

Race, Colonial History and National Identity: *Resident Evil 5* as a Japanese Game

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Abstract

Resident Evil 5 is a zombie game made by Capcom, featuring a White American protagonist and set in Africa. This article argues that approaching this as a Japanese game reveals aspects of a Japanese racial and colonial social imaginary that are missed if this context of production is ignored. In terms of race, the game presents hybrid racial subjectivities that can be related to Japanese perspectives of Blackness and Whiteness, where these terms are two poles of difference and identity through which an essentialized Japanese identity is constructed in what Iwabuchi calls “strategic hybridism.” In terms of colonialism, the game echoes structures of Japanese colonialism through which Japanese colonialism is obliquely memorialized and a “normal” Japanese global subjectivity can be performed.

Keywords

race, postcolonialism, Japan, memory, Resident Evil, normal country, avatar, social imaginary, implied player, hybridism

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Introduction

Resident Evil 5 (RE5), released in 2009, is the fifth instalment in Capcom's zombie franchise, a series of games in which a set of recurring characters—Chris Redfield, Jill Valentine, and others—repeatedly save the world from zombie hordes set in motion by the pharmaceutical company, the Umbrella Corporation. The franchise has been very significant in digital game culture, in terms of both its popularity—the franchise has sold over 40 million copies worldwide (Capcom IR, 2015)—and its development of formal conventions of the survival horror and action horror game genres. At the start of this game, we learn that the Umbrella Corporation has been closed down for creating biological weapons. The other global pharmaceutical companies have agreed to fund a global antiterrorism unit—the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance (BSAA)—tasked with preventing such illegal biological weapons from being produced or distributed, and it is as part of this unit that Chris has come to Africa, where signs of suspicious zombie-like activity have been reported. Chris, a White, square-jawed all-American hero, whom the player controls in the game, is joined by a new partner, Sheva, a local member of the BSAA who, she says, will help Chris gain the trust of the Africans he comes into contact with.

Throughout the game, Chris and Sheva fight side by side. The player/Chris needs to make use of Sheva to get to inaccessible places and stave off the zombie hordes, and this cooperative gameplay resonates with a narrative arc that sees Chris coming to terms with having a new partner after the supposed death of his former partner, Jill. After battling zombies in a string of exotic locations, Chris and Sheva finally free Jill, who had not in fact died but had become a zombie slave. Chris and Sheva defeat Wesker, the CEO of the Umbrella Corporation, and fly off into the sunset.

This brief synopsis suggests a game about neocolonialism and Africa. *RE5*'s story is about a multinational corporation, Umbrella, coming into a postcolonial country and continuing the structures of colonialism that existed before independence through economic rather than military or political exploitation. Much of the academic engagement with *RE5* has focused on this historical legacy that the game rehearses—where White masculinity stands for modernity; undifferentiated Black African bodies stand for an ambivalent premodern nature/tradition that is equal parts threatening savage and victim in need of salvation by the White hero, Chris (Brock, 2011; Geysler & Tshabalala, 2011; Harrer & Pichlmair, 2015).

These analyses tend to bracket the fact that this game was produced in Japan, by the Japanese game company Capcom. My starting point here is that this game is an intensely transcultural text—a game made in 21st-century Japan, with cutscenes filmed in Hollywood (Capcom IR, 2008), drawing on imagery from European colonialism and depictions of Blackness redolent of 19th-century European race theory, employing the figure of the zombie—with its origins in West Africa and Haiti, but globalized through, most obviously, Hollywood cinema; and targeting markets in Japan, North American and Europe (Capcom IR, 2009, p. 46).

This article focuses on the Japanese in this transcultural text: the fact that it is a game made in Japan by Japanese designers. Certainly, these are designers with one eye on the West. Capcom's annual report from 2009 (the year *RE5* was released) worries about "a sluggish domestic market suffering a falling birth rate" and seeks expansion into more promising markets by, among other strategies, developing "new titles that suit the preferences of the overseas customers" (Capcom IR, 2009, p. 23). In an interview during development, *RE5*'s lead designer Jun Takeuchi obliquely refers to some of these preferences, claiming that "Europe and America will be particularly pleased with the game's content" (Kelly, 2009, p. 5). The theme of a White hero's adventures in darkest Africa (what might be labelled the "Dark Continent" theme) could certainly be seen as part of a strategy to give overseas markets the content they are perceived to want. It is equally clear that the images of Africa we get in *RE5* are mediated by the representation of Africa in a global popular culture with its roots in the West. For example, in the same interview, Takeuchi cites *Black Hawk Down* as a key influence on the game's visual imagery.

