The Island as Container: Islands, Archipelagos, and Player Movement in Video Games

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Abstract: The use of islands and archipelagos as settings in video games has proven enduring and popular: these locations are usually shown to be dangerous places where travel can be difficult. The use of island and archipelago settings in this medium developed along with conventions about water in general being an obstacle to traverse, meaning that player characters that experience islands and archipelagoes are forced to discover ways to travel around, over, and away from them. Islands remain popular settings because they work well with players' preconceptions about these spaces, with people's understandings of natural boundaries that make travel difficult, and with game designers' intent to control player character movement throughout a world that is necessarily constrained by the reach of technology.

Keywords: archipelagos, archipelagic movement, fictional settings, islands, video games

Introduction

To many would-be tourists, islands are typically sunny, tropical locales which promise beautiful beaches and friendly locals. To the player character in a video game series, however, the island or archipelagic setting is something much more dangerous and mysterious.

Many video games have been, and continue to be, set on islands or island chains. But these settings haven't been designed to impress viewers with the beauty of the island setting or the charms of the indigenous culture. Instead, these islands tend to be places of danger, where movement is strictly controlled and tropical beaches are populated by monsters both human and not. Islands and archipelagos act to trap the player characters, keeping them from moving around freely in the game world or even from achieving what is often depicted as their desired ultimate goal: escape from the island.

In the new *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013), this trope is depicted quite clearly. The game is a reboot of the classic *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996), which began a popular game series featuring Lara Croft, a British archaeologist. The latest *Tomb Raider* explains how Lara got her start as a fearsome adventurer. According to the new game, Lara picked up her survival skills after a shipwreck resulted in her being stranded on a tropical island, isolated from fellow survivors and hunted down by mercenaries. The island setting keeps Lara trapped and in danger, forcing her to grow into the character beloved in the earlier games (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Tomb Raider* **heroine Lara Croft looks out over a number of shipwrecks from her island perch. (Tomb Raider © Square Enix Ltd, 2013. Picture used with permission.)**

The island, then, is itself part of the story, part of the plot that forces Lara to grow. It is also a dangerous place, surrounded by water and located far away from other land masses, conditions that inevitably force Lara to confront her enemies rather than escaping them. In this sense, islands fit into a long tradition of video games using water as a fixed and sometimes lethal boundary, designed to keep characters moving in a certain direction or confined to a certain location. Because water is seen as a natural and immovable obstacle that acts as a boundary, the use of islands as naturally contained areas for players to explore is fairly common in video games. Games can take place entirely on a single island, or archipelagos can be constructed to control player movement as progress throughout the plot leads them from one island to the next. In the former case, escape from the island is oftentimes a final goal for the game, as it will be for Lara Croft mentioned above. In the latter case, players often must complete game objectives in order to be allowed to overcome barriers preventing movement across islands in the archipelago.

The constant appearance and reappearance of these places in video games is indicative of the role that islands and archipelagos continue to play in popular representation and culture. In that sense, video games are just the latest in a long tradition of media that use island spaces to tell stories, with such predecessors as Homer's *Odyssey* (1997 [c. 800 BCE]), Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1998 [c. 1610]) and Wyss's *Swiss Family Robinson* (2004 [1812]). Likewise, the analysis of island and archipelagic literatures (DeLoughrey, 2004; 2007) and music (Baldacchino, 2011) point to the role of islands and island culture in fictional works. But today's fictional islands are not just found in books or island music; Mezzana, Lorenz and Kelman (2012) illustrate how these tropes have been picked up in modern rock music that is popular both on mainlands and on islands themselves. I seek to demonstrate the same presence in video games in my discussion below.

I begin by considering the scholarly literature on islands and archipelagos, to see how these video game tropes are themselves echoes of real world opinions and views on these places. I then explore some of the reasons why this convention took hold in game programming in the first place, and further discuss how the use of water in video games has changed over time. I then turn to why this convention has seen acceptance among game players, emphasizing past portrayals of water space in other cultural works, and how this in turn creates an incentive for game developers to situate their fictional settings on islands or archipelagos. These settings, then, allow for certain desirable attributes from the point of view of both game players and game designers, reinforcing these older conventions in gaming and real life stereotypes of islands and archipelagic chains.

