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**LOST WORLDS OF *ANDROMEDA***

The paper offers a reading of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (BioWare, 2017) vis-à-vis lost world romance (also dubbed “lost race romance”, or “imperial romance”), a late-Victorian era novelistic genre originating from H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* and serving as a major tool for British Empire propaganda and a source of early science-fiction conventions. We claim that the narrative failure of this ill-received game stems from its adherence to the rigid principles and forceful themes of the genre and the colonial and imperial imaginary informing it. Our analysis aims at highlighting the way 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelistic convention can be remediated as contemporary digital games, and to expose the link between the imperial imaginary and the ways in which open-world digital games are structured, on both the narrative and gameplay levels, even when they do not directly refer to the historical colonial legacy.

Keywords: imperialism, science fiction, colonialism, game studies, digital games, Victorian novel, *Mass Effect*

***MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA*  
AND THE VICTORIAN LOST RACE ROMANCE**

The aim of this paper is to explore ways *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, the ill-received (Metacritic – *ME: Andromeda* (PC) reviews, 2020) sequel to the critically acclaimed *Mass Effect* trilogy introduces tropes of the lost world romance, a Victorian literary genre born in the shadow of the scramble for Africa. The reason behind such a reading is threefold. First, we aim to demonstrate the historical roots of the imaginary of common mass-market

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big-budget games, and to point out their relationship with the adventure novel tradition, in a spirit already highlighted by several scholars analyzing the interactions between 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature and gaming (Fuchs et al., 2018; Majkowski, 2016a, 2016b; Vella, 2015). Second, we wish to look beyond the obvious settler/colonial ideology of the game in question to explore the inevitably tangled relationship between imperial ideology and colonialism in fiction (see Fuchs et al., 2018).

We also have a third goal: to supplement the growing body of work analyzing the way mass-market, high-budget games cater to and reinforce the imperial ideology of the industrialized West by perpetuating myths of cultural superiority and benevolence of Western rule disguised as a narrative of anti-conquest (Pratt, 1992) or understood in terms of the “white man’s burden” through the usage of fantasy and science fiction aesthetics. Although a such perspective is not completely alien to digital-game analysis, it is worth pointing out that most existing postcolonial research focuses mainly on two issues: the representation of real-world races and the historical colonial past (Berger, 2008; Harrer and Pichlmair, 2015; Höglund, 2008; Martin, 2016; Shaw, 2015; Šisler, 2008), and the imperial legacy of strategy games (Euteneuer, 2018; Magnet, 2006; Mukherjee, 2017). In both cases, the research aims at either criticizing the medium as inherently colonial and beyond redemption (Breger, 2008; Fuchs et al., 2018, Harrer, 2018), or seeking how digital games could introduce postcolonial subjectivity (Apperley, 2018; Ford, 2016; Hammar, 2017; Lammes, 2010; Lammes and Smale, 2018; Mukherjee, 2015) and struggle to bring a critical perspective to the colonial legacy (Hammar, 2017; Felczak, 2020).

With our attempt, we wish to move into slightly different territory. Instead of focusing on the logic of the imperial and colonial political and economic praxis replicated in game rules and informing game narratives, we address fictitious motifs inherited by contemporary science-fiction games from 19<sup>th</sup>-century adventure novels for boys (Hanson, 2002; Mathison, 2008; Rieder, 2008). We are aware, of course, of the relation between the novel and imperialism (Said, 1994), although with this paper we are more interested in how seemingly discredited tropes can be rejuvenated by remediation (Bolter and Gusin 1996) as a digital game.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE OF THE *MASS EFFECT* SERIES

The paper most directly addressing the issue we raise in this analysis is Michael Fuchs, Vanessa Erat and Steven Rabitch’s reading of the fantasy-themed computer role-playing games (cRPG) *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* trilogies from the Canadian studio BioWare, the direct precursor of the title we analyze here (2018). While pointing out the inevitable imperial undertones of both series, both series acknowledge they are conscious of this entanglement and are trying (albeit failing) to address the issue within the game narrative. The authors praise the first *Mass Effect* game for depicting humans as an upstart secondary power trying to throw their weight in a galaxy ruled by an alien species far more developed, and for open criticism of the in-game Earth’s aggressive colonial policies. They point out, however, that the promise is undelivered: on a gameplay level, *Mass Effect* remains a conservative, militaristic game of resource accumulation and forceful destruction of any opposition. Both

tendencies gradually grow with the subsequent parts of the trilogy, as humanity (personified by the game protagonist) grows into the role of galactic Messiah, not only destined to save all sentient organic life from the invasion of ancient conscious machines, but also to resolve the numerous conflicts the alien races are struggling with. It is worth noting that this tonal shift started when the producer, the Canadian studio BioWare, was purchased by the US-based game development giant Electronic Arts, a change well in line with Fuchs, Erat and Rabitch's argument highlighting the relationship between digital games and the Empire in Hardt and Negri's sense (2000) as a major reason behind games' reliance on colonial ideology. Following Dyer-Witford and de Peuter's seminal work (2009) they consider mainstream digital games to be "a paradigmatic media of Empire – planetary, militarized hypercapitalism" (Fuchs et al., 2018, p. 1484), claiming that "neoliberal heirs to the empires of the past control the means of production and dissemination of mass media, effectively making players of cRPGs «serial imperialists»" (Fuchs et al., 2018, p. 1477).

