivating a nation’s sense of self. By using the term “nation” rather than “nation-state”, I focus on what Anderson described as an “imagined political community…conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship”\(^8\). Anderson demonstrates how the modern nation was a unique political entity best understood not by

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examining borders and government structures, but by studying shared sociopolitical consciousnesses that emerge through the collective consumption of circulated media. Anderson points to the expression of an abstract “German-ness” or “Mexican-ness” in print media that facilitated the construction of these new political entities in the 19th century across large geographic areas and spanning disparate people groups.

His findings were followed by those who pointed to the fundamental role of the novel in developing national identities⁹, and others who extended these ideas into the concept of “national cinema”¹⁰. Higson notes that national cinema, and by extension other forms of media, serves both internal and external functions. It can unify a nation’s population across varying interests and understandings of what the nation is or should be, and it can communicate to the rest of the world the nation’s unique identity and values. Both functions serve to strengthen the imagined coherence of a unified state.

Very little research, however, has been done to explore the relationship between video games and national identity, perhaps because video games tend to be associated with other digital forms of technology that tend to be linked to transnational/global identities. Or perhaps because games have erroneously been perceived as niche media, not circulated widely enough to affect national identity. However, research demonstrates that video games are integral to mainstream culture and integral to the production of cultures¹¹, and game scholars increasingly look to the relationship between games and local or national cultures¹². This scholarship is vital

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¹² Paula Callus and Cher Potter, “Michezo Video: Nairobi’s Gamers and the Developers Who Are Promoting
because games “are cultural in their own terms, rather than as a result of their similarities to forms like film”13. For example, Webber investigates how national identity formation might operate when the interactivity of games allows for diverging possible narrative outcomes.

Returning to the word “imagined” is crucial because it reminds us to think about who is doing the imagining. On the one hand, there are the game developers cultivating an imaginary within their narratives, but on the other hand, players imagine their own narratives through their game choices. All media forms—even print media and novels—are subject to the agency and interpretation of the media user, so, in a sense, all media are interactive. But understanding the varying natures of interactivity for distinct media helps us to understand how processes of individual and collective identity construction take place. For video games, Webber suggests that, “The imagined community is then created through wondering what others did when confronted with a dilemma, and in some cases realising that many would have acted as you did because national enculturation led them along that path”14. Nevertheless, player interpretation is limited by the choices of the developers; such dilemmas must be coded into the game with set outcomes. These decisions, along with those regarding landscape, character, and general narrative design, reflect how game designers instill their own sense of nation into a game, regardless of how a player makes decisions.

An Industry to Build an Identity

The second proposition notes that due to the cost and infrastructure necessary to produce video games, it is difficult to establish a financially-viable national video game industry unless it can garner significant global engagement. In order to understand this, we can return briefly to Higson who demonstrates that national media operate within a necessary tension between the global and national. On one hand, national media are constructed through an inward gaze upon the nation’s self, but on the other hand, the process of establishing national identity (and identity in general) is necessarily also about differentiating the self from the other. For cinema, this means “asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood’s international domination”\textsuperscript{15}, but the establishment of a new national film industry infrastructure paradoxically also requires reliance upon resources and recognition from Hollywood.

We see a similar paradox in the video game industry, perhaps experienced more strongly due to how much more expensive and complex it can be to produce a video game. Wolf outlines the necessary infrastructure from “basic needs such as access to electrical power, verbal and visual literacy, and lifestyles that include leisure time for gameplay”\textsuperscript{16} to “corporate structures to stabilize and maintain an industry, the necessary investment capital, and a large enough user base to make larger-scale productions financially feasible”\textsuperscript{17}. Historically, the USA and Japan have been and remain the dominant industries\textsuperscript{18} though new game developers are emerging across the globe.

Regional game developers tend to eschew local or national culture in their games in

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\textsuperscript{15} Higson, “The Concept of National Cinema,” 137.
\textsuperscript{17} Wolf, \textit{Video Games Around the World}, 5.
favour of “globally-recognised” cultural tropes and game styles. This is a strategy to make one’s game as broadly marketable as possible\textsuperscript{19}, but also has to do with technology. It is easier and cheaper to build a game using a pre-existing game “engine” like Unity or Unreal\textsuperscript{20}. Plus, one must construct one’s games to be compatible with global distribution systems and mechanically familiar to global audiences\textsuperscript{21}. These technologies are overwhelmingly produced and maintained by companies within North America, Western Europe, and Japan.