Island, archipelago and artistic perception

The very definition of an island is of a body of land, smaller than a continent, surrounded by water. An archipelago then refers to a chain of islands, islands that are near enough to one another to be grouped, and yet lacking that physical connection which would have had them considered as part of the same land mass. Thus, the existence of as little as a thin strip of water is enough to set close land masses apart, marking them as islands in an archipelago rather than as a single location.

Islands are seen as separate yet whole entities, complete in their own right yet set strangely apart from their neighbours (Steinberg, 2005; Anckar, 2007). Thus, the term archipelago was necessary to discuss islands that were close to one another yet apart from a larger (usually continental) mainland. These islands were connected to each other by proximity and by water, the same water that distanced them from everything else.

As Hayward (2012) points out, the way we usually use archipelago as a term is somewhat misleading, since this word translates to something more like "prominent sea area" rather than anything about land. But to scholars of islands, this would actually seem more like a fortuitous word choice, as the surrounding water itself is as much a part of the definition of an island as is the land. Noted scholar Epeli Hau'ofa famously described the Pacific as a "sea of islands," drawing a specific contrast with the depiction of this location as "islands in a far sea" (1993, p. 2). LaFlamme (1983) pointed to the "internal sea" of archipelagos, the space around its composite islands, as one of the four distinguishing attributes of the archipelagic state. Thus the relationship between the islands, island chains, and the surrounding seas is all a part of the location; to view them as separate is to misunderstand the relationship between island land and island water.

The water thus serves as connecter as well as divider; the sea is a "connection-space" that links people together (Steinberg, 2001). While this is true for all islands, it is certainly a concept that needs further exploration with regards to archipelagos, entities connected by sea, by history and culture, and often by a history and culture of crossing that sea. The archipelago as a geographical construct needs to be considered in its own right (Stratford, Baldacchino, McMahon, Farbotko and Harwood, 2011); the relations of land and water to each other and to themselves deserve critical study. One answer to such further consideration has been Hayward's (2012) proposition of the 'aquapelago,' a term meant to encompass both the land and the water of an island chain, thus including the connection that defines each separate island. The 'aqua' refers thus to the water, and the 'pelago' acts as the "grounded" element of the term (2012, p. 5). But, while Hayward describes the 'pelago' part of aquapelago as referring to the land, the new term would translate simply as water, just as the original does.

Marrou (2007, pp. 173-4) had previously pointed to the same problem illustrated by Hayward. He notes that archipelago spaces are often conceived as a group of islands, but that English and other languages use multiple words to refer to a group of islands, including just the simple term 'islands'. He later posits another answer in his discussion of archipelago spaces as 'merritoires', a combination of the French *mer* (sea), and *territoire* (territory) (Marrou, 2011).

The archipelago then is seen as a place of separation and mobility, of connection and completeness. Land and water are co-involved in the creation of the space. These popular imaginations, along with their scholarly analysis, create a picture of a space that is in many ways ideal as a fictional setting, given that all works of fiction must have their own forms of connection and completeness.

I examine the role of the island and archipelago in video games because, in these fictional or fictionalized settings, much of the above mentioned connection and separation play out together on the screen. Islands are ideal because of their holistic "completeness," necessary for a game world which must fit within the limitations of storage media and console or computer processing power. Thus they work well as settings in video games, with the water usually acting as a boundary that puts a finite limit on the travel area. In this, video games are no different than films; for example, water is put to a similar use as a boundary in the movie *The Truman Show* (1998), where Truman finally discovers the falseness of his world by running into the "wall" at the end of the sea.

To a certain extent, all video game worlds are "islands" of a sort: limited areas with defined spaces of travel. And many other game settings are island-like; caves have similar natural boundaries, as can valleys surrounded by mountains, and so on. The recent *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013), for example, featured a floating city called Columbia that was clearly island-like without being surrounded by water. In this, it was similar to the setting of the first *BioShock* (2K Boston, 2007), which was set in an underwater artificial city called Rapture. Games set in outer space often share qualities with archipelagos, where players travel from planet to planet, just as archipelagic settings require them to travel from island to island. The *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007; 2010; 2012) is an interplanetary space adventure where planets in various systems work very much like islands in an archipelago.