We agree with this position, echoed by numerous scholars claiming that basic gameplay modes of cRPG games, revolving around exploration of a supposedly unknown land – "a virgin territory"<sup>1</sup> – and appropriation of various treasures are inherently tied to the colonial imaginary (Felczak, 2020; Lammes, 2010; Mukherjee, 2015; Majkowski, 2016b, 2018). Therefore any attempts to introduce anti-colonial or anti-imperial narratives are inevitably contested by the way the game is played; as Fuchs, Erat and Rabitch put it, while "video games' narrative layers often critique imperialist tendencies and aspirations, players are made to play empire" (Fuchs et al., 2018, p. 1492).

Despite this limitation, it is however possible to read an anti-imperial narrative in further instalments of the *Mass Effect* trilogy. Even though it puts a human hero at the center of the plot, it never contests the early-established idea of humans being among the least advanced races, challenging the concept of scientific advancement as a mandate to govern over savage cultures – a concept central to imperial ideology (Mignolo, 2003; Rieder, 2008). Not only does it frequently side with the less-advanced civilization (such as the war-like Krogans) to criticize the devastating effects of paternalistic interventions or poke fun at the concept of cultural superiority (e.g. by introducing Salarians, a race of science-loving amphibians), but the central plot revolves around the protagonist's efforts to resist seizure of their homeworld by the technologically superior beings.

The antagonists, artificial beings known as the Reapers, are not simple conquerors: they operate on a higher calling, trying to save the galaxy from certain doom, and offer their own version of salvation to all sentient beings. Their basic modus operandi is, however, unlimited appropriation: They harvest sentient beings as a resource, reducing less advanced races to either zombie-like slaves or simple biomass. Finally, they are revealed as a force secretly manipulating the scientific development of organic races, to bring them to the point where they become the very threat the Rippers are trying to save the galaxy from. In this way the sentient machines justify the cycles of genocide and appropriation as an inevitable necessity. Therefore, it is the antagonists who rely on colonial ideology in the *Mass Effect* trilogy, despite presenting the protagonist as a savior. Such a premise allows for a (somewhat generous)

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<sup>1</sup> See (McClintock, 1995) for further discussion of gendered metaphors in imperial and colonial discourses.

reading of the *Mass Effect* trilogy as at least an attempt to reverse the imperialistic tropes of science-fiction RPGs in the vein introduced by H.G. Wells' anti-colonial manifesto, *The War of the Worlds* (Rieder, 2008).

*Mass Effect: Andromeda*, a sequel released after a five-year hiatus, is a game with a much more unsettling narrative premise. Here, humankind arrives in the new galaxy with the explicit aim to colonize it, regardless of the native population. Even though it is framed as necessity – humans and other sentient races arrived at Andromeda galaxy to avoid certain extinction at the hands of the Rippers – the lack of regard for possible natives is profound. Humans crossed the vast void of space and the ocean of time (the journey took 600 years to complete) with the manifest destiny to find a new home. The meticulous directives governing the process of colonization lack any clear instructions for dealing with native cultures – it is thus up to the player to enact forging relationships with aliens, quite neatly divided between two races: one of noble savages, and the other of dangerous savages (see Rieder, 2008; Roszczynialska, 2001). This plot seems to be directly at odds with the main topic of the trilogy and makes *Mass Effect: Andromeda* a game hard to swallow, as the protagonist of the new title is given a task quite similar to what motivates the Reapers: to deliver various non-human races through technology and teach them a new, better way to live while appropriating their resources.

To justify such an uncritical stance on colonial practices, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* introduces a series of easily-recognizable narrative tropes, already tested as a moral justification for imperialism and colonialism in adventure fiction. On the surface level, they tie the game to the Western genre and the myth of settling the Americas: humans (and other races from the trilogy) are set as pilgrims crossing the unconquerable ocean to avoid doom in their homeland. There is a conflict between the freedom-seeking settlers and the administration still following the rules and procedures of the “Old Worlds”. Finally, the two sentient races of Andromeda galaxy can be interpreted as a heavily stereotyped depiction of the native population of the Americas, with the Plains Indians, a noble yet backward culture of high spirituality seeking communion with nature, and the “evil native empire” of Central and South America, conventionally (and inaccurately) depicted as bloodthirsty and governed by half-mad priests. This interpretation is reinforced by how the protagonist assumes the title of Pathfinder – a clear reference to the third installment of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Moreover, early in the game the protagonist finds an edition of the journals of Lewis and Clark, a supposed memento of her historical predecessors.

By introducing the Lewis and Clark memoirs (1803–1806), the first overland expedition to traverse North America and reach the Pacific Ocean on behalf of the US government, the game not only highlights the continuity between the fictional Pathfinder of Andromeda Galaxy and real-life historical figures, thus contributing to the idea that drive behind playing digital games is similar to the urge driving European explorers to Americas, as analyzed by Fuller and Jenkins (1995). It also subtly hints that it is humanity's manifest destiny to take over the newly discovered star cluster, much as the Lewis and Clark Expedition fueled the concept of the USA's dominance over North America as the country's manifest destiny (Miller and Miller, 2006).