My argument is that, while a certain perception of Western tastes may have led to the identification of the Dark Continent theme as commercially viable, when this theme is implemented in *RE5*, the cultural baggage of Western discourses of race and colonialism becomes interleaved with a Japanese social imaginary. I am arguing the game tells us little about Africa and not much more about European colonialism or North American racism (as Brock, 2011; Geysler & Tshabalala, 2011, argue it does). What *does* resonate throughout the game are two aspects of the Japanese social imaginary in the first decade of the 21st century. First, the game puts into play Japanese conceptions of race, particularly as it relates to Japanese self-fashioning with respect to Whiteness and Blackness. Second, the game puts into play a "normal" Japanese subjectivity that can take action on a global stage; a subjectivity that stands in contrast to the figure of Japan as a demilitarized power, whose global economic status is not reflected in its global political status.

Non-African fiction set in Africa often uses the continent as a backdrop rather than the main textual focus. Schmidt and Garrett (2011), for example, criticize "films that make Africa and its 'messes' the scene for comfortable and familiar Hollywood depictions" (p. 428). Similarly, in Achebe's (1978) famous criticism of *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is a "backdrop" for a story in which a non-African takes a leading role. Writing about *Jungle Emperor*, a manga by Osamu Tezuka, Natsume (as cited in Kuwahara, 1997) sees it as less a story about Africa and more a story about post-War Japan. In *Jungle Emperor*, the characters are all African, but Natsume's point is that the story is primarily a means through which Japanese identity is worked through rather than a story about Africa or even about Japan's relationship to Africa. In each of these instances, it is the social imaginary of the production context that is most evident in the text under consideration. The remainder of this article sees *RE5* not as being about Japan and Africa but being about Japanese racial and national subjectivity.

Taylor (2002) defines social imaginary as the common sense understandings of social relations that allow people to participate in society, know their position, form

relations with others and, in general, engage in “the practices of a society” (p. 91; see also Castoriadis, 1987). These understandings and practices are based on normative judgments—what is good and bad, valuable or not valuable, and so on. The social imaginary is not explicitly theorized by people but instead is “carried in images, stories, and legends” (Taylor, 2002, p. 106)—and, I would say, digital games. We find Japanese conceptions of race and national subjectivity in *RE5* not because the designers are artfully or subtly communicating these ideas—indeed, the designers have gone on record disavowing any political subtext (Sterling, 2008)—but because once the Dark Continent theme has been chosen, the conflicts, plots, characters, and settings associated with this theme become worked out in relation to the social imaginary obtaining in the game’s context of production. In the production of the game, the Dark Continent theme is given shape through a Japanese social imaginary.

It is important here not to characterize “the Japanese social imaginary” as monolithic or autonomous. In what follows, I sketch out a general discourse around race and national subjectivity that obtained in post-War Japan and, more specifically, in and around the period of the game’s development between 2005 and 2009, but there are of course countervailing understandings of these complex themes within Japan. At the same time, as will become clear, the development of Japanese conceptions of race and national subjectivity has not been independent of the development of these terms elsewhere.

Context of production is another term I need to unpack a little before proceeding. By this, I mean the way in which certain issues (particularly as they relate to race and national identity) were circulating in Japanese society around the period of the game’s production (2005–2009). I am not in this article focusing on the culture within the game company Capcom or the structures of the game industry (a *production perspective*, as discussed by Peterson & Anand, 2004); nor am I looking at the specific political views and production practices of the game’s creators (an *auteur* approach seen, e.g., in deWinter, 2015). While these would be potentially fruitful ways of approaching the game, this article focuses on more widespread cultural understandings of race and nation in post-War Japan.

In what follows, I do two things. First, I read the game’s racial politics in terms of a Japanese hybridity where Japanese racial identity is located as neither Black nor White, and this is related to the supposed essential Japanese ability to take in, adapt, and control foreign cultural influences.

Second, I read the game’s colonial politics in terms of a Japanese colonial past that structures how the Dark Continent theme is treated. The game transforms a partially suppressed Japanese colonial memory into the performance of a normal Japanese (inter)national subjectivity.

Race in the Japanese Social Imaginary

According to Koschmann (2006), the possibility of and need for a Japanese subjectivity have vexed Japanese intellectuals since the Meiji period and the birth of the

Japanese state. Japanese writers and commentators of diverse political hues have seen a coherent Japanese subjectivity as lacking and the establishment of one as necessary to the development of a proper politics. This eagerness to define a national identity can also be seen in *nihonjinron* literature; a form of writing, particularly popular in the 1960s and 1970s, that attempted to define the essence of the Japanese national character, usually in racial terms (Befu, 2001; Yoshino, 1997).

