

Valuable Cannibals and the Concept of Power-knowledge

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Introduction

In the light of the current cultural turmoil regarding the questions of identity and the power to draw the line between those who are “in” and those who remain “out” of the various social structures, it may be beneficial to look at the ways in which the figure of the Other is discursively constructed, appropriated and sometimes reassembled in modern works of art. One of the old, albeit still effective ways of doing so is to evoke the figure of a cannibal, which is handy for its ambiguity as the synonym of ultimate savagery on one hand (see Avramescu 2009) and ancient, transgressive and magical pathway to power and enlightenment on the other. Video games, medium that has been accused numerous times of advocating primitive impulses and catering to the most obscure ways of resolving conflicts, in recent years diversified its approaches to the uncanny topic of cannibalism, and introduced stories and gameplays which went beyond the simple use of this concept as a shocking ornament in the violent narratives. The main aim of this paper is the analysis of video games which use cannibalism as a form of narrative leverage to subvert and question the ethical underpinnings of violence against the Others – usually manifesting in the form of outcast NPCs or representatives of groups which according to the inner game logic pose a potential threat to the player’s progression towards the end game goals. In other words, I would focus on the cannibal “other” as a narrative or mechanical obstacle to be dealt with – but nevertheless an obstacle which asks important questions about the fundamental ethical underpinnings of player’s agency in digital worlds. The main theoretical frame for the issues discussed in this paper concerns the studies on post-colonial.

Albeit the titular concepts of power and knowledge can be (and have been) used in evocation of the works of Michel Foucault (1977, 1990), they also appear as discursive underpinnings of colonial narrative, which was famously described by Edward Said. “Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant” and thus “to have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it” (Said 1978: 32). Said’s commentary on the British discussions concerning English presence in Egypt at the beginnings of the XXth century can be related to the position of the player facing the digital worlds. The explorer-who-knows, often occupying privileged stand in the game’s story as the figure of the chosen one, perceives imaginary digital lands’ history in the overarching fashion. In other words, players enjoy insights regarding the cosmogony of the worlds they explore, knowing their past and future history, deciding on pivotal events and collecting valuable artifacts signposting their continuous assessment of the cultures they encounter. As I would argue, these players’ actions encompass three forms of

cannibalistic incorporation as described in the seminal study by Maggie Kilgour (2014): incarceration, consubstantiation and sublimation. Incarceration would mean giving a form for the body: to shape the other accordingly to our tastes. Players' ability to shape and influence in a direct way the bodies of other beings – as well as their player characters (PCs) would fall to this category. Consubstantiation relies on the joining of two bodies, and is important in transforming the cannibal into an anthropophage, as it appropriates the taboo of accepting the otherness into the corporeal self. Finally, sublimation and cannibalism proper stand for complete devouring of one's material and immaterial being by another.

In this paper, I would like to take a look at the meaning of cannibalism in selected games from the RPG genre, looking at 1) the figure of a cannibal 2) the corporeal component of the cannibalism and 3) the cannibalism as a metaphor of economic (and symbolic) power. Each of the subsequent sections of the article will deal with the aforementioned aspects accordingly.

The figure of the cannibal

Cannibalism as a cultural phenomenon is tightly linked with taboos concerning death, family bonds and inheritance. In computer games, it is often used to support secondary narrative tropes, introducing elements of uncanny grotesque and serving as a source of abjectal pleasure, being a respite from the main story line (examples include *Jade Empire's* "Cannibal Cookbook", the "American Appetites" mission in *Red Dead Redemption*, or the character of Donald Love in *GTA: Liberty City Stories*). This section of the research proposes a different reading of such themes, focusing on titles which conceptualize the cannibal/anthropophage motifs in the context of subversive cultural practices which establish an alternative power-knowledge circuit.

The term "cannibal" was identified as coming from self-identifying practice of Arawak Indians (see Avramescu 2009) and thus ties up to the history of colonizing the Americas. The origin of the word is also referenced to the Spanish name for indigenous inhabitants of Lesser Antilles. Although it is hard to pinpoint exact moment in which cannibals started to be regarded as a signifier for otherness, it all ties up to the discourse of the colonizers: "the historical emergence of the word 'cannibal' to describe the inhabitants of the West Indies. That which etymologically begins as description assumes very quickly a power to signify the *Other*" (Ashcroft & all 2003:356).