It is our claim, however, that those Western tropes – although readily available – are quite shallow and mostly limited to casual references. The main plot is built upon another

adventure genre, that of lost world romance (also dubbed “last race romance” or “imperial romance”<sup>2</sup>). It is not an accident the title “Pathfinder”, alluding to the prose of an American frontier romance writer, is superimposed on the protagonist’s surname, Ryder. Although sometimes understood by fans as a reference to Sally Ride, the first American female astronaut (Mass Effect Fanon Wiki, 2019), it can be also read as allusion to H. Rider Haggard, the most famous author of the lost world romance, sometimes considered the inventor of the genre (see Hanson, 2002; Katz, 2010; Monsman, 2006). Such an interpretation seems valid, as the main plot of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* follows a central premise of the Victorian genre: Following a cryptic map, the protagonist stumbles upon remnants of a surprisingly advanced culture in the heart of an untamed wilderness and turns out to be uniquely suited to unlocking the mystery of the lost land, owing to technological and moral superiority which the native guardians of the treasure lack.

## WORLDS THAT TIME FORGOT

The popularity of the lost world romance in Victorian fiction starts with the surprising success of two early adventure novels: R.L. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* in 1883 and H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* in 1885. Both build upon a similar premise of Englishmen travelling to a distant and exotic land in search of easy gain. Following a mysterious map, the protagonists bypass numerous dangers in search of the hidden and fabled treasure (Daly, 2007; Mathison, 2008). There is one important difference, however: In Stevenson’s novel, the central conflict is class-based, as a party of English gentry clashes with lower-class pirates over a pile of Spanish gold. Haggard does not allow for his Englishman to squabble over diamonds from King Solomon’s mines, describing the conflict as an internal issue of the indigenous population which the protagonists become involved in by accident. In this way the struggle over the treasure is turned into a larger framework of imperial policy, as white people’s ability to resolve local frictions and bring peace to the Black population of Africa becomes inseparable from the appropriation of African treasures (Daly, 2007; Katz, 2010; Mathison, 2008; Roszczynialska, 2001). In Haggard’s subsequent novel, *She* (1887), cementing the rules of the genre, the financial gain is omitted. The real treasure Horace Holly and Leo Vincey bring from their African escapade is both intellectual and moral: they have discovered an unknown and mysterious culture in the heart of the continent while resisting the temptations of the flesh thanks to their English common sense.

Haggard’s novels originated the genre rules followed by dozens of novels published between 1890 and 1914, with Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Lost World* (1912), Rudyard Kipling’s *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888), Francis Atkins’s *The Devil Tree of El Dorado* (1897),

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<sup>2</sup> Even though the most widespread term seems to be “lost race romance”, in this paper we use the less prominent “lost world”, as the former term highlights discovery of hitherto unknown (usually white) races and focuses on the racial anxieties of the late Victorian society. For our reading, the spatiotemporal aspect of the genre, as well as its relation with the “fantasy of appropriation” is of equal importance, and we believe the less popular name better captures the spirit of the genre. See (Daly, 2007; Hanson, 2002; Mathison, 2010; Katz, 2010; Rieder, 2008) for further discussion.

Edward Markwick's *The City of Gold* (1896), and D.L. Johnstone's *The White Princess of the Hidden City* (1898) serving as the most prominent examples. The heavily conventionalized genre served as popular entertainment as well as an important element of imperial propaganda (Katz, 2010; Mathison, 2008; Hanson, 2002), addressing the anxiety regarding the imminent fall of the British Empire resulting from the decline of the adventurous and enterprising spirit among late-Victorian Britons. While providing a narrative framework for justification of colonial practices (Katz, 2010; McClintock, 2013; Roszczynialska, 2001), the novelists were also weaving the mirage of quick economic and social advancement to be found in the colonies (Daly, 2007; Mathison, 2008) as well as promoting athleticism and survivalism, as opposed to the moral apathy and lack of physical prowess supposedly plaguing Victorian society during the Boer Wars (Hanson, 2002). Finally, by introducing the motif of the mysterious and unknown white people and the legacy of their lost civilization, lost world romance provided an easy way to reconcile the scientific racism which considered non-whites as inherently inferior (Rieder, 2008; see also Mignolo, 2003) with the archaeological evidence of grand non-European civilizations, while addressing deeply ambivalent attitudes toward cultural hybridization within the British Empire (Hanson, 2002). Finally, it served as a showcase of the empire's geographical span, with much emphasis put on accurate depiction of colonial flora and fauna and local customs, to present the young readers of London the wonder and excitement of the exotic lands ruled over by the queen (Daly, 2007).