Writ large, then, we could say that all game worlds are islands, as even the most open world has boundaries and limitations. That having been said, I focus here mostly on games where the setting is actually a physical island or archipelago. The idea of setting a fictional story on an island is not one that is new to video games, but instead is the product of a long history of using these settings in western literature. As such, use of an island setting by a writer or entertainer automatically suggests certain themes and tropes to the audience of that work.

Another reason to focus on physical island settings lies in that the water is often a game mechanism in its own right as well, either preventing passage outright in games where water is lethal, or in providing an obstacle to be overcome in order for the player to be granted passage to other, new islands. Both parts then of the island or archipelago, the land and the water, have specific rules and functions within the game world, and the interplay between them allows spaces for allowing and restricting player movement in order to serve a particular purpose. Thus, in a very real sense, video games with islands and island chains evince these same defining characteristics of archipelagos (or 'aquapelagos' or 'merritoires') as uniting land and water as their real and material counterparts do.

And yet, it is important to remember that island settings serve a figurative purpose as well, as a *tabula rasa* for mainland imaginations. This can be accomplished through metaphorical islands, but in western tradition, the physical island is the setting often chosen. Islands become reflections of our wants and desires, as well as our fears (Gillis, 2004). They are at once distant and removed from us, as they are connected figuratively through those projections, those desires and dreams that are thrust upon them by the rest of the world. Islands are areas that can be designed and improved, testing grounds for new ideas and opportunities. For most of history, it did not concern anyone that these areas were not in fact abandoned or isolated, but the (usually European) mindset was not concerned with this. There are, of course, issues with these representations of islands as small, isolated, and empty places, but nevertheless the image lingers solidly on.

There is a reason that More's *Utopia* (2003 [1516]) is set on an island. More describes the physical location of Utopia as being an island created for political purposes; Utopia had been an archipelago until human activity separated it entirely from land. Utopia had to be separate to survive as a society set apart from the world. This cultural image of islands as interesting places where humankind can be isolated makes them perfect settings for the likes of artists, visionaries, ascetic monks but also high-profile prisoners. The setting has been used in iconic literary works by western writers like Defoe (1994 [1719]) and Shakespeare (1998 [ca 1610]), and is popular as a location for stories where any man can be a king. This particular association makes islands especially suitable for video games, where the player character is usually the most important person in the game's entire world. Islands are seen as places filled with fantastical things and experimental activity, both exotic and foreign. They are often, in the case of Robinson Crusoe or the Swiss Family Robinson, places to be subjugated, owned, and controlled. In fact, the player character, the protagonist whose actions the video game player controls, can have powers that make Robinson Crusoe's look mild in comparison. Whatever the setting and plot of a game may be, the world's advancement usually rests on the player character's actions (or lack thereof). Factions in civil wars wait on his or her decisions, battles remain unfought until she or he moves to fight them, and/or the world may come to a standstill until the player character takes action.

The subjugation aspect is one that is both perfect from a game perspective and yet troubling from a sociopolitical view. Since combat provides a large portion of much modern day gameplay, the idea of "conquering" an island and its population works very well for a game and fits in with the usual depictions of islands as discussed above. Likewise, for open world games, it works well as an "untouched" place to explore and map, this time playing into the view of islands as remote and pristine wildernesses. But of course, in real life, most islands have their own inhabitants and their "subjugation" by (usually colonial) others has brought these inhabitants a great deal of misery − this is not something to glorify. This can be especially troubling for island populations when games invoke the "noble savage" trope, casting native populations in the role of mystic nature lovers. It can be difficult for game designers to walk the line between playing with long established western stereotypes about islands without crossing over into the realm of racism or xenophobia.