The challenges of thinking a Japanese national subjectivity are partly due to the fact that the modern Japanese nation was born as it came into contact with the West, and it is the importation of a European idea of the nation that allowed for this birth. Alongside the nation, Japan also imported the concept of race, as it was understood in 19th-century Europe and North America. According to Sakamoto (2004, p. 180), initially the “five races of the world” thesis was largely accepted by Japanese intellectuals. In the Western version of this thesis, Japanese people were seen as part of a “Yellow” race including other East Asians such as the Chinese. This Yellow race, while supposedly inferior to the White race, was seen as superior to other races such as the Black race. These Japanese intellectuals did not immediately recognize a “Japanese” race when the concept of race was imported from Western thought. Rather, argues Sakamoto, the Japanese race was gradually discursively constructed in order to establish the Japanese race as separate from the Yellow race and therefore the Japanese *nation* as separate from (and superior to) the rest of East Asia.

Japanese conceptions of race and nationhood, then, are derived through Western modernity. But this is not to say that race occupies the same cultural position in Japanese and U.S. or European cultures. Russell (1991) argues that Western conceptions of Blackness are brought into the Japanese social imaginary in such a way as to:

preserve [Blacks'] alienness by ascribing to it certain standardized traits which mark it as Other but which also serve the reflexive function of allowing Japanese to meditate on their racial and cultural identity in the face of challenges by Western modernity, cultural authority, and power. (p. 4)

That is, Blackness is not just imported but put to use in relation to Japanese identity. Russell goes on to argue that Blackness is often used in Japanese texts:

as a reflexive symbol through which Japanese attempt to deal with their own ambiguous racio-cultural status in a Eurocentric world, where such hierarchies have been largely (and literally) conceived in terms of polarizations between black and white and in which Japanese as Asians have traditionally occupied a liminal state—a gray area—“betwixt and between” the “Civilized White” and the “Barbarous Black” Other. (Russell, 1991, p. 6)

Russell argues here that Japanese racial discourse is a *mediation* of Western racial discourse, in which a third category—Japanese—sits uneasily between the Black/

White dichotomy in a way that is productive in terms of Japanese self-fashioning. Blackness is both symbolic of “the Other” (and so, in the same way as it operates in western discourse, productive in terms of negative self-fashioning) and a source of identification in that it is, like the Japanese subject position, not-White. In a similar vein, Cornyetz (1994) sees in Japanese appropriation of hip-hop culture an identity being forged that supplements and serves as an alternative to the “Western imperialist black-white binary paradigm” (p. 116).

Discourse on race and nation is, of course, subject to change. An important component of the connection between a Japanese race and a Japanese nation is the idea that Japan is a racially homogeneous society or *tanitsu minzoku*. By the 1990s and early 2000s, many scholars were questioning this (e.g., Denoon, Hudson, McCormack, & Morris-Suzuki, 1996; Oguma, 1995). The recognition in 1993 of the Ainu—an ethnic group from the north island of Hokkaido—as an indigenous people is testament to this shift (Roth, 2005, p. 85). This period also saw calls for internationalization (*kokusaika*) and a greater openness to immigration—partly seen as a solution to the recession (Johnson, 2008). An increased visibility of minorities in Japan can be seen in recent agitation for legislation against racial discrimination (Baker, 2005). The question of Japanese national and racial identity was taking on a new shape during the period of the game’s production.

In treating the Dark Continent theme, *RE5* works through a social imaginary constituted by the racial discourses discussed above. This process is seen in the game’s motif of hybridity. Hybridity in *RE5* takes a number of forms. There are hybrid monsters that are constituted by amalgamations of different organic and technological components. There are also genealogically hybrid characters, such as Jill Valentine, who has a French father and a Japanese mother. Lastly, there is the hybrid player-avatar structure familiar from many digital games. Here, the player experiences hybridity directly in that she is folded within an agential structure that combines her own subjectivity/agency with that of a visible and fictional character. To discuss race in the game, I turn first to Jill as a hybrid character.

The first image we see in *RE5* is a hooded figure standing over a Black man who is kneeling with his head bowed. It is a striking and disturbing image of Black subordination. We later learn that the hooded figure is Jill Valentine, Chris’s former partner who has been infected by a virus that puts her under the control of Wesker, the game’s main villain. From previous exposure to the virus in the first game, Jill has developed antibodies that are useful to Wesker in developing his new biological weapons. When Chris and Sheva discover this, they battle Jill, eventually managing to remove the virus and restore her to her former self.