In his analysis of a way the colonial ideology informed early science fiction novels, John Rieder (2008) claims that the widespread appeal of the lost world romance genre as well as its ability to address such a diverse range of issues stems from its heavy reliance on imperial ideology. The author offers analysis of this ideology through Slavoj Žižek's concept of ideological fantasies, understood as fiction shaping social realities, and he analyzes four such fantasies providing justification for colonial practice and informing the themes and motifs common in this literary genre. The fantasy of progress equates cultural difference with scientific and social advancement, reducing non-Europeans to children yet to reach maturity (and in need of protection provided by "adult" Britons). The fantasy of discovery allows treating any unmapped territory as unsettled or even empty of human life, and therefore ready to be claimed. The fantasy of the missionary assumes destruction of a native way of life to be a beneficial gift of true civilization. Finally, the anthropologist's fantasy considers non-European civilizations as remnants of the past, as if tribal cultures of Central Africa or the Americas were living museums of European prehistory (Reider, 2008, pp. 30–32). It should be added that the lost world romance justifies British interference with non-European cultures by employing a strategy first developed in diaries of real-life explorers, what Mary Louis Pratt calls the narrative of anti-conquest (Pratt, 1992). Here, the European protagonist of the story is a messianic figure, exposing himself to various dangers and suffering hardships at the hands of local chieftains and warlords not for personal gain, but to advance science and bring the oppressed local population the gift of civilization. Any prize he claims in the process is therefore morally justified as earned through sacrifice: Allan Quatermain and his friends can claim diamonds from King Solomon's mines only after they personally end Twala and Gagool's rule of terror and reinstall the rightful heir to Kukuanialand's throne.

As we demonstrate below, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* follows the narrative of the lost world romance almost to the letter, introducing several tropes of the genre. It features a selfless explorer as the main character, a map leading to the lost treasure, a strange and ancient culture ignorant of its own past, rediscovery of a lost civilization by rational European minds, and a race of evildoers ready to make ill-use of the hidden treasure (Daly, 2007; Mathison, 2008). It also structures the first contact with space aliens along lines drawn by the genre: the humans are technologically superior but lack the moral strength the noble savages possess, and only the alliance of those two can overthrow the dangerous indigenous empire ruled by religious fanatics (Rieder, 2008). Ethical justification for this imperial perspective on the local population is embedded in the quest structure, presenting the protagonist's trials as a form of beneficial anti-conquest (Pratt, 1992). Finally, the environment is presented as unknown and exotic, in need of being surveyed, tamed and exploited.

As a science-fiction themed role-playing game, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* is well-equipped to present such a narrative, inheriting lost world romance conventions from both the narrative and gameplay genres. As analyzed by numerous scholars (Frelik, 2017; Rieder, 2008; Suvin, 1983), the imperial and colonial imagination embodied as lost race romance provided the foundation for the science fiction genre. Even the famously anti-colonial H. G. Wells novel, *The War of the Worlds*, did not abandon colonial logic; it just reversed it. Lost world romance was also a direct influence on American pulp fiction, with Edgar Rice Burroughs *Princess of Mars* (1912) bringing the genre logic to another planet, and Haggard's racial anxieties and pessimism regarding the inevitable decline of any human empire informing the heavily-racialized sword and sorcery genre, which, in turn, heavily influenced the creators of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the first tabletop RPG, published in 1974 (Peterson, 2012). This is of course true for all science fiction RPGs, sharing the same double legacy. The readiness of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* to embrace imperial tropes and ideologies is striking, especially given that the *Mass Effect* trilogy made an effort to distance itself from it, at least on the narrative level.

Below we analyze the way four fantasies informing imperial and colonial imaginary of the lost world romance are fully articulated in the main plot of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and are reinforced by the way the game is played.

## THE FANTASY OF PROGRESS: THE NOBLE HEROINE OF ANDROMEDA (AND HER PET AI)

After a six-hundred-year journey from the Milky Way to Andromeda Galaxy, Sara Ryder<sup>3</sup> wakes up in Ark Hyperion to find that humanity's assumed new home planet can no longer be colonized for two reasons: the presence of hostile aliens called the Kett, and changes in the planet's atmosphere. She joins her father, a Pathfinder of humanity on a scouting mission on the

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<sup>3</sup> The player can choose between binary genders of the protagonist, playing as male or female - the unchosen option is presented in-game as the protagonist's twin, still in cryogenic stasis. The player can also freely choose the protagonist's name. To avoid confusion however, in this paper we assume the female Sara Ryder to be the default protagonist of the game, with the default male Scott Ryder as her frozen twin.

planet's surface, and fights the Kett. During the mission, the Pathfinder team finds a mysterious, ciphered map and cleans the planet's atmosphere with ancient terraforming infrastructure. Sadly, Sara's father sacrifices his life to save hers, and the protagonist inherits his position as a Pathfinder. Sara has to adjust to her new position and responsibilities: From now on she will have to make the decisions establishing the future of humanity in Andromeda Galaxy.

As a Pathfinder, Ryder's main goal is to explore the planets of a new galaxy and determine their potential as possible future homes for humanity. Being the first human being to explore the planets, she faces difficult choices, such as how to exploit available resources or whether the new colony should become a scientific unit or a military base. In this way Sara is making a statement about humanity's attitude toward the Andromeda Galaxy, although the choice is usually limited to more or less aggressive exploitation, and she cannot decide to abandon attempts at colonization.