As Fletcher (2011) points out, though the field of island studies can on occasion privilege the 'real' island of the social sciences over the 'imaginary' ones of literature, the divide between the two is more of principle rather than of practice. Though her focus is on literature, she indicates the role of other media, including social media, as a player in a "mutually constructive relationship" (2011, p. 30) that involves both imaginary and reality.

Video games are one such medium wherein the player engages with a created world, at times both consumed in solitude or shared in cooperative play, and thus the presence of the island or archipelago as a common setting helps to reinforce the troubling real-world depictions of islands as isolated, dangerous places filled with unfriendly Others. These archipelagos may be imaginary in that, for example, there are no 'Rook Islands' on a map; but their lack of a physical presence does not deter them from influencing the perceptions of their real players.

"Not waving, but drowning": gaming conventions and movement through water

Ever wonder what assassins, children, car thieves, and various aquatic animals could possibly have in common? In the world of video games at least, none of these are able to swim. Video games of the past and present are filled with characters that have, in the words of website TV Tropes, "super drowning skills" (TV Tropes, nd, a). Water, it would seem, can be the ultimate equalizer: no matter how skilled a character may be, as little as a few inches of water can be lethal. Even in the venerable children's video game *Oregon Trail* (Rawitsch et al., 1971), where players guide a family and their Conestoga wagon west, water is a deadly obstacle; when crossing rivers, true, but wagon members can also drown in the relatively little water found on a flooded trail.

There are some reasons for the use of water as a lethal mechanism. Some of these have to do with game mechanics, but many also stem from the function of water in culture and society, and the way in which people in certain cultures view water and water spaces as unpredictable and potentially hostile. Game programmers use water as a lethal obstacle in part because it is easier to program that way, but also because it is seen as more realistic than other boundary mechanisms or obstacles they could use. In other words, this conventional shortcut gained traction because it was socially acceptable to players.

The idea that video game characters have a lethal allergy to water is not a new development. Many of the oldest, most venerable videogame characters have this particular characteristic, perhaps most notably the eponymous hero of *Frogger* (Konami, 1981), the arcade game where the player guides a frog across a crowded and dangerous river. Despite being a frog, the character will die the instant he touches water. Mario, the famous plumber of the Super Mario Brothers series, can swim, but this varies by game and by level. At times, he is incapable of drowning; yet sometimes, he drowns far too easily. In more modern games, the most egregious example of a person who cannot swim but should is Altaïr ibn-La'Ahad, the main character of *Assassin's Creed* (2007). He is a deadly assassin with such a pathological aversion to water that he can drown not just in large bodies of water but also in fountains. These games are not alone in their portrayal of water as an instant killer: TV Tropes lists 144 video games where the player character cannot swim (TV Tropes, no date, b).

This unrealistic reaction to water is not the result of antipathy on the part of game developers. Instead, it stems from choices made in programming that are meant to make the game easier to code, more interesting and, strangely enough, more realistic (Totilo, 2009). To have characters who have the ability to swim requires programmers to create new animations and other graphical elements; drowning doesn't require any extra work at all. This of course is a weak justification; video gamers are sophisticated and demand better and more realistic animations and graphics, as well as more intense and interesting plots, and so it is difficult for game developers to claim lethal water is justified due to the amount of extra work it would cause.

The usual answer provided by both designer and player is that water is boring. Swimming levels are seen as tedious for the player, as the controls are boring and the motion is slow (Totilo, 2009). In some games, such as *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), water acts as a pacifier. When the player character in *Skyrim* enters the water, pursuing enemies from land are unable to attack in pursuit (carnivorous fish can and do, but they are less challenging opponents). *Skyrim* isn't alone in this: other recent games published by the same studio likewise feature water as a sanctuary, reversing one millenary island trope: see, for example, *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) and *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010). Gamers who prefer high paced combat may find themselves frustrated by such tactics. Making water deadly, on the other hand, provides game developers with a new dangerous obstacle to put in a player's path. As illogical as it may be, lethal water can make a game harder for the player and allow developers to vary their barriers to player actions.