Anthropophagy occupies a place of disjunct between the cultural and the natural – it is "not an element of natural history understood as a universal genus" (Avramescu 2009). At the same time practices of cannibalism are placed among the main signifiers of barbarism and savageness. The reception of a figure of cannibal, which was historically first judged according to the natural law, and evolved to be viewed from the perspective of a curious mixture of theology and metaphysics, arguably stopped with the birth of positivism. Anthropophages became an object of scientific interest, and the practice of devouring flesh of the own kind began to be placed at a different side of the (pop)cultural spectrum. Cannibals can now be portrayed as sophisticated intellectuals who derive pleasure not only from primitive cannibalistic rites or appeasement of their hunger. They explore the rejected practice of anthropophagy to voice their superiority in relation to the societal structures and cultural norms. Dr Hannibal Lecter is a chief example of this shift, but computer games offer an insight into cannibalism understood as a relation between knowledge and power, in

a Foucaultian sense inspecting the practical boundaries of social hierarchies. Cannibalism – a colonial term for eating human flesh (see Creed & Hoorn 2001) – gradually evolved into anthropophagy, a cultural practice with a powerful discursive potential (see Sanborn 2001: 196).

Corporeality and the perils of the flesh: meat and bones

Kilgour’s consubstantiation, previously mentioned as third element of incorporation, happens when the PC needs to be imbued with special power – a power extracted from its enemies. Albeit few video games narrativize the moment of violent subsumption of the Other to the power of the player, some still comment on the need to be selective in the process. An example of this can be found in *Torment: Tides of Numenera* (2017). When inquired by the PC, one of the Dendra O’hur members, Imbitu, says that his cult isn’t “devoted to paper records” and its members prefer to “keep them in the heads”. The juxtaposition between the primitive means of transferring knowledge combined with tribal-like hierarchical order and powerful abilities which are indispensable for juridical and punitive system of the Sagus Cliffs social order form a curious mixture. At the same time, Dendra members do not “chew on corpses”, but instead incorporate the valuable extract from human flesh through the means of advanced technology: a specifically constructed suit. It is also mentioned that “humans are a diseased bunch” and one must take extra care with what is incorporated and assimilated into the body. This ties up to the understanding of cannibalism as a form of a ritual, which “primary function [of ritual] is to create order” (Jooma 2001: 58). With each classically understood ritual comes the danger of ritual impurity, thus it is crucial to carefully examine what is eaten, and what remains outside (therefore being a subject of double ostracism and rejection – what cannot be absorbed from the Other remains not only discursively outside, but is automatically excluded from the history and forgotten); “a semblance of order is attainable if differences are exaggerated” (Jooma 2001). What we accept into our bodies creates a potentially dangerous transgression - “such substances - particularly foods that pass from outside to inside the body - also blur lines of demarcation and so represent a similar threat to order” (Jooma 2001, p. 59).

This notion is also noticeable in *Pillars of Eternity*. When we look into game mechanics, one of the most effective tactics while dealing with dangerous encounters is to eat something – preferably a meal including meat of the powerful beast. Thus, if we want to defeat a dragon, it is immensely profitable to eat a dragon stew. It is also no coincidence that an important part of the *Pillars of Eternity* fandom activities (and one of the most popular ones) is to try to recreate the in-game recipes in real life (for reference, see e.g. “The Dragon Cook Tavern”). Crafting food in-game is similar to performing a purgatory ritual involving cannibalistic signifiers. In *Pillars of Eternity*, out of 24 items under the category of “food”, the highest bonus to the damage-based statistic – might – almost exclusively comes from the meat.

Cannibalism, violence and economy

There is a multifold connection between cannibalism and capitalism. It has been described on an economical level, often with evoking vampire-like relation between the representatives of various

social strata – such as by the evocation of the figures of “aristocrats cannibalistically feeding on the blood of those whom they exploit” (Wright 2001: 96).