Even when governments indicate support and/or preference for games contributing to the national imaginary, a prioritisation of global standards persists\textsuperscript{22}. Vanderhoef argues that indie games with national markers “are exceptions rather than the rule in a global marketplace that privileges genre tropes and innovative mechanics over cultural narratives embedded in specific geographies and cultures”\textsuperscript{23}. Instead Vanderhoef points to a “transnational indie imaginary”, in which games are “developed as culturally ambiguous”\textsuperscript{24}, which I have also found to be true for SA games\textsuperscript{25}. Performances of “South Africanness” are located in the performance of industry success on the global market—not within the game texts themselves.

To be Successful is to be Colonial

This leads us to the third proposition: the logics of many successful triple-A games are fundamentally colonial even when they implement more diverse representation. If games around


\textsuperscript{20} Vanderhoef, “Indie Games of No Nation.”

\textsuperscript{21} Toftedahl et al., “Global Influences on Regional Industries.”

\textsuperscript{22} Baeza-González, “Video Games Development in the Periphery.”

\textsuperscript{23} Vanderhoef, “Indie Games of No Nation”, 161.

\textsuperscript{24} Vanderhoef, “Indie Games of No Nation”, 175.

\textsuperscript{25} van der Merwe, “From Global to National: Mapping the Trajectory of the South African Video Game Industry.”
the world are modelled upon existing “success stories”, then it is valuable to consider what constitutes success. I use the concept “imperial play” to describe the colonial ideologies embedded within the video game industry and many video game texts, focusing especially on the procedural logics in triple-A games to demonstrate “how so many of our basic assumptions of how a video game should work are fundamentally wrapped up in colonial attitudes.” In making this argument, I encouraged game scholars to extend their critical analyses beyond just audiovisual representation to the underlying rhetorical infrastructures shaping games. For example, the expanding game map tends to be used as a tool for mastering and traversing the gamescape much like maps were used during colonialism. Carpenter makes a similar argument about games like Civilization, noting that, “Even as these games have added indigenous polities, they have maintained core game systems that reinforce settler colonial assumption.” King shows how an embedded logic of mastery within games can reify the ideology that success in society also entails mastery of one’s body and environment. And Paul points to the toxic meritocracy that characterises the surrounding game culture itself.

Woven together, the three propositions suggest that in order to accomplish global recognition, game developers should model the logics of existing successful games, many of which tend to be inherently colonial. If creators also attempt to represent their nation, then one can infer that colonial values will likely be woven into whatever national identity and culture.

26 The term triple-A is an informal industry term referring to games produced and distributed by a mid- to major-size game publisher, i.e. these are the games with the broadest audiences and with the largest global cultural impact.
depicted within the game. The nation itself is a colonial entity, so any construction of national identity necessarily participates in colonial structures\textsuperscript{31}; however, for nations such as South Africa that are actively trying to decolonize within the limitations of a nation-state, introducing further colonial logics into the national imaginary is counterproductive.

**Methodology**

To explore how South Africa is imagined within *Beautiful Desolation*, I conducted a rhetorical and critical discourse analysis through playing the game in its entirety and watching gameplay on YouTube. Rhetorically, I studied not just visual and verbal rhetoric deployed throughout the game but also procedural rhetoric, the “practice of using processes persuasively”\textsuperscript{32}. As Anthropy notes, “Games tell stories . . . not just through their explicit content but through the logic of their design, and the systems they choose to model.”\textsuperscript{33} Even as I attended to how characters and gamescapes look and sound, I also asked what was possible in the game, and what choices was I given as a player?

Building upon the rhetorical analysis (the values and messages I perceived privileged in the game’s representations and processes), I did a critical discourse analysis to see how those values and messages reproduce or challenge existing societal discourses.\textsuperscript{34} In particular, I wanted to understand how SA national identity was constructed, and how it was related to apartheid and


colonialism. I also investigated how other aspects of cultural identity (gender, race, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation) were depicted as they inform expressions of collective identity, such as national identity. For this chapter, I focus on my observations regarding gender and race.

**Analysis: Entering into the Beautiful Desolation**

The video game *Beautiful Desolation* plunges us into 1976 Cape Town on a stormy evening when a strange triangular structure abruptly appears in the sky. The arrival of the Penrose coincides with violent atmospheric conditions that cause a city-wide power outage, radio signal failure, and ultimately a powerful shock wave. We witness the disaster from the backseat of a couple’s car, tossed through the air by the shock wave, but then travel forward ten years to learn that protagonist and principal avatar, Mark, survived that accident while his wife didn’t.

The Penrose turns out to be “an object of untold technological abundance that would advance civilization on all frontiers: hunger and disease eradicated, energy mastered, immortality conquered” but Mark, an investigative journalist deeply shaken by the tragedy, harbours concerns for the Penrose. Determined to uncover where it came from and what the military is actually doing with it, Mark convinces his brother Don to fly him onto the structure. During this mission, the brothers are inexplicably transported into a post-apocalyptic future where new evolved alien civilizations have arisen in the wake of global self-destruction, catalysed by societal struggles over the technological discoveries from the Penrose.