These barriers are important. Game worlds are finite: even the most expansive role playing game with the largest free range setting has limits. Moreover, these restrictions have only a certain degree of flexibility; game settings are limited by a variety of factors. These include technological limitations, such as processing power and storage space; but the budget of the developer, which determines the number and quality of writers, artists, programmers, and voice actors, serves as an important brake as well. As these improve, worlds can expand; but, at the time of a game's creation, these are relatively fixed variables. There must be a way therefore to create and contain the world such that it seems natural within the broader story. Natural features like mountains or bodies of water were one such barrier that developers have seized upon, and both have been heavily used in game worlds over the past decades. They act, however, in different ways. Both can prevent a character from traveling where he or she wishes to, or the player from guiding a character off the world's map. But, notwithstanding the lessons of the famous movie musical *The Sound of Music* (1965), it is rarely if ever the goal of the player character to escape over the mountains as the Von Trapps did. It is commonly the goal, however, to escape over water; especially if that water traps a player on an island.

As time passes, though, so too do conventions. Characters that once could not swim have learned to do so. Tommy Vercetti of *Grand Theft Auto Vice City* (Rockstar, 2002) couldn't swim, but Niko Bellick of *Grand Theft Auto 4* (Rockstar, 2008) can. However, strangely enough, this doesn't mean that the idea of water as a barrier has died out as a video game convention: rather, limits were often placed on where the player character was allowed to swim. A video game world still needs boundaries, so players cannot simply take their character and swim out into the ocean forever. Thus, water still exists as a boundary, even though characters in newer games have learned to swim.

Controlling player movement on land: the island/archipelago

In real life, many people can swim. As games have become more realistic, their characters have likewise learned how to navigate water without drowning upon its touch. But since also in real life people cannot swim forever, or even necessarily really far, water can still work as a barrier to navigation. For example, today's swimming characters usually have oxygen metres of some sort, to indicate that they can't swim underwater for prolonged periods of time. When the metre runs out, the character will drown. Thus, regardless of a game's age or the swimming ability of the player character, the use of water as a way of guiding or barricading player movement remains current.

While the idea of using water as a lethal obstacle has diminished, that of utilizing it as a useful setting has remained. It has been a long heralded tradition in video games to create various chokepoints that would limit a player's ability to progress further until after the completion of a designated obstacle. This allows the game designers to ensure that progress through a game's world is tied to the players' progress throughout whatever main plot has been devised. Often, these chokepoints take the form of bridges which would need either creating or repairing. *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft, 1986) provides an early example of this, as the game cannot be completed without building a bridge to reach the final villain of the game. But another favourite way of restricting player movement is by trapping the player character on an island or an island chain. Since islands are seen as holistically complete, and water as a traditional obstacle, they represent a natural way of limiting a game's environment while still appearing to provide the player with a fully developed world.

Islands, therefore, are a useful setting. Certainly, they serve a role as being a "natural" limitation for a game world, allowing developers to achieve a realistic setting and eschew more artificial boundaries. But, as discussed above, there are many ways to accomplish that without the use of islands in particular; floating cities, planets, or valleys surrounded by mountains would achieve the same goal. Thus, islands may be seen as desirable not just for this reason, but for all the cultural resonance that island spaces have: places seen as remote, unpopulated, dangerous, beautiful, and/or controllable. As a geographical location, islands speak to their audience in a way few other places, real or fictional, can match.

Islands in video games can thus be grouped together by their primary purpose as a setting. For example, one major reason for the island setting is that they can be used to define or limit the player's activity. Many games set on islands, for example, use the idea of escaping the island as the main goal for the game. *Dead Island* (Techland, 2011) is a shooter game set on a fictional island in the South Pacific that has been overrun by zombies, and the player's goal is to kill the zombies, survive, and escape the island to safety. Other games, like the *Tropico* series (PopTop, 2001; Frog City, 2003; Haemimont 2009, 2011), are about building and developing island spaces. *Tropico*'s setting on a fictional Caribbean island is purposefully meant to evoke the stereotypes of banana republics, and it is the island setting that sets the game apart from other city and empire building games, like *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989) and its sequels. Moreover, this difference is not just in appearance; the Caribbean island setting provides players with set challenges and limitations as well as a unique cultural flavour and regionally inspired music. Note that the Tropico series is unique in its Caribbean setting; almost all other island games either have no reference to real world geography or have their islands situated in the Oceania region of the Pacific, like the aforementioned *Dead Island*. *Tropico* and the upcoming *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft, 2013) are two of the only games specifically set in the Caribbean (see <u>Figure 2</u>).

