The Slow Apocalypse: Cute Video Game Aesthetics as Ideological Tools in Normalizing Colonialism and Authoritarianism

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Colonialism has always functioned as a slow apocalypse, erasing cultures, lands, and communities. However, video games frequently present colonization and empire-building as strategic puzzles rather than destructive forces. This paper examines how "cutopian" games, which pair cute aesthetics with colonialist and authoritarian mechanics, trivialize power structures, making conquest, surveillance, and governance feel non-threatening. Through *The Battle of Polytopia* and *Lil' Guardsman*, we analyze how visual design and gameplay mechanics depoliticize empire. Contrasting these games with decolonial alternatives, we highlight approaches that resist expansionist logic and highlight resistance and Indigenous storytelling instead. Drawing from animated media, we also examine how empire is often displaced into metaphor rather than dealt with as an ongoing material reality. Finally, we ask: Is it possible to decolonize cutopian games – to use their aesthetic softness to reveal, rather than obscure, the mechanics of oppression?

Keywords: Video Game Aesthetics, Ideology, Decolonization, Decolonial Game Studies

Paper DOI: https://doi.org/10.48341/ccmd-a102

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Introduction: The Slow Apocalypse

Video games are powerful tools for world-building, actively shaping how players perceive history, power, and empire (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Through their mechanics, narratives, and aesthetics, games encode and reinforce ideological frameworks, frequently upholding dominant cultural and political perspectives. Modern video games, particularly those rooted in strategy, simulation, and governance systems, often trivialize, romanticize, or "cutify" serious political realities such as colonialism, imperialism, and authoritarianism. Yet, while some games explicitly frame empire-building as desirable (e.g., *Civilization, Age of Empires*), others obscure oppressive political messages beneath appealing aesthetics, turning colonial expansion into something comforting rather than exploitative.

This paper investigates how video game aesthetics (particularly those employing cute or otherwise appealing visual styles) actively shape players' understanding and internalization of oppressive ideological messages. By examining the relationship between aesthetics and game mechanics, this paper poses the question: How do video games use aesthetics to trivialize or normalize oppressive structures such as colonialism, imperialism, and authoritarianism, and what are the ethical implications of these representations?

Colonialism as Apocalypse

A central theoretical claim in this analysis is the framing of colonialism itself as an apocalypse, which is a perspective aligning with historical and Indigenous critiques of empire. Colonization is not simply territorial expansion or cultural encounter; for colonized populations, it represents the violent erasure of societies, languages, and histories. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that colonialism operates not only through physical conquest but through systematic cultural destruction, stating famously that "[t]he bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation" (Ngũgĩ 1986, 9). Similarly, Tuck and Yang (2012) conceptualize settler colonialism as a structure rather than an isolated historical event, which continues to devastate Indigenous communities through ongoing displacement, forced assimilation, and resource extraction. Video games, as digital simulations of history, frequently reproduce and normalize these colonial structures. The pervasive presence of empire-building, territorial conquest, and authoritarian governance mechanics reinforces ideological assumptions that expansion and control are natural or inevitable historical trajectories. Such representations directly parallel not only past colonial structures but also contemporary anxieties about future societal collapse or dystopia, implicitly connecting colonialism with the idea of a slow and ongoing apocalypse.

In Western media and thought, the apocalypse is imagined as a future disaster, e.g., a nuclear war (*Fallout*), a climate catastrophe (*Horizon Zero Dawn*), or a viral outbreak (*The Last of Us*). This perspective assumes that civilization is stable and that the apocalypse must take the form of an unexpected rupture. It reflects anxieties about losing Western dominance, rather than acknowledging that for many communities, this collapse has already happened. Western post-apocalyptic fiction often centers on white survivors reclaiming a broken world, reinforcing the idea that they are the protagonists of history. For Indigenous peoples, the arrival of colonial powers was the apocalypse, i.e., a slow, methodical destruction of land, culture, and autonomy. The genocide of Indigenous nations in the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade, and forced assimilation policies were world-ending events for those communities. The Global South, including many formerly colonized nations, does not need to imagine the apocalypse in the same way Western media does, as it is a lived experience, whether through war, economic devastation, climate disaster, or systemic violence.

Contributions and Analytical Approach

By critically examining how aesthetics (particularly "cute" or cozy styles) interact with game mechanics that simulate oppressive systems, this paper contributes a nuanced understanding of the ideological power of video game aesthetics. While existing research critiques colonial representations within game mechanics, relatively few analyses explicitly address the ideological consequences of aesthetics themselves. Through the concept of cutopian games, where charming visuals obscure ethically troubling mechanics, this paper aims to reveal how visual and narrative choices contribute significantly to ideological trivialization and normalization.