The majority of the game takes place in this future where our prime objective is to get home. None of the game is set in present-day SA and what little of 1970s and 80s SA we see

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35 *Beautiful Desolation - Kickstarter Video, 2017*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0f5RFXfLSZ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0f5RFXfLSZ8).
depicts an alternative history. While BD’s South Africa is a speculative construct, its SA is nevertheless grounded in a familiar, existing SA. SA players will easily pick this up through various cultural signifiers scattered throughout the game, e.g. common Afrikaans terms and SA lingo are dropped into conversation (“Ja” for Yes) or used to label items in gamescapes (“bakkie”: pick-up truck; “skottel”: Weber grill).

(Insert Figure 1.)

Our protagonists in this game are both White men and as we join them on their adventure, a White patriarchal vision of SA emerges. Though we travel into the future, ideologically we never leave 1980s SA and its apartheid national imaginary. I’ll begin by pointing to the colonial ideology embedded in the game’s mechanics before addressing the representations of race and gender that reify apartheid thinking.

I ideological mechanics in BD: White saviors and incidental genocides

There are no real puzzles or combat in this game, unlike many RPGs. Instead, most of the game entails running around a beautiful, strange world while trying to fix decades-old tensions between communities. By completing errands for new acquaintances, you gradually expand your map access and locate the spare parts you need to repair your ship. These tasks could be innocuous, but Mark and Don actually wield a significant amount of power and influence within this new world. Take this as an example:

(insert Figure 2: a conversation between Mark and Old Aunty Unna of the Boneyard Maidens)
The Boneyard Maidens were part of a larger community called the Kettle Maidens, but they had a disagreement years ago and left to start their own settlement. The two communities have been estranged, but in our journey, we engage with both. Each community agrees to help us so long as we respect their individual politics and history; however, the game makes it advantageous for us to interfere. We ignore the Boneyard Maidens’ wishes for privacy and tell the Kettle Maidens where they are. Mark is a complete outsider meddling in issues he cannot possibly understand, but our brash interference is rewarded. Unna protests weakly before *very* suddenly declaring that the Boneyard Maidens were wrong and thanking Mark for his intervention. This is just one example in *BD* of the classic colonial White savior trope at play, where the White man, an outsider with no prior experience in the local context, comes in to save a so-called primitive, less intelligent people from themselves.36

Most of our errands are not simple acts of service or fair trades but amount to political manuevering wherein the people we meet are reduced to pieces on a chessboard. Through Mark, we occupy a god-like position from which we determine the fate of entire people-groups, e.g., at one point we arbitrate between the Hanasi and the Chiznyama peoples and must decide to whom we will give map information. From what we learn in the game, the Chiznyama have enslaved the Hanasi for generations, so the groups hate each other bitterly. By giving the map to one group, we provide the means by which that group can destroy the other. Our companions, Don and Pooch (a robot dog), each offer opposing advice in these types of decision-making situations, such as arguing that the Hanasi were enslaved so surely they deserve revenge.

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This is not the only genocide that I facilitated while playing the game. Without fully understanding what I was doing, I made a “click-of-a-button” decision that murdered the Caecus people. Later in the game I decided between the lives of the Moss People, Dr. Anna, and the Nest hive intelligence. Genocides occurred not because of my ineptitude as a player, but were baked into the game. Besides the Caecus situation, it was not a question of genocide or not but rather who experiences genocide. Other forms of binary, “zero sum” thinking also occurred regularly throughout the game. I was always playing sides, picking between this-vs-that, and pretending to be everyone’s friend, while my interest was instrumental or voyeuristically curious about the “other-ness” of this foreign world.

The most fundamental binary in the game is the “us-vs-them” dynamic, and the driving force in this game remains trying to get “us” home, whatever it might take. In a side conversation, Don suggests that maybe we should stay and make our lives in this world. In response, we argue that we need to go back to our own time and prevent “all of this from ever happening”. Mark refers here to the apocalypse that took place because humanity meddled with the Penrose. While at first Mark’s argument seems to be a critique of techno-utopianism, implicit in his stance is the assumption that all the civilisations and lives that have emerged post-apocalypse do not deserve to exist: that 1980s SA (and the rest of the world) deserves a second chance more than this emergent world deserves to remain in existence. From what I could determine, it isn’t possible to choose an outcome in BD that allows Mark to remain in futuristic South Africa, short of refusing to play the game to completion. Thus, all genocides authorised throughout gameplay inevitably appear irrelevant in light of the mega-genocide we commit against this entire future timeline.
Race and Gender in *BD: The Alien Everyone Else*

The “us-vs-them” dynamic mentioned above is integral for understanding how race and gender are depicted in *BD*. Though the game begins in a version of 1970s and 80s South Africa, there are no direct references to an apartheid system that would have been in place at that time, or even depictions of a multiracial society, whether separated or integrated. However, the game *does* imagine a racialized and largely segregated futuristic southern African society.