Sometimes the island itself is the star, as in the case of *Myst* (Cyan, 1993), a highly popular PC game from the early 1990s. The game takes place on the island of *Myst*, where the player character has been whisked after reading a mysterious book. And that's all the information a player gets when beginning the game. From that point, the player's main activity is simply to explore Myst and learn what is going on. *Myst* is compelling gameplay because it is first person; players feel as though they are the ones engaging in exploration, especially as the player character they supposedly represent has very little backstory (and is in fact named "the Stranger"). Its sequel, *Riven* (Cyan, 1997), takes place on an archipelago, but maintains the same style of gameplay.

Figure 2: **The Caribbean awaits Edward Kenway, the privateer turned pirate of the upcoming** *Assassin's Creed IV***. (Assassin's Creed IV © Ubisoft, 2013. Picture used with permission.)**

Yet, not all games featuring islands do so as a merely static venue. While the games above allow movement only throughout the island rather than off it, other games prefer to use the island as a base for controlling player movement throughout a larger game world. This objective is usually achieved by using an archipelagic setting rather than a single island. In some of these games, the islands are merely different settings and assorted backdrops, much like different towns would be on a mainland setting. The archipelagic setting here does not control player movement – you can go wherever you want to pretty much from the beginning – but instead provides a different way of creating various locales and linking them together. The tenth *Legend of Zelda* game, *The Wind Waker* (Nintendo, 2003) features a flooded continent with close to 50 different islands, all of which Link, the main character, can visit by using a boat. Some islands must be visited in order to complete the main quest, which involves traveling under the sea to defeat the villain. For example, Link must visit three specific islands and place special pearls on them in order to summon the tower that will allow him to reach the undersea castle. Other islands contain items that would be helpful to Link in completing his quest, but are not ultimately necessary. Some islands have little of value on them at all.

In other archipelagic settings, the islands are meant not just to provide variety to the game world, but also serve a particular purpose. In these, the water acts as an obstacle to player character movement, trapping a player on one particular island until he has performed a necessary quest to travel to a new island. In this, water is used not just as mechanism to contain, but also eventually as a mechanism for transport, similar to the way in which real world island settlers regard their oceans as connection space. However, in games, the routes for transport tend to be a great deal more limited. A good early example of this control using archipelagic movement is Nintendo's *StarTropics* (1990), a game for the original Nintendo Entertainment System. The player character is a young man named Mike Jones, who has found himself on a fictional island in an archipelago in the Oceania region. Mike's uncle, an

archaeologist, has been abducted, and the plot of the game follows Mike's quest to find him. The first task that Mike has to accomplish is traveling through a dungeon in order to gain access to the submarine he needs to leave the island and move to the next one in the archipelago. The submarine remains Mike's primary inter-island transport until it wrecks, and then the player has to undertake a series of quests for an island chief in order to get him to repair the submarine. The player must continue to island hop until Mike finds his uncle and only then can he fight the last villain and win the game.

StarTropics, like many games of its era, has only a very loose plot which holds together the various obstacles and enemies that the player fights as part of the game. But the setting of the game on an archipelago enables the game designers to make sure that players defeat all their enemies before they can head off to fight new ones. Since the player is literally stuck on an island until the plot mandated objectives are completed, there is no way to progress except to go through the various fights and win the right to move on to another location. Each island has only one route that will allow the player character to progress off it, and thus players are allowed only that movement, which is tightly defined and controlled by the game's designers.