Geyser and Tshabalala (2011) compare Jill Valentine to Madeleine, a White character in the 1932 film *White Zombie*:

Like the woman in *White Zombie* [Jill] is not held accountable for her actions when infected because Jill, like the Western woman in *White Zombie* is, although essentially generic, assumed to be generically good. (p. 11)

It might be added that both Madeleine and Jill are unique in their fictional worlds in being the only characters to recover from the zombie state. Jill, when she recovers, also claims that a part of her was aware throughout and struggled against the infection even as she was battling Chris and Sheva. But where does Jill's "generic goodness" come from and what is the significance of her ability to control zombification? Geysler and Tshabalala's (2011) focus on Madeleine's Westernness suggests a similar explanation of Jill's survival: Jill's ability to resist this virus elevates her above the Africans who are unable to battle the viruses that infect them and who all lose control when infected. She, as a White woman, remains in control of herself. This could be read as the expression of an essentialist notion of identity, where the real (White) Jill is, at base, incorruptible. One problem with this reading is that other White, Western characters in the game, for example, the villains Excella Gionne and Ricardo Irving, do succumb to the virus when infected. Jill's ability to control the virus is seen as an aspect of her mental fortitude, while other White characters' inability to do so is down to their "unworthiness"—a term used throughout the game.

If Jill's genealogy plays a part in her ability to control the virus, then it is necessary to take into account her ambiguous racial position as a "*hafu*"—the Japanese term for a half-Japanese, half-Western person. Japanese marketing material for the first *RE* game explains that Jill's father is French and her mother is a member of the Japanese diaspora (*nikkei*).¹ In Japanese paratexts, Jill's Japanese heritage is mentioned a handful of times in official material and is occasionally mentioned in fan discussions (e.g., *fmv_masan*, 2011). This has made it into the English language fandom in forum posts and fan-made wikis, and the veracity of the claim that Jill is half-Japanese is debated, with fans citing the original Japanese material (sirleibl, 2012). Seen from this perspective, Jill is not so much a "White Zombie" as a "Yellow Zombie." I am using the term Yellow in the sense used by Japanese writers such as Watanabe Koichi (discussed in Sterling, 2011, p. 62) or Yoshida Ruiko (discussed in Russell, 1991, pp. 14–15) as a way of characterizing Japanese identity as it has developed in terms of its difference from and identity with both White and Black racial identity, standing outside but in relation to a dichotomy inherited by way of Japanese modernization processes that followed a European model of modernity.

Jill's ability to take in, control, and overpower the foreign bodies represented by the virus can be read in terms of her Japanese identity. When Jill becomes Wesker's test subject, she experiences side effects that can be read racially. Her dark hair turns blonde and her skin becomes paler. At the same time, she develops superhuman strength and agility and an animal-like aggressiveness. From within Japanese racial discourse, Jill's infection pulls her in two directions at once, toward a Whiteness represented by her changed skin and hair color and a Blackness based on racist stereotypes of strength and aggressiveness. However, she is ultimately able to control these pressures on her identity.

This plays into a persistent narrative around Japanese culture known as *dōka*: the idea that Japanese culture is uniquely positioned to import, adapt, and localize

foreign influences, while all the time retaining a unique Japanese identity (found, e.g., in Hall, 1949; Prasol, 2010, pp. 1–5; Tobin, 1992; and discussed by Kang, 1996; Oguma, 1995; Yoshino, 1992). Iwabuchi (2002) calls this “strategic hybridism.”

While the concept of *hybridity* undermines the possibility of essentialized national identities, *hybridism* actually reinforces such an identity: “Japanese hybridism aims to discursively construct an image of an organic cultural entity, ‘Japan,’ that absorbs foreign cultures without changing its national/cultural core” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 53). Iwabuchi argues that this strategic hybridism has been deployed in different ways throughout modern Japanese history in order to discursively maintain a pure Japanese subjectivity, while making use of foreign ideas and technology. That is, Iwabuchi is not offering hybridism as an essential Japanese characteristic but as a strategy that is deployed at different times in order to achieve specific political goals. He discusses, for example, how strategic hybridism was used before the war to justify the colonization of other Asian nations (pp. 55–56) and after the war to establish a Japanese “national culture” under the conditions of the U.S. occupation (pp. 57–58). Elsewhere, Kowner and Daliot-Bul (2008) have employed the concept of strategic hybridism to explain the way in which English loan words enter the Japanese language. Jill’s ability to absorb and withstand the virus in a way other characters cannot and in such a way that her essential identity is preserved is just such an example of “Japanese hybridism.”

In *RE5*, the central character is an American. But let us imagine a Japanese player at the controls. Compare this situation to a Japanese person reading a novel set in Africa. The player encounters Africa in a manner similar to this reader. But she also encounters Africa in a manner similar to the protagonist of the novel. The player takes actions—does things—in (a virtual version of) Africa. Sterling (2011) analyzes a number of novels in which a Japanese protagonist travels to Jamaica and experiences what he calls “Afro-Jamaican Blackness” (p. 53). Sterling sees these novels as positing Japanese identification with a non-White subjectivity negotiating with or resisting a dominant White power. In *RE5* though, it is not a Japanese *character* that experiences this identification but, in a sense, the Japanese player. Gameplay itself is a form of travel, a means of encountering strange lands and foreign peoples.

