The genealogy of board games in Britain is also an expression of its imperial past. Built on colonialist and orientalist tropes that reinforce a hierarchy of race, their legacy is still discernible in the worlds created for the games played today.

Text by K. Mehmet Kentel

For centuries children have played at empire. They have travelled the globe, explored new continents, conquered new lands, subjugated people and animals. Some of them went on to play for real, as agents of empire from all ranks, who saw the world as theirs as their playground and played it to the brink.

In the late 18th and 19th centuries, a newly invented type of game, based in geography and cartography, enabled these spoiled men-children to simulate the imperial experience in the comfort of their homes. Over time, these predecessors of modern board games became one of the paradigmatic forms of imperial entertainment.

It is no coincidence that geography was the first and most popular theme of those early board games. Geographical knowledge – of lands, cities, peoples, animals and plants of the world – and cartography had attained prestigious and widely recognised status during the Enlightenment and provided the necessary spatial terrain. Enlightenment ideas of colonialism, not only required refined cartographical knowledge for its military and economic needs, but also created a cultural necessity to redefine and represent the world and the “other”. Both entailed a hierarchical power relation between Europeans and the rest of the world. In this context, maps proved to be one of the most essential and useful tools of imperial governance. As Matthew Edney has argued, the Enlightenment was a project of mapping the world, its peoples and its knowledge. Brought together in an orderly fashion, knowledge of the world would also impose an order on the world.

While board games had been played in many parts of the world – in different forms and styles – for millennia, the development in Britain of board games with specific, visualised themes can be traced back to 1759 and a game called A Journey Through Europe, or The Play of Geography. Such geographical board games, which first appeared at the advent of British overseas expansion, both represented and miniaturised the acts of global exploration, circulation of peoples and formations of networks that were central elements to the late 18th- and 19th-century creation of an imperial order, and were made possible by the emerging commercialised society and technological developments that made production easier and cheaper. The publisher of A Journey Through Europe was John Jefferys, a London-based map-maker with a royal charter. His turn to board-game production began a new line of business for many map-makers, who created a large number of geographical games based upon their original nautical maps.

While the production of board games was a growing commercial and political concern, their use was seen as purely domestic: they were an educative form of entertainment that could be enjoyed by all members of the family – or at least, that is how they were advertised. Through playing these games, players could learn to travel to distant parts of the world, look at the “exotic” in the world as legitimate objects of acquisition, and appreciate the networks established by empire. Board games allowed children to position themselves within an imperial horizon, to experience it as mundane, a reality of their own daily lives. This – at least in theory – excluded any possibility of contemplating the resistances of indigenous peoples or the contingencies of imperial history. The empire was there, and it needed to be played out.

The classic early game was played upon a map in a “picturesque” style. For example, European Travellers, an Instructive Game by John Wallis, another map-maker-turned-board-games-publisher, was played on the map...
of Europe. It was not only a representation of a continent, but also a vivid display of peoples, their cultures and landmarks through an Anglocentric, orientalist prism.

In the game, players made a tour of Europe, finishing in London. Throughout their voyage, they were supposed to grasp the uniqueness of Britain, and its higher stage of development compared to continental Europe. For the square of Great Britain, the game’s guidebook proudly proclaimed: “The people are brave and industrious; the soil is fertile in some parts, and in others rich in minerals. It excels all others in arts and manufacturing, and its constitution, government and courts of law are celebrated throughout the world.”

The game also sits within the dominant orientalist discourse of the period. When a player comes to Constantinople, the guidebook reads: “The Capital of Turkey and residence of the Sultan … sparkle and take coffee, which is the chief employment of the inhabitants.” As Edward Said put it, the “very possibility of development, transformation, human movement – in the deepest sense of the word – is denied the Orient and the Oriental”. Like many such games before and since, European Travellers situated the players, whose raison d’être was the movement on the game board, as an exact opposite of the motionless orientals depicted in the guidebook.