This narrative premise is surprisingly synchronized with the gameplay: by building the story on exploration and colonization, the game manages to avoid the tension between the fast-paced story of many open-world games and the thorough exploration of the space the game demands (Majkowski, 2016a). Controlling the Pathfinder, the player is constantly scanning the environment to gather scientific data and pinpoint natural resources, both serving as currency to buy "scientific advancements" in the form of more effective weaponry. The other common activity is to fight numerous dangers, from aggressive animal life to hostile aliens, and to discover the ways leading to further areas to explore. The last major activity is to have prolonged colloquies with various NPCs, both accompanying the Pathfinder in her quest and met during the exploration. In this way the game distinguishes three categories of objects: the natural world, to be explored, described and subsequently exploited, and hostile natives and benign natives, highlighting the ability to have a proper conversation as the basic way to distinguish between these two. Not only does this division follow a clear imperialistic logic of manners being the measure for humanity (Anderson, 2016; Bhabha, 2012; see also Majkowski, 2018), it also introduces the tight connection between the adventurous quest and voyage of discovery, characteristic of the lost world romance. Ryder is put in the same position as Allan Quatermain, who claims in the faux introduction to *King Solomon's Mines*: "I discovered eight varieties of antelope, with which I was previously totally unacquainted, and many new species of plants, for the most part of the bulbous tribe" (Haggard, 1907, p. 6).

After her father's death, Sara inherits a god-like AI technology called SAM, supporting her in these tasks. Not only does it help her to scan the environment and learn about her surroundings, but it also gives her access to the technology of a mysterious, long-lost and highly advanced precursor race known as the Remnants. This nearly miraculous technology is unavailable to anybody else, including native scholars. Even Moshae Sjefa, a native researcher who has devoted her life to studying Remnant technology, cannot measure the information easily obtained by SAM. With SAM's technological AI support, Sara quickly gets access to power far beyond reach of the Angaras and Ketts (see below). She is able to activate and command ancient terraforming structures considered to be mere strange ruins by both local races. This way she, and she alone, can control the climate of entire planets, making them more habitable. She is also the only one capable of deciphering the map leading to Andromeda's hidden treasure.



Not only is the technological advantage of the European explorer a common trope in the lost world romance, but also the trope of heredity, which is quite directly repeated here. And as in Victorian prose, inheritance is understood both literally and figuratively. First, Ryder inherits the key to the mystery from her adventurous forefathers in a double form: an artifact and the ability to decipher its meaning thanks to her intellectual and scientific superiority. In this way she is similar to the protagonists of Haggard's *She*, decoding the mysterious Sherd of Amenartas inherited by Leo Vincey. Equally important, however, is the figurative inheritance: by commanding Remnant's technology (on both the narrative and gameplay levels), Ryder proves to be the only worthy successor to the ancient, superior race the inferior locals cannot aspire to. This mirrors the racial anxiety of Victorian romance, highlighting the whiteness of advanced African or American fictitious civilizations and in this way presenting the British Empire as a rightful ruler over colored people unworthy of the imperial heritage (Hanson, 2002).

To further justify the legitimacy of the inheritance of the Remnants, the game presents the command Ryder holds over the ancient technology as an easy solution to the major problems that had been plaguing the native races for centuries. Most grand quests on alien planets culminate with the player turning on terraforming devices and restoring the global ecological balance. As Gerald Farca claims, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* fits into the new trend of presenting critical utopias, which outlines the gameworld as "promising but flawed" and – regardless of whether the future will be better or worse – resting upon actions taken by the protagonist, who must negotiate with other parties to reach an agreement (Farca, 2019). Indeed, Ryder is the one who can resolve all conflicts, eliminate the dangerous race which cannot be reasoned with, and bring about a utopian age of peace and cooperation to the Andromeda Galaxy. Again, however, it is possible through replacing the chaotic and barbaric leaders of the local population with Ryder's enlightened companions, the equivalent of installing a European's manservant as the King of KukuanaLand in *King Solomon's Mines*.

## THE DISCOVERER'S FANTASY: EXOTIC PLANETS OF ANDROMEDA

One of the main missions of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* is to find a planet for the human race to colonize. This is why Sara Ryder inherits the title of Pathfinder – she is responsible for mapping and exploring the unknown planets and determining their settlement potential. This search for a new home is presented as a part of the continuum of human history, the result of our noble thirst for exploration. As Alec Ryder, the father of the protagonist, states at the beginning of the game: "This path began a long time ago. A course paved through human history that took us across continents, oceans, and ultimately... to the stars". Moreover, motivating his team with a speech in the game introduction, he claims:

I chose each of you for the Pathfinder team, not just because you're talented and passionate. But because you're dreamers, like me. We dream of exploring the unknown, of finding the edge of the map – and then discovering what lies beyond. When people look back on this – and they

will – they’ll remember we didn’t give up. We kept dreaming that our first, few faltering steps in Andromeda were the beginning of everything they know. We only get one chance to be first. So let’s go make history.

This speech frames conquering a galaxy already inhabited by other sentient races in terms of passion, dreams and historical imperative. It simply does not matter that all those planets are already settled by Angaras or Ketts: they still need to be discovered and tamed with technology inherited from the Remnants, the original owners of the galaxy. It is utterly unavailable to the other races, who are oblivious to their planet’s hidden potential and therefore unfitting to be considered humanity’s equals.