On the other hand, the excessive exploitation is not enough to draw connections between capitalist modes of production and cannibalism-like practices. Julia Wright in her assessment of Gothic traits and their cannibalistic and colonial features writes as follows: “it was colonial in its violent establishment of title and settlements but not capitalist, in the sense that it did not seek to transform colonized peoples into a viable labor force or the land into the site of mass production (and consumption) (Wright 2001: 83)”.

In (aptly named) action-RPG *Path of Exile* (Grinding Gear Games, 2013-), player is an exile himself, and must make her way through the hordes of savages and monsters, to finally defeat the main boss Kitava. Kitava’s nickname is “the Insatiable”, and he is a cannibalistic god with enormous appetite. Even though in online action-RPG game such as *Path of Exile* there is little concern for narratively expanding on the universe, Kitava’s case is a curious one. He is the god of the Karui, the indigenous people to the game’s world, Wraeclast. Loosely connected to the Polynesian mythology, Kitava represents the final challenge for the players who wish to enter the free-form late-game content, and defeating him requires – in accordance with the genological rules of action-RPG – obtaining sufficiently powerful artifact throughout the journey. The figure of powerful cannibal thus connects with the need to obtain valuable items, which must be pillaged from the corpses of wraeclastian inhabitants throughout the course of the playthrough.

Another connection between cannibalism, the economic order and mechanics of looting in cRPGs comes from the uncanny usefulness of cannibalistic artifacts, even though they might be obtained by the means of “uncivilized” methods by the players. *Pillars of Eternity* lets us keep the skull of a powerful lich-like magician (Concelhaut) and place it in the inventory space reserved for cosmetic animal companions (like cosmic piglet). The reason behind keeping these items ties up to the colonial practices of collecting and trading the cannibalistic memorabilia. Gananath Obeyesekere writes that “like other Maori artifacts, body parts were collected by ships’ personnel, officially for museums and patrons, and also unofficially for sale in metropolitan capitals” (2005: 120)

The general consensus in the current game studies literature is that “goals play a central role in games” and “give value to certain actions within a game’s rule system” (see Calleja 2011: 150). This value can be established internally by the game itself, or it can be constructed by the emergent gameplay practices. Power and knowledge form foundations in which the colonial project was grounded, but they can also be used to describe the evolution of the approach to cannibalism in video games – from a category subsumed to the politics of divisiveness and denigration to the concept which serves an important role in alleviating the games’ narrative dissonance between “heroic” narrative and “barbaric” game mechanics. In this sense, player possesses the right to spill blood of his own kind, and to prey on those who are placed beneath them in a goal-driven ladder of game progression.

The aim of studying cannibalistic traits in video games however is not to treat them as analogous to modern or historic societies – quite the contrary, games are often spaces in which being different means being powerful. But where are the boundaries of those differences, where is the line which delimitates player character’s hero from a murderous maniac? It is a recurring question from

Fallout or *Baldur's Gate* series to *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*; one can even argue that Jon Irenicus in *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* uses more “civilized” methods of achieving his sociopathic goals than the PC, as fewer beings actually suffer in the process. Cannibalistic traits in video games may shed some light on these topics, mainly because they express the logic of excess.

Conclusion

This paper makes three main claims. The first one states that the anthropophagy in RPG video games is used to alleviate the excessive violence which is needed to progress through the game narrative. The discrepancy between the excessive and often transgressive actions required for the player to advance and the almost universally positive outcome of them in terms of game narrative poses a certain problem in terms of cohesiveness of the game's experience.

Second claim lies in connecting the player's agency with that of a colonizer (see e.g. Mukherjee 2017), albeit with a significant twist: the anthropophagite is used instead of the “savaged” cannibal to narratively express the nuances which lie in (mostly linear) power progression of the players' characters throughout the game.

Third claim regards the economical power that comes from using the figure of the cannibal. The transgressive acts made towards human flesh do not exclude securing tangible profits achieved through direct or indirect participation in activities involving cannibalism. Thus, players are allowed to remain outside the abjectal circle of cannibalism while still maintaining the position to seize the gains needed to achieve designed game goals.

Games

PATH OF EXILE. Grinding Gear Games, PC, 2013-.
PILLARS OF ETERNITY. Obsidian Entertainment, PC, 2015.
THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM. Bethesda Game Studios, PC, 2011.
TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA. InCile Entertainment, PC, 2017.

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