This thought experiment—imagining a Japanese player at the controls—is not a claim as to how Japanese players actually experience this game. To make that sort of claim a different methodological approach would be required. My interest here is in the social imaginary that determines how the game’s Dark Continent theme is worked through in the production of the game. The player is an important figure in the production—and not just the reception—of a game in that the player exists as a potentiality in the production of a game. Drawing on Iser’s (1974) concept of the *implied reader*, Aarseth defines the *implied player* as “a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to ‘exercise its effect’” (2007, p. 132). This implied player has a particular shape, determined by common-sense understandings of what a player is, and of the range of pleasures,

desires, skills, and knowledges players have. Some of these understandings are the results of conscious research and decision-making processes on the part of designers. For example, Jun Takeuchi has revealed that the change in the control scheme between *RE4* and *RE5* was made in order to “help people in the West to play it” (Kelly, 2009, p. 1). But the implied player also enters the game through common-sense understandings that are not consciously held or deliberately implemented—understandings that are part of the wider social imaginary through which the game is created. In what follows, I am describing not a flesh-and-blood player but the implied player as conceptualized in relation to the Japanese social imaginary in the first few years of the 21st century.

The idea that playing digital games is a form of travel is discussed by Fuller and Jenkins (1995), who compare games (they are talking about *Super Mario Bros*) to new world travel writing. They argue that travel writing and digital game-playing share a concern with “explorations and colonizations of space” (p. 57), in which these actions, rather than narrative resolution, are themselves “the point, the topic and the goal” (p. 57). This aspect of digital games makes them popular in the United States, a part of the world that is, they say, “oversettled, overly familiar, and overpopulated” (p. 57). This is strikingly similar to how Sterling (2011) discusses Japanese travel writing on Jamaica—a flight of fancy away from the safe but vitiating climes of the developed world. Fuller and Jenkins claim that at the level of form, quite apart from content, the digital game “allows people to enact through play an older narrative that can no longer be enacted in reality—a constant struggle for possession of desirable spaces” (p. 71).

Fuller and Jenkins (1995) explicitly disavow the role of “character identification” in favor of “role playing” in explaining ideology in digital games (p. 72). That is, it is what the character (and the player) *does*—explores new spaces, experiences new places—rather than their backstory or appearance, that allows players to identify a cultural resource that resonates with social structures in their life and compensates for the lack of opportunities for certain kinds of experience.

RE5 is similar to the “Japanese in Jamaica” novels that Sterling (2011) analyzes in that it provides a means through which a Japanese subjectivity can access the Black spaces of Africa. However, unlike those novels, here the implied player travels to this Black space “as” a White character. Jill’s fictional hybridity is mirrored, then, in the necessary hybridity of the avatar-player structure. Kirkland (2009) argues that both avatars and zombies are uncanny in the sense that they occupy an undecidable zone between the animate and the inanimate. The avatar Chris, then, as well as the zombies he destroys, is himself a figure of the uncanny and of the liminal space between life and death.

More importantly, the avatar structure is, or can be, racially hybrid. The avatar is a relatively stable site through which a variety of racialized/gendered textual elements flow and are capable of being captured and performed by the player. In *RE5*, the avatar’s gender and race are not collapsible to that of Chris the character (White male). The avatar is a hybrid, dynamic agential structure. This is further hybridized

by the position of Sheva within this structure. The relationships of control, subordination, and orthogonal coexistence within this Chris–Sheva–player structure are multidirectional. In one sense, the player controls Chris directly by inputting commands such as movement or handling weapons. The player also controls Sheva indirectly, since she will generally follow Chris where he goes, and the player can issue commands to Sheva through Chris. However, as Gadamer (1960/2004) has argued in a nondigital context, the player is not the controlling subject of the game. Rather, the game plays the player. Chris, as a textual mechanism, constrains what the player can do in this space. Chris’s limited actions are in this sense more fundamental than the player’s inputs in determining the player Chris–Sheva agential structure. Sheva, another textual mechanism, also exerts control over Chris and the player. She sometimes refuses to comply with the player’s requests issued through Chris and also sometimes leads the way to show the player the correct path in the more navigationally complex levels. When we overwrite these ludic affordances and constraints of this agential structure with the racialized representations of the player, Chris and Sheva, the ludic subjectivity that the player takes on in exploring the Black space of Africa becomes deeply hybridized, mirroring Jill’s genealogical hybridity.