Even though the game makes feeble attempts at worldbuilding while presenting alien planets, it is limited to flying rock formations and giant glowing mushrooms on Eos, the first planet to be identified as a potential human colony. Other worlds Ryder explores bear a striking resemblance to areas surveyed by British 19<sup>th</sup>-century explorers and popularized as a setting of the lost world romance: there are two planets covered with sandy deserts resembling the Sahara, a humid jungle dubbed “a garden world” similar to the tropical rainforests of Africa and America, an uninviting frozen wasteland corresponding to polar regions, and twisted passages and canyons similar to northern Persia and Afghanistan.

Although the planets are already inhabited, they still need to be studied and mapped by the protagonist<sup>4</sup>. Not only does the local population lack the knowledge and technology to exploit raw materials (which makes them useless for the natives and therefore free to take for the human colonizers), but they also have trouble exploring the surfaces of the planets and making them habitable, as they are plagued by ecological disasters and dangerous Remnant technology only the Pathfinder can tame. During her stay on the planet’s surfaces, Ryder not only probes the surroundings to learn more about the new world and how to live there, but she also establishes scientific and military units on the surfaces of the planets and, most importantly, uses the AI to exploit the ruins left by the ancients for everyone’s benefit. The mechanism Michael Fuchs, Vanessa Erat and Stefan Rabitsch analyze in regard to the original *Mass Effect* trilogy is multiplied here and made the basic task of the protagonist: by making the “unknown both known and knowable” the player character “engage[s] in imperial acts of taking possession (e.g., mapping and naming), and/or establish[es] (or help[s] establish) new nodes of imperial control (e.g., camps, trading posts, and garrisons)” (Fuchs et al., 2018, p. 1482).

## THE MISSIONARY’S FANTASY: THE LOST RACES OF ANDROMEDA

Andromeda Galaxy is inhabited by three races: the Remnants, Ketts and Angaras. The Remnants are a synthetic race of animal-like machines with impressive ancient structures filled with powerful technology scattered throughout the galaxy. As their name suggests, they were abandoned a long time ago by their ancient creators. Because no one can control

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<sup>4</sup> Due to space constraints the relationship between in-game cartography and imperial ideology is not explored here: see Majkowski (2016a, 2016b) for further discussion.

this mysterious technology, it is hostile toward every other life form and prevents local races from taking full possession of any planet. The species of machine-like beings is described as mysterious, in possession of great power and animated by incomprehensibly advanced technology the evil Ketts have been trying to understand and monopolize for years – yet with no results. It is also common knowledge that whoever subdues the Remnants and possess their powers will dominate the Andromeda Galaxy as a worthy successor of an ancient legacy – an equivalent of legends and prophecies of a lost heir, commonly exploited in Victorian lost world romances, from *King Solomon's Mine* to *The Devil-Tree of El Dorado*. There is no doubt that the protagonist of the game, the human race's representative, is the one to tame it thanks to technological advantage, as analyzed above. Even though the Remnants are presented as extremely potent and completely mysterious within the game narrative, with the gameplay neither is true: they pose a mild threat at worst and are easy to defeat, and their presence quickly leads into a series of discoveries, robbing the Remnants of any mystery.

Moreover, as they are governed by the game engine, there is no difference on the technological level: the hostile remnant NPCs are a product of the technology rendering every other object in the game. This is of course to be expected, although the dissonance between the narrative premise and the technological reality highlights the fundamental difficulty of introducing anything “alien” to the digital game: Everything that appears onscreen has to be a part of the common system, replicating the systemic logic of the Enlightenment that provided intellectual and moral justification for the rise of colonial empires in 18th Century (Mignolo, 2003; Pratt, 1992). Again, it is an unintended product of technological limitations, but it neatly highlights the way open-world games are doomed to reinforce imperial logic.

The second race, the Ketts, are the main enemies encountered by the player on various planets, and rival colonizers. Just like humans, they are not native inhabitants of Andromeda – they invaded the galaxy years ago and are at war with other races, trying to take control over them and the Remnants' technology. However, what makes the Ketts different from the benevolent human colonizers is the inherent violence of their culture, the fanatical devotion to their leader called Archon, and their religious rituals. As the race is unable to breed, they reproduce through exaltation, an artificial process treated as a sacred ritual which only the “chosen” members of other races can partake in. They capture and transform other species (mainly Angaras) to enlarge their own army. The difference serves as a justification of humanity's colonial project, depicted as peaceful and undertaken in concordance with the natives, as opposed to forceful unification offered by the Ketts. This way the game introduces another important aspect of lost world romance ideology, inherited from Haggard: the criticism of direct colonial rule and support for curated native self-government (Hanson, 2002; Katz, 2008; Roszczynialska, 2001). Moreover, their religious fanaticism allows the Ketts to fit neatly into another trope of lost world romance: evil and tyrannical priests, often in possession of magic, that have to be deposed along with their superstitions by European explorers in order to introduce the benevolent light of civilization to the child-like natives (Rieder, 2008).