Wallis’s New Game of Wanderers in the Wilderness was arguably the Wallis publishing house’s masterpiece both in terms of visual and literary quality. The “wilderness” of the title is South America, which was a relatively popular travel destination for 19th-century Europeans. Contrasted to the neat picture of European civilisation displayed in other Wallis titles, South America is presented as a place of chaos, of no order whatsoever. Playing the role of “wanderers”, players associate themselves with two white explorers on the upper end of the continent. Wanderers travel through the wilderness, where they meet indigenous people and wild animals, depicted in a similar fashion and in close proximity. The introduction to the journey from the guidebook immediately reveals a hierarchical relationship between the European wanderers and indigenous peoples. “Servants” are sent to “prepare some refreshments”, while the white host of the wanderers (the voice of the game) describes his estate. He informs the players that he has “two hundred negroes” working for him. They were once slaves, but now, in accordance with the liberal and enlightened anti-slavery rhetoric of mid-19th-century imperial Britain, he now “pays them regular wages”.

Once our wanderers have refreshed themselves, their journey starts: “Away! To the wilds of the far, far west … / Saying man is distant, but GOD IS NEAR.” The journey into the “wilderness”, in line with the colonialist vision, is seen as a heavenly one, almost a duty, to the lands where humanity barely exists (where “man is distant”, that is). Nevertheless, the presence of God is pervasive, echoing Edmund Burke, the paramount figure of modern British conservatism: “We ought to elevate our minds to the greatness of that trust to which the order of Providence has called us … our ancestors have turned a savage wilderness into a glorious empire.”

Wanderers were there to observe and enjoy the wilderness, but also and eventually, to turn it into a “glorious empire”, to make it a part of civilisation. In the game, indigenous people and animals are constantly presented in the same taxonomic scheme, with differences not in kind but rather in degree. When a player comes to square 19, the storyteller announces: “What are those that look like hats of the Native Indians? Do they belong to them? No! They are Ant-hills, and inhabited by a much fiercer race.” According to the narrator, then, not only are indigenous people of a lower race, they are not even as fierce as ants.

Colonial possessive mentality regarding the “wonders” of the world manifests itself in the narrative when the estate owner speaks of a “Bird of Pandora, displaying his elegant plumage. What would some ladies in England give for his skin to adorn their heads!” Ladies in England had every right to possess the skin of the
bird of Pandora if they had enough to give in return. This obvious right to possess was constituted within the “hierarchy of spaces” between the imperial centre and the colony. As historian Megan A. Norcia suggests, these geographical games reduced entire regions of the world “to the commodities they furnished.”

A Voyage Round the World, an Entertaining Excursion in Search of Knowledge, Whereby Geography is Made Easy, was created by Smith Evans in 1851 as part of a series of ephemera produced in conjunction with the Great Exhibition, the first World’s Fair, which was held in the Crystal Palace in London. As the 19th century progressed, exhibitions like the Crystal Palace fair allowed European nations to stage their national characteristics, wealth, and perhaps most importantly, their colonies. Almost universally, they hosted “reconstructions” of colonial landscapes, supposed to represent the reality for colonial peoples, while constructing taxonomies of the countries, peoples and the goods of the world. The Crystal Palace Game served as an entertaining manifestation of the imperial taxonomy that was made possible by the overseas expansion of Great Britain – as such it represents without a doubt, the 19th century colonial game par excellence.

Set on a world map surrounded by several orientalist depictions of various peoples of the world, as well as of adventures of European explorers, the Crystal Palace Game lets players follow the sea routes taken by a ship named Alfred, led by its captain, Flint. As it sails over the seas, the world is presented with a full gamut of peoples and goods, only to be viewed and possessed by the empire and its adventurous agents, connected through the imperial networks. The illustration in the middle of the map shows a ship sailing over a globe populated by exotic plants, which is further circled by the imperial motto, “Britain, upon whose empire the sun never sets”, and is followed by a table entitled “British possessions”, which lists the amount of imports and exports between the colonies and the metropole, and their respective populations. Like its namesake, the Crystal Palace Game stood for an overt expression of British pride,
an ethnographic showcase of colonial peoples and distant lands of the world, reduced to their raw materials and brought together by imperial connections.