Seen in terms of U.S.-European discourses of race, *RE5* can be read in terms of an imperial project, and this is the perspective of much previous work on the game (Brock, 2011; Geysler & Tshabalala, 2011; Harrer & Pichlmair, 2015). Some parts of the game certainly position the player in a subject–object relationship to imagined Black-colonial zombies that could be theorized in terms of an “imperial gaze” and Sheva is certainly presented in a way that could be theorized in terms of the “male gaze.” But the “structure of looking” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 10) in the game is actually quite complex. It is the White American protagonist Chris who is most often the seen–unseen. In a number of cutscenes, we are positioned alongside villains observing Chris without his knowledge. The gameplay is largely structured around being surprised by zombies coming from nowhere, the awkward camera functionality ensuring that the player Chris spends large parts of the game, failing to see zombies that have him in their sights. Indeed, Chris never has his own look in the game. The camera is placed above and to the right of the avatar, such that Chris will fail to act against zombies whom, in the diegesis, he should be able to see. This is because his agency is entirely determined by the player’s look and not his own.

The position of the player with respect to the avatar is marked by instability rather than stable racial or national identity. The player–avatar relationship oscillates between identification, representation, immersion, disavowal, invisibility, and control, all of which allow for different sorts of racial and gendered positionings for the player, even if a dominant or preferred position can be identified. This opens a space for the non-White-male player to experience being a White-male subjectivity exercising control over Black and female bodies (both those of the zombies and of Sheva), but it also opens up a space for this player to experience—from a non-White subject position—control over the White-male body of Chris. Iwabuchi (2002) discusses Tokyo Disneyland in similar terms. He argues that when upwardly

mobile Japanese visited Tokyo Disneyland, when it first opened in 1983, they were not becoming American but were rather fashioning an invigorated Japanese identity that was equal to the most powerful country in the world. Similarly, the implied Japanese player playing as Chris is not only experiencing White subjectivity but is also experiencing control over this powerful subject position. The avatar-player is a hybrid and dynamic structure that comprises the shifting subjectivities of the fictional character as experienced by the player as well as the player's own experience of their own subjectivity. Read in this way, the implied player's taking over Chris's subjectivity is an instantiation of a prediction made by Shigeru Yoshida, the first postwar Japanese prime minister, that being a colony of the United States would in time allow Japan to become stronger than the United States, just as the American colonies had in time become stronger than their colonial master Great Britain (Pilling, 2014, p. 249). By 2009, Yoshida's optimism seemed to have been misplaced, but the game constructs an implied player that performs an imagined reversal of the U.S.-Japan colonial relationship.

Colonial Memory and Normal Japanese Subjectivity

The second part of this article's argument is that the game is constructed through a suppressed memory of Japanese colonialism and the contemporary Japanese anxiety over its place in the world. I am not here making a claim about historical parallels between European colonialism in Africa and Japanese colonialism in East Asia and the South Seas. Rather, I am tracing the way in which the European Dark Continent theme is reworked in the game in terms of a Japanese (neo)colonial social imaginary.

In the first 10 years of the 21st century—and still now—Japanese colonial history was one of the two or three central issues in Japanese relations with its nearest neighbors, particularly Korea and China. While Korean and Chinese politicians demanded Japan face up to its colonial history, Japan's political class sought to move on. Kushner (2007) characterizes the official Japanese attitude in the early 21st century to its colonial past as an attempt to “bypass the problem in the hope that the colonial legacy will cease to dominate bilateral relations” (p. 795). He quotes the Liberal Democratic Party prime minister between 2001 and 2006 as saying that “it is time [for the region] to look towards the future and escape the bondage of history” (Kushner, 2007, p. 795). Japan issued apologies in 1995 and 2005, but many in East Asia felt that the actions of its politicians over visiting the Yasukuni shrine, issues about how school textbooks discussed the war, and reluctance to admit the widespread and officially sanctioned sexual abuse of women in the 1930s and 1940s flew in the face of these apologies.

I want to focus on one of the “bonds of history” that the conservative government of the period was particularly keen to escape from. This was the U.S.-imposed constitution, and in particular Article 9, prohibiting Japan from maintaining a military. After the war, the United States effectively wrote the Japanese constitution that is still in place today. They were concerned that if Japan was allowed to rearm, this

would lead to renewed aggression and another war. They therefore inserted Article 9 which prohibited the government from raising an army or engaging in war.

Through the 1990s, these two elements of Japanese politics—Japan’s colonial past and its present-day military sovereignty—became a deeply interwoven component of Japanese foreign policy. Starting with Ozawa’s (1994) *Blueprint for a New Japan*, the question of whether Japan is, can be, or should be a normal country has largely been a question of Japan’s constitutional commitment to pacifism and its perceived responsibility to contribute to global military interventions in conflict zones such as Iraq.