Our protagonists, the “us”, are White and male, and everyone else, who are not both those things, are coded as alien and strange. Mark’s White wife Charlize dies in the opening scene, effectively erasing her from the narrative. In their abrupt time travel to the future, Mark and Don accidentally bring with them a robot designed to resemble a dog. The robot had been guarding the section of Penrose where they landed and wishes to return home. It agrees to travel with them, becoming a companion avatar we occasionally control in the game. But “Pooch” is clearly not of equal standing and is coded as “other” through both gender and in being non-human. While never explicitly gendered in the game, “Pooch” is marked with stereotypical and problematic indicators of femininity, such as a higher pitched voice and a nagging personality. Even the character’s name itself “Pooch” can refer to either a female dog or derisively to a human woman.

Once we begin engaging with the locals in this future, it is difficult to distinguish between who is human and who is alien, and perhaps who is both. We never learn the nature of evolution and settlement that took place after the apocalypse, so our encounters are largely dehistoricised. Everyone who isn’t a protagonist is experienced as alien and other. The alien and unfamiliar is always a bit unsettling, but in the context of the game, such characters are often visually and aurally coded as disturbing (see figure 3), and little is done to challenge or transform
those perspectives. Mark does not treat these characters with respect, but rather as tools by which
to get home. When Don or Pooch challenge him, they do so based on abstract ethical principles
while “speaking for” these NPCs without ever actually listening to or asking the NPCs what they
want. The alien NPCs remain alien.

(Insert Figure 3)

Furthermore, characters encountered are often coded racially. Jarek the mechanic speaks
with an implied Jamaican accent (see figure 4). Intimidating guards protecting the Sanctuary of
Witherberg speak a language that is visually depicted using unfamiliar symbols but aurally
sounds quite similar to isiXhosa, a Nguni language from southern Africa that incorporates
clicking phonetics. Thus, players encounter characters that are racially depicted as Black,
regardless of the colour of the character’s skin, and that are simultaneously depicted as alien and
disturbing—a very concerning combination reminiscent of colonial and apartheid narratives. For
some characters, the associations of being Black with negative societal values are even more
pronounced. The Hanasi people, also implied to be Nguni descendants based on their accents, are
portrayed as degenerate, lazy, and lacking moral values. They worship their dead hanging around
the city, and the city itself is in disarray. Many citizens are on drugs, and Don exclaims that the
place smells like rotten meat. These unfavorable depictions hold an uncanny semblance to
historical narratives that were used to justify colonialism as a “civilising” or “redemptive”
mission.

(Insert Figure 4)
Even when characters aren’t coded with blatantly negative values, we are reminded frequently that the locals all need help. By design, they are non-playable characters placed throughout the game to serve Mark and Don while simultaneously Mark and Don sweep in as White saviours to fix their decades-old conflicts or to complete tasks that somehow these characters were unable to do themselves.

**Conclusion**

The use of South African cultural markers alongside these depictions of race, gender, and White saviorism, without critical reflection or suggestion of satire, leaves us with a futuristic game that privileges imaginaries of SA from its colonial past. In trying to develop a game that both embraces a SA context and might be legible to a global audience, the strategy that The Brotherhood appears to take is (1) to privilege White masculinity in its representations, perhaps catering towards a presumed predominately White male audience, and (2) to implement the colonial logics of successful triple-A games—even though these choices fundamentally undermine the post-apartheid, decolonial identity that much of the nation’s population is striving to build. One could argue that their game even *reifies* a colonial imagining of the region.

As I have demonstrated above, scholarship indicates that indie game developers are deeply influenced by what constitutes success in dominant video game markets and these existing models are profoundly colonial in their values. *Beautiful Desolation* exemplifies how the video game industry continues to sustain the production and success of games endowed with colonial values, and with racist depictions and concerning portrayals of gender. At the moment of writing, this is the South African game most likely to circulate widely at a global level, meaning this is the story about South Africa that gamers will more likely encounter. What would
it take to instead see enjoyable adventure RPG video games with decolonial values find a global audience? Some success has already occurred with games like Iñupiat Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna, but this is where game scholars should consider partnering with indie, international game developers to explore strategies for breaking the industry cycle that privileges colonially-informed games and marginalises games instilled with decolonial, counter-cultural social imaginaries.
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