In late 19th-century Germany, a different but concurrent genealogy of the development of modern games undertook the responsibility of representing imperial politics. These games emphasised military conflict over land rather than geographical exploration. Game creators in German-speaking parts of the continent had been developing strategy games based on the principles of chess, but modifying them in accordance with changing complexities of modernising warfare. Thus, Das Kriegsspiel (originally published in 1780 under another title but renamed War Game for the 1803 edition) was developed by entomologist and game designer Johann Christian Ludwig Hellwig (1743–1831). Das Kriegsspiel aimed to illustrate a battlefield in all its physical complexity – with mountains, swamps, and water, all represented by different colours. Cartography, it seems, was still a key determinant in setting the gameplay. But the cartographic horizon manifested in the game now had more to do with the physical topography of a limited terrain than picturesque representations of entire continents or the earth itself. It is perhaps unsurprising that a model war game was first developed in Prussia, the leader in 19th-century military innovation. Later editions were created for the Prussian military classes, by actual soldiers, military advisers and members of Prussian nobility.

The military-advisor creators of German war games were telling different than those of British map-makers at the turn of the 19th century, yet their influence was wide. As the 19th century wore on and old masters like John Wallis gradually left the British board-game business, newcomers with no ties to map-making more easily adopted new themes and gameplay features to their productions, in particular those of the German war-games. The increasing militarisation of the British board-game scene resonated with the changing structure of imperial politics. As the “liberal” and “humanitarian” ideology of the British Empire was driven into crisis and warfare. An early example of this trend was the New Imperialism came to be increasingly identified by an aggressive struggle over land, constant expansion, and warfare. An early example of this trend was the New Military Game of German Tactics, published by Kronheim & Co. around 1840.

As the Prussian Kriegsspiel was making the rounds on the continent, a German living in Edinburgh introduced the theme and the German military brand to the British board-games market. At the same time, games began to represent topical battles of the time. For example, Siege of Sebastapol (1870) depicted the siege of the Ukrainian fort and naval base by British, French and Ottoman armies during the Crimean War of 1853–1856. Likewise, Siege of Paris (1870) simulated the Franco-German War, and was produced before the war had even ended. It was followed by the New Game of the Siege of Paris the next year, with pieces coloured red representing the Communards. They were placed at the centre of the board and complicated the gameplay, an abstract expression of the real-world Commune. Another title that supports the notion of board games as a politically responsive medium, was the Boer War Game, published in 1899, the same year the war between the British and Boers began. None of these games presupposed an existing cartographic order; they were not played on geographical boards, but they were rather situated on more abstract battlefields, where military tactics proved to be much more important than the ethnographic knowledge of the other, or their location within the wider world.

The worldviews implicit in these games have a long legacy. Only this year, Scramble for Africa by GMT Games, an established player in the contemporary board-games world, was scrapped as a result of the public outrage caused by its unapologetic use of colonial history and presentation of the exploitation of African land and peoples as the central premise of gameplay. The controversy increased attention on the predominance of colonial themes in modern board games, from Settlers of Catan and Puerto Rico, to more overtly colonial games like Colonial: Europe’s Empires Overseas.

UNTITLED BY NELL ZINK
She drank three red wines at the opening of the juried show of Chinese-American artists before approaching the jury member who was talking to her old professor, and saying, “Tell me why you rejected my stuff.”

“You know we don’t talk about jury deliberations,” the jury member replied.

“Maybe consider updating your themes?” her professor stage-whispered. “That’s a bit old hat.”

“Then what’s that?” she said, pointing at a painting that was hanging on the wall. “That is literally a heroic portrait of Deng Xiaoping?”

“Subtle satire?”

“A heroic portrait of the Dalai Lama could never be satire,” the jury member quipped, “but it could never be 19th-century.“ Several people laughed.

“My collages use traditional craft motifs employed by Tibetan women?”

“Grow up,” the jury member said. “Be a professional. Who do you think is paying for this space?”

“Would you say that if my work was about Palestine?”

- Flash Fiction -

Nineteenth-century board games remain important artefacts of that era’s cultural imperialism, and they invite us to think critically and creatively about how their history provides insights into imperial history. After all, what is now a question of historical realism, fetishism and nostalgia for an imperial past, was once a current, contemporary and even forward-looking practice of the imperial present. These games connect the 21st-century American child who plays one of the countless versions or variants of Call of Duty, fighting Middle Eastern “terrorists”, to the 19th-century English child who played the Crystal Palace Game, travelling around the world, exploring the wilderness and “backward” civilisations of the world. Empires change, and so do their games.