A similar approach is taken in a more recent title, *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar, 2008), one of the best-selling video games of all time. The game is set in Liberty City, a fictional locale based around the greater New York City area. Like its inspiration, Liberty City features islands as part of its urban setting. These islands and mainland areas are linked to each other by way of bridges and tunnels, similar to those linking Manhattan with the outer boroughs. However, the bridges are "locked" when a player begins the game, meaning that there are police barricades preventing a player from crossing over from one area to another. As players progress in the main plot, bridges are 'unlocked', allowing them to safely travel from one borough to another and thus expanding the world for players to further explore. Any attempt to cross a bridge early will be met with a very high level of police response. Unlike in most of the game, where the police can be evaded until they quit looking for a player, crossing a bridge too soon triggers a permanent and enduring manhunt which will eventually end in the player's death. Committing vehicular manslaughter and murder would result in less intensive police action taken against a player than would daring to cross a bridge in Liberty City too soon.

Then, there are islands that represent entirely different worlds and modes of gameplay. Two games in the *Far Cry* series, the original *Far Cry* (Crytek, 2004) and *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft, 2012) also feature movement throughout an archipelago. In *Far Cry 3*, the game takes place on a fictional Pacific archipelago, the Rook Islands. Like the games detailed above, the player is required to move from island to island. The archipelago has five islands; but, in the main quest, the player is restricted to the two main islands in the game, North Island and South Island. Compared to many of the other games mentioned above, the player character has a variety of transportation options to travel between these two islands, ranging from more conventional boats to less conventional but highly useful hang gliders. Movement between the two remains necessary to complete the game, and the player character is only allowed to travel back and forth after completion of a certain amount of the main plot. Nevertheless, though the main quest deals only with North and South Island, the other islands are far from superfluous. Quite the opposite; they serve as the settings for other forms of gameplay beyond the main single player plot.

Far Cry 3 is not just a single player game with a main quest; if it were, it would be somewhat unusual by current game standards. While they still retain a coherent plot, a series of quests, and the basic features of a make believe world, today's bestselling video games also tend to feature a multiplayer mode where players from around the world compete against other over the games' own platform's networks. Thus, often a player's first choice is whether to play the main quest of the game, or to take part in the multiplayer activity that goes on all the time. For many games, such as the *Call of Duty* franchise (e.g. Sledgehammer Games and Infinity Ward, 2011; Treyarch, 2012), the multiplayer activity is more popular than the main quest itself. This is where the archipelagic structure of *Far Cry 3* is unique: the other islands in the Rook archipelago are the settings for the multiplayer action and the cooperative mode, with one island hosting each (see <u>Figure 3</u>). Thus the game continues in other formats on these other islands, with one island allowing for cooperative play between two to four individuals working as a team, and the other island allowing for multiplayer gaming involving individuals competing against one another.

The island and archipelagic setting therefore can be extraordinarily valuable to game designers as they plan how they want players to be able to move throughout a game's world. It is deemed natural and acceptable to use islands to limit player character movement, as the convention now already dates back many decades. It works well with the other, related convention about water being an obstacle to be overcome by an intrepid player; *StarTropics*, the game set on an archipelago, will still see the player character drowned if he steps in a puddle. But these conventions only work for game developers because they resonate with their audiences; the tropes and ideas about islands and archipelagos we see in video games exist because they are based on long-held traditions and stereotypes about these places in the real world, even if these stereotypes jar with the experiences of many real-world island residents.

<u>Figure 3</u>: The Rook Islands serve as the setting for *Far Cry 3*, seen here from a hang glider. (Far Cry 3 © Ubisoft, 2013. Picture used with permission.)

Further research

This paper is just one early examination into bridging the gap between island scholarship and island portrayal in video games, and there are several directions suggested for future research. First, not all islands in video games are alike. There is a significant population of fictional islands and archipelagos set in Oceania: the island settings of *StarTropics*, *Dead Island*, and *Far Cry 3* are all explicitly located in this area, for example. Yet, the islands of *StarTropics* are populated by indigenous tribes (complete with requisite stereotypes), *Dead Island's* Banoi is shown as a high-end tourist destination, and *Far Cry 3*'s island chain is home to a den of pirates. These are all islands or island chains that must be escaped from in some capacity; they represent three highly divergent yet, in many cases, quite inaccurate views of island life.