Finally, there are the Angara people: the pleasant-looking race least hostile to the humans. They display multiple qualities of the “noble savage” trope: a heightened sense of honor, a close relationship with nature, and a deeply passionate disposition, as they value emotion over reason. They are also in a rather difficult position, being simultaneously torn by the

civil war and exposed to endless assaults of the Ketts. In this way their portrayal combines major traits of Victorian romance lost races, from their unusual nobility (Hanson, 2002) to the fact they are simultaneously engaged in conflict with their own rebellious faction and evil priests, both common in the lost world romance (Rieder, 2008). Moreover, the Angara are a people in clear need of the salvation to be delivered by the Pathfinder, a race oblivious to its own history and unable to take care of its own affairs. From the moment the humans arrive at Andromeda Galaxy, the Angaras are on the losing side of the conflict, with the better part of them captured by the Kett army, with Moshae Sjefa, the matriarch scientist studying Remnant technology, among the prisoners.

Every race found in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* requires interference from the human Pathfinder. The Ketts pose a threat to the entire galaxy, and with the power of ancient technology they could become even more dangerous, so Ryder has to destroy them. The dangerous technology of the Remnants, which makes several planets inhabitable and can destroy entire civilizations in the wrong hands, must be subdued to the will of Ryder. And finally, the Angaras are awaiting the savior who will help them out from under the Ketts' dominance and discover their own past. Ryder is that savior.

Curiously, the title of Pathfinder helps Sara Ryder to fit in this demanding position and almost instantly gain the trust of some of the Angaras. Whenever and wherever she appears, new tasks emerge before her, provided by the helpless natives and hopelessly lost colonizers. The protagonist is entrusted to examine the wreck of an Angara spaceship (even if she is still an outsider in their community) as if nobody could do it prior to her arrival. Sara is the one to solve the mystery of the first murder on Nexus Station, the center of the colonizing effort, to suppress a rising riot, and to free numerous Angaras from the Ketts' dungeons. All those actions increase the pool of Andromeda Viability Points, representing Pathfinder's success in making the galaxy livable and increasing the trust of colonizers and Angaras alike. This way the narrative of anti-conquest is introduced: The selfless purity of her actions, not violent conquest, establishes Ryder as the moral and political leader. Therefore, even though the result is quite similar to what the Ketts are trying to accomplish, as the galaxy is converted to Ryder's moral standards and cultural values this outcome is justified by its noble means.

## THE ANTHROPOLOGIST'S FANTASY: THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF ANDROMEDA

Following the tropes of Victorian lost world fiction, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* builds its main plot around a quest for hidden treasure. Even though Meridian, the object of everyone's desire, is not introduced at the beginning of the game but later on, the mysterious map introduced early already suggests finding the treasure will simultaneously fulfill the main goal of the protagonist: Humanity will find a new and secure home for the human race and tame the advanced technology. Ryder's personal gain is thus equated with the benefit of all.

The treasure hidden in Andromeda Galaxy is the heart of the Remnant civilization and the most important element of the legacy of the ancients. Meridian is a planet-like construct, connecting each piece of Remnant technology and storing forgotten data about the galaxy. It

is not only strongly protected by defense weapons and special layers covering the sphere, but it also provides ideal living conditions for human colonies and the tools necessary to complete the inhabitation of other planets. The Meridian's real nature is mysterious and impossible to explain with knowledge available to other species – it could be very well considered a magical artifact. One thing, however, is certain: Whoever is the first to find Meridian and master its power will gain secret knowledge and possess advanced technology enabling dominance of the Andromeda Galaxy.

But finding the hidden treasure is not an easy task. As already mentioned, Meridian's location is marked on a ciphered map, which can only be decoded by the same ancient technology. As its rightful owners and creators have disappeared, the treasure is free to be taken by whoever is able to read the map, so Sara Ryder, luckily in the possession of AI technology, can be considered the rightful owner of the treasure and the successor of the ancients. Before arriving at Meridian, though, she has to prove her good intentions and quality of character through a series of tasks, always culminating with activating Remnant terraforming technology and making a planet a site of cohabitation for native Angara and human colonists.

The journey in search of Meridian is therefore based on two important imperial tropes. The first is anti-conquest (Pratt, 1992): The Pathfinder suffers numerous hardships and is wittingly exposed to various dangers to selflessly help people in need, which convinces them to take a favorable stance towards cohabitation in the process, that is, converting them to Ryder's value system by setting an example. Second, the journey itself combines moving in space with swimming against the current of time (see Hanson, 2002; Rieder, 2008), speaking metaphorically, as there is no actual time travel involved. On her numerous quests the protagonist learns about the immediate and distant past of the Andromeda Galaxy as she uncovers secrets unknown even to the native populations. This culminates on the Meridian itself, with Ryder discovering the secret to sentient life: it turns out the Angaras were artificially manufactured by mysterious precursors. This, in turn, removes the last doubt about Ryder taking over the Remnants' technology, as the Angaras are not the descendants of the long-forgotten race, but rather their servants.