The “normal country” thesis can be summarized as follows: “Japan ought to become a ‘normal country’ by stepping up and shouldering its rightful international responsibilities and by cooperating with other states to build prosperous societies around the globe” (Soeya, Tadakoro, & Welch, 2011, p. 42). This normal country thesis was taken up in various forms after 1994 and was an important touchstone in discussions around the revision of the Japanese constitution that gathered pace in the first decade of the 21st century (Kajimoto, 2005). Japan’s support for the War on Terror puts strains on Article 9. While Japan has in fact always had a military force—the SDF (Self-Defense Force)—until 2004 it had rarely been deployed abroad and never in significant numbers. In the aftermath of 9/11, the remit of the SDF began to widen considerably, and in 2004, despite some opposition from the Left, the Japanese government deployed a nonfighting force of 550 troops to Iraq to support the U.S. coalition—a deployment found to have been a breach of the constitution by a 2008 Nagoya high court decision (Martin, 2008). In 2006/2007, the Defense Agency became a full ministry—the Japanese Ministry of Defense. For commentators in China, this was seen as not only a change of name but a “display of ambition” and a sign of a nation betraying the pacifist commitment of Article 9 (“Hu’s offer to visit,” 2006). These sorts of contradictions between Japan’s pacifist constitution and its increasing—if still relatively slight—presence as a military power on the world stage made constitutional reform an important topic in this period.

The issue of Japan as a normal country that can take its place on the international stage is one picked up by Shinzo Abe (2006) in his political autobiography Utsukushii Kuni E (*Toward a Beautiful Country*). This bestselling book, which came out as Abe became prime minister in 2006, was very much in the Ozawa mould, arguing that Japan must establish itself as a militarily sovereign state, capable of defending its national interests, and taking a lead in global affairs. In interviews before becoming prime minister, Abe was clear that constitutional reform, including reform of Article 9, was a priority for him (Pilling, 2014, p. 237).

Constitutional reform has been a divisive topic in Japan. Article 9 on the one hand was seen as an important part of post-War Japanese prosperity. For many Japanese, it had kept them safe during the Cold War and prevented a repeat of the disaster that was the Second World War. On the other hand, Article 9 was seen as an impediment to Japan’s development as a global political power (Pilling, 2014, pp. 242–43). Opinion polls in various newspapers of this period showed a divided nation and

changing levels of support for revision of Article 9 across the period (Hanai, 2007, “Japan facing genuine prospect,” 2007; “Time is right,” 2006).

Similarly, how Japan should remember its past was in this period “deeply contested domestically” (Lawson & Tannaka, 2010, p. 408) with a variety of voices, from nationalists who believed Japan should refuse to make further apologies to progressives who called for their country to continue to apologize and pay reparations to the victims of its wartime aggression.

These two threads are to do with Japanese neocolonial subjectivity in the sense that they are about the way in which Japan’s colonial past manifests itself in current projects of Japanese self-fashioning. Each thread—attitudes to Japan’s colonial past and whether Japan can be a normal country while unable to take part in military actions—is played out in *RE5*. But this does not happen through the overt theme of the game. *RE5*, while not directly engaging with Japanese colonial history or contemporary concerns about Japanese sovereignty, does work through a social imaginary constituted in part by this history and these contemporary concerns. To see how it plays out in the game I return to the hybrid player-avatar structure already mentioned.

Virtual Travel

The setting of the game and the nationality of the protagonist are not Japanese. But the setting of the game and the nationality of the protagonist are not necessarily privileged anchoring elements in a text—particularly in a game. The cognitive load required to play a game and the sources of pleasure in sites other than visual spectacle and fictional setting displace these aspects of a game’s meaning apparatus. Shaw (2011) discusses, for example, the relative insignificance of game characters among many players. This is not to say that these fictional aspects are to be ignored but rather that they intersect with other elements of the text that may be more primary.

I have already discussed how the game shapes an implied player in relation to a Japanese social imaginary to do with Blackness and Whiteness. Seen from a different perspective, still within the Japanese social imaginary, the same hybrid avatar structure constructs an implied player that rehearses a form of colonialism as normalized international behavior. This structure allows for a particular form of memory in a Japanese context; one in which a colonial past that cannot speak its name—at least not in a major commercial game bound for international markets—is transformed into a normalized way of being Japanese under a mandated global entity (the UN-sponsored BSAA).

The game provides the implied Japanese player with two performative opportunities. The first is to perform a sanitized and exuberant version of colonialism without guilt. The second is to perform a normalized contemporary global Japanese subjectivity.