Then, there is the question of perspective. In all three games above, the player characters are not themselves native of the island or archipelago where the stories unfold. Mike of *StarTropics* is a westerner sent to find his archaeologist uncle; the four player character choices of *Dead Island* are all tourists, though some hail from other islands; and the player character of *Far Cry 3* was kidnapped while on vacation. Thus, in all these examples, as in many other games, the player is sympathizing with an outsider. This outsider perspective may in part be driven by the typical game plot of "escape the island and return home"; certainly the case for *Dead Island*, and that ending is one of the choices that the player character can make in *Far Cry 3*. Of course, the implication there is that islands are not home; at least not to anything other than monsters. A failure to understand the nuances of such an implication can lead to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes or even outright racism, as the makers of *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009) found out to their dismay. The game is set in Africa with African natives serving as the victims turned zombies, which led to a discussion about whether the imagery of 'wild-appearing' Africans being slaughtered by a white protagonist to echo painful racist and/or colonial tropes (Cavalli, 2009; Pham, 2009; Snider, 2009). Islanders who enjoy video games may well find equally painful moments in their representation in many of the games listed above.

This is all part, incidentally, of an ongoing discussion (some may say battle) over the portrayal of women and minorities of all types in video games. In the summer of 2013, the PAX Australia event, a gaming expo run by the makers of the influential Penny Arcade web comic, became embroiled in controversy over one of the panels accepted. This panel, called "Why so serious?" claimed that "any titillation gets called out as sexist or misogynistic, and involve any antagonistic race other than Anglo-Saxons and you're a racist" (Howett, 2013). The description of the panel was amended, and several presenters removed themselves from the event entirely due to concerns about a lack of inclusiveness, complicated by several poorly taken remarks from the event's founder. Islanders and aboriginal people should be a part of this discussion, and concerns about island stereotyping play into this broader discussion.

Conclusions

The portrayal of islands and archipelagos in video games reflects a well-understood vision of islands in the social consciousness of the contemporary West. They are places, usually tropical, that are simultaneously exotic and restrictive; they rely on movement between and connection with the outside world. At the same time, they also fulfil a specific purpose for video game

designers: this setting is seen as natural while still allowing for a well-developed story contained within a bounded world. To island scholars, then, the portrayal of these places in new media such as video games is unsurprising, and is an outgrowth of their depiction in much older media.

Video games are a newer medium wherein island stereotypes continue to grow and flourish, but this particular medium is one where the convention has strongly taken hold, with no indication that island-set titles are likely to diminish in the future. And video games are a highly popular media amongst a variety of age groups; data from the US-based Entertainment Software Association indicates that close to half of American households own at least one dedicated gaming console, such as an Xbox or a Playstation, and that the average age of a video game player is 30 (ESA, 2012). The Entertainment Software Rating Board indicates that the industry brought in US$10.5 billion in revenue in 2009 (ESRB, 2011). It is a form of popular media that is highly popular, and has grown more so over time with new technologies.

In the recent past, video games were limited to arcade style machines and later computers and consoles; but today's games are also available on smart phones and a variety of other platforms. Likewise, they can take very different forms, ranging from single player games, to games with multiplayer modes, to those that create an online virtual world like *Second Life*. The last of these, a multiuser virtual environment, explicitly features island spaces as a premier product, with the expensive price tag that goes along with such a designation, showing how even in large-ranging virtual worlds, which could consist of anything and everything, the private island is still envisaged as the ultimate exclusive playground (e.g. Fruit Islands, 2013). An exhaustive list of all games created across these platforms – from computers, to the Playstation (and sequels), to Apple's iOS – may well be impossible. But a game's platform determines a game's opportunities and limitations, and an iOS game is not similar in scope or in development budget to one meant for Microsoft's Xbox (or its sequels). Thus, a more explicitly cross-sectional consideration of games across these platforms would be useful.

What is clear is that island and archipelagic stereotypes and video games are both here to stay, and the marriage between them has so far proven to be durable and long-lasting. As video games continue to expand their reach and audience, scholars of islands and archipelagoes would do well to examine how this relatively new medium continues to express some very old and well established tropes about island life.

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