As the mysterious technology provides an answer to every problem that Ryder meets on her way during her journey through the galaxy, the Pathfinder's spatiotemporal travel culminates at the cradle of time itself: arriving at Meridian, Ryder simultaneously resolves the past, the present and the future. The artificial planet becomes the future home for the human race, it allows the quick defeat of the Ketts' fleet, brings an end to the long-lasting war, and provides all the answers to the mysteries of the distant past, save for the identity of Meridian's extinct creators, very conveniently left out. With the ultimate treasure of Mass Effect: Andromeda in the possession of a noble human Pathfinder rather than the murderous Kett leader, here dawns the imperial promise of peace and prosperity, instead of the endless war and suffering, as safeguarded by the human race.

*Mass Effect: Andromeda*, however, allows the player to revisit their own past in a more direct way: As the long-awaited sequel to the beloved game series, it offers an opportunity to revisit the *Mass Effect* universe, offering two important developments over the original trilogy and thus highlighting the passage of time. The first is technical: with a more sophisticated game engine, the game presents better visuals, a refined gameplay experience and a new mode

of experiencing the game space, as the open world replaces the forced paths of the previous installments. The game is clearly a product of more advanced technology, a testament to the progress gaming devices have made over ten years.

On the narrative level, the most significant progress from the original trilogy is humanity's position within the fictional universe. Humans are no longer the least advanced upstarts in the galaxy of alien empires. This time, they possess the ultimate technological edge and the moral qualities to use it. It is the Angaras who occupy the place humanity has in the original trilogy: uncertain of their own future, exhausted by a prolonged war with a technologically superior enemy and only recently learning how to coexist with other sentient races. Humanity itself is more akin to Asari in the original trilogy: advanced, benevolent and in possession of technology so advanced it is almost magical. In this way, the Pathfinder meeting the Angaras revisits the past of humanity as it was rendered in the previous game.

## CONCLUSION

*Mass Effect: Andromeda* was met with a mixed reception from players and critics alike (see Metacritic – ME: Andromeda (PC) reviews, 2020). While praising the combat system, most critics point out the emptiness of the open world and the simplistic story<sup>5</sup>, very different from the complex and ethically loaded tale of the original trilogy, with several reviews highlighting the troublesome colonial premise of the game. It is our claim this sense of naive simplicity stems from the way the game follows the genre rules of the lost world romance. In a failed attempt to distinguish itself from the predecessor and offer a more optimistic alternative to complex problems troubling the Milky Way – a fresh start for the survivors of Ripper-caused genocide – it offers yet another journey against the currents of time, towards the half-forgotten and rightfully criticized roots of science-fiction. It is not our place to determine whether this turn toward imperial ideology of the lost race romance is a cynical attempt to exploit the highly politicized climate of the contemporary gamer community, fighting to preserve male privilege (Nieborg and Foxman, 2018), or just an unfortunate byproduct of ill-advised inspiration, amplified by the general tendency of open-world games to rely on tropes of discovery control, easily falling into the imperial imaginary.

Either way, it is remarkable that the game narrative, as it closely follows the rules of the lost world romance genre, does not cause ideological friction between the gameplay and the story Fuchs, Erat and Rabitch (2018) exposed in the *Mass Effect* trilogy, where an attempt to take a stance critical toward imperial ideology was nulled by the gameplay convention. This time the narrative fits the gameplay like a glove: the main plot feels organic, and the conclusion of the central quest is hardly forced. Ryder is fighting for humanity's better future armed with advanced technology and sense of moral superiority, only to reach the desired outcome in the end.

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<sup>5</sup> We are leaving out the criticisms regarding the technical side of the game. Even though this is extremely valid in terms of the neo-imperial exploitation of game development workers, as documented by Schreier (2017), it is outside the scope of this paper.

By combining spatial practices already analyzed as colonial legacy (Lammes, 2010; Magnet, 2006) with lost world tropes, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* not only goes to great lengths to justify its own colonial stance, it also serves as a prime example of the direct and indirect relation between open-world digital games and imperial ideology, transmitted through adventure novels (Daly, 2007; Katz, 2010; Said, 1994), science fiction (Suvin, 1983; Rieder, 2008) and visual media (Frelík, 2017) and shaping the way digital games reflect upon the relation between the modern rational subject and the world in terms of mastery and power. This is being met with growing resistance, however, as the unenthusiastic critical reception of the game clearly shows: Game journalism is beginning to cast a more critical eye on the colonial overtones of open-world games<sup>6</sup>. It is also a highly polarizing matter, as it widens the distance between game critics highlighting problematic issues within game culture and gamers focusing on the technology. As the division is frequently painted as gendered one (see Mortensen, 2018; Nieborg and Foxglove, 2018), there is another issue to be raised. Lost race romance served as a didactic tool to introduce imperial masculine values to a generation of British boys (Hanson, 2002; Mathison, 2008). By revitalizing its tropes, games such as *Mass Effect: Andromeda* reinforce the idea of digital games being a pastime for men training to be discoverers and conquerors.

The rarely-experienced concordance between narrative and gameplay allows for a conclusion: by shamelessly following the ideology of British imperial prose, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* unwittingly exposes a similar ideology behind gameplay conventions. With other games of this type dominating the mass market it is therefore possible to claim that regarding gameplay conventions, contemporary mass market gaming has not progressed far from the Victorian boy's bedroom.

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<sup>6</sup> Other examples for this tendency can be found in the reception of *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (2018) or *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).

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