Ultimately, this paper not only critiques existing aesthetic practices but also searches for and proposes pathways forward. Analyzing lessons from related media, such as animated series that grapple similarly with colonial themes, suggests potential decolonial approaches for future video game design. These proposals aim to critically confront, rather than hide oppressive realities, acknowledging colonialism explicitly as an apocalypse requiring meaningful, structural interventions rather than metaphorical treatments.

Aesthetics as Ideological Tools in Video Games

Aesthetic choices (i.e., visual style, sound, atmosphere) actively shape players' emotional responses and ideological perceptions of games' themes and mechanics. This section examines how different aesthetic strategies each communicate distinct ideological messages. As such, apocalyptic visuals explicitly depict catastrophe, cozy aesthetics evoke comforting escapism, juxtaposed aesthetics in horror amplify shock, and abstracted aesthetics normalize empire-building. Together, these examples illustrate aesthetics' ideological power in framing historical, social, and political issues.

Apocalyptic Aesthetics and Environmental Storytelling

The aesthetics of apocalypse and dystopia in video games rely on key visual and narrative elements that signal societal collapse, decay, and survival. One of the most common features of post-apocalyptic aesthetics is environmental storytelling (Jenkins, 2004), e.g., the use of ruins, abandoned cities, and desolate landscapes to show a world that has fallen apart. Game series like *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Metro* present players with crumbling infrastructure, overgrown urban spaces, and bleak color palettes. Ideologically, apocalyptic aesthetics explicitly confront players with the destructive consequences of modernity's unchecked excesses, such as environmental devastation, nuclear catastrophe, or societal collapse. Through environmental storytelling, these games provoke critical reflection on contemporary anxieties about technology, politics, and human survival. This way, aesthetics directly reinforce ideological critiques by emotionally engaging players in reflecting upon potential catastrophic futures.

Cozy and Cute Aesthetics: Comfort, Nostalgia, and Ideological Myths

In contrast to the bleak and oppressive aesthetics of apocalyptic and dystopian games, many popular modern titles embrace cozy aesthetics, which are designed to evoke feelings of warmth, safety, and comfort. These games typically feature bright colors, soft visuals, slow-paced gameplay, and approachable mechanics that create an atmosphere of ease and emotional security. For example, in *Stardew Valley*, players engage in idyllic, low-stakes activities such as farming, fishing, and forming relationships with a welcoming community. Similarly, *Coffee Talk* places players in the role of a café owner, serving drinks and listening to customers' stories in a dimly lit coffee shop while it rains outside. In both examples, the games cultivate a sense of coziness that fosters emotional investment, escapism, and relaxation.

However, cozy aesthetics are not ideologically neutral. As Sianne Ngai (2012) argues, cuteness is a highly affective and political aesthetic, often used to disarm critique and make labor or power structures feel non-threatening. This is especially relevant considering how cozy games frame labor, survival, and social relationships. Games like *Stardew Valley* and *Harvest Moon* present rural life as an escape from capitalist burnout, where the player abandons a corporate job to reconnect with nature. However, as scholars such as Sutherland (2020) and Bódi (2024) point out, this romanticized depiction sanitizes the realities of agricultural labor, which in real life is tied to economic instability, corporate exploitation, and environmental degradation. The game mythologizes the self-sufficient farm household, reinforcing Vogeler's (1981) "myth of the family farm", which has historically served capitalist and nationalist interests by erasing and obscuring the systemic hardships farmers face.

This depiction of nostalgia as inherently apolitical is part of what makes cozy aesthetics so effective at depoliticization. The sense of warmth and belonging found in these games often hinges on simplified, conflict-free narratives, where problems can be solved through individual

effort rather than structural change. In a world increasingly marked by economic uncertainty, climate anxiety, and political instability, cozy games provide a seductive fantasy of stability and control. Yet this fantasy often relies on historical erasure; rural life is stripped of class struggles, racialized labor exploitation, and environmental collapse, leaving behind a gentle, frictionless simulation where capitalist ideologies of self-sufficiency and productivity remain intact, while hidden beneath a layer of pastel aesthetics.

This capacity of aesthetics to both soothe and obscure makes it a powerful ideological tool. While these cozy aesthetics provide comfort, they also subtly reinforce myths about labor, progress, and historical reality. In the next section, we explore what happens when cute aesthetics, which are typically used to provide a feeling of safety, are deliberately subverted in horror games to unsettle and disturb players. The very mechanisms that make cozy aesthetics reassuring can, in a different context, be weaponized to create cognitive dissonance and thus force players to reconsider their expectations of safety, control