The first of these is similar to Fuller and Jenkins’ (1995) discussion of *Super Mario Bros*. The fact that Mario is Italian does not matter to Fuller and Jenkins because this characterization is secondary. An American player performs Mario not

as an Italian subjectivity but as an American subjectivity, such that exploring new worlds means something not in relation to some Italian experience of world discovery but some American experience of this. The player fits their own experiences of exploration and conquest into the performance of exploration and conquest that the game's structure affords. In *RE5*, it is the performance of exploration and conquest that resonates with colonialism rather than the fictional content that fixes this as a specifically African colonial experience.

Another aspect of the memorializing of Japanese colonialism is in how the game handles victimhood. A key element in the post-War Japanese public debate was that Japanese citizens were led into war by a military elite, paying the price of this elite's bellicosity with massive civilian casualties. This element casts post-War Japan as surviving victims of an enemy within, now vanquished (Dower, 2012; Orr, 2001).

The zombie perfectly encapsulates this complex form of victimhood. While the emergence of the zombie in colonial Haiti is linked closely to issues of colonial exploitation, and particularly slavery (Kee, 2011), Degoul (2011) has argued that the zombie was also regarded in Haiti as a source of empowerment (see also Fay, 2008, pp. 92–93, for this ambivalence). In more recent zombie incarnations, *Dawn of the Dead* contains perhaps the clearest examples of this ambivalence, for example, when one character, looking down at the voracious consumer-zombies, says “They're us” (Harper, 2002). In these instances, zombies elicit empathy. They are seen as sharing in the same suffering that we recognize in ourselves.

Krzywinska (2008) has argued that zombies are the perfect digital game enemy because they can be dispatched without feelings of guilt. But the action of killing zombies is not always as guilt-free an experience as Krzywinska makes out. As Backe and Aarseth (2013) have shown, zombies can fulfil a range of different functions in games. The zombie is dispatched without guilt when we can tell ourselves that it is no longer human, and in many games this is indeed how zombies operate. But it is precisely because the zombie retains a glimmer of its humanity that it is such a compelling monster in much popular culture. In *RE5* Sheva, horrified by the sight of African zombies dressed in traditional African costumes, exclaims “What have they done to them?” The zombie is capable at these moments of eliciting the sympathy of other characters and of players. Killing zombies at such moments is not a guilt-free experience. The zombie of the type we encounter in *RE5* is both the enemy and the brainwashed victim of the real enemy. In this sense, the zombies of *RE5* parallel a certain self-understanding in post-War Japan in terms of blame and victimhood.

The second performative opportunity for the implied player relates more specifically to the Japan of the early 21st century and requires a slightly different way of thinking of games as virtual travel than that suggested by Fuller and Jenkins (1995).

In *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt (2008) describes travel writing in the colonial period as “one of the key instruments that made people ‘at home’ in Europe feel part of a planetary project; a key instrument, in other words in creating the ‘domestic subject’ of empire” (p. 3). While Fuller and Jenkins (1995) argue that digital games offer the

possibility of experiencing the thrill of New World travel in an age that can no longer sustain such travel, I would argue that contemporary travel writing and digital games retain the more substantial, less nostalgic function of creating, not the “‘domestic subject’ of empire” but the domestic subject of “the globe.” They allow players to perform global citizenship by virtually going out into the world and doing things there. The meanings of these things that are done relate to one’s own subject position and how “the globe” is related to this position.

This second sort of performativity arises through the way in which the game allows players to perform a kind of contemporary Japanese global subjectivity that is—in contrast to Ozawa’s (1994) conception of Japanese national subjectivity—normal. The game, then, transforms memory (of colonial atrocities) into a cultural resource for rehabilitating Japan as a normal member of the international community. Viewed from this perspective, *RE5* works through Japan’s unusual (abnormal) place in the world at the beginning of the 21st century. By going out into the world and redressing global imbalances, the player performs a normalized Japanese global identity that Japan, according to the normal country thesis, lacks. In this reading, the game uses many of the codes of 19th-/20th-century colonial fantasy (as discussed by Geyser & Tshabalala, 2011) but overwrites these with contemporary concerns about Japan’s place as a normal country in a globalizing world—one in which the “old colonies” of China and Korea are reemerging as economic, political, and cultural forces.

Conclusion

As popular culture texts, games are always polysemic (Fiske, 1989), and any textual analysis will necessarily focus on aspects of this polysemy due to its perspective from some particular cultural and academic position. I have argued here that thinking about this game not only in terms of its ostensible theme but in relation to the social imaginary that shapes that theme reveals in the game contemporary Japanese anxieties about race and national identity.

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1. <http://imgazer.imageshack.us/a/img835/4118/xrvi.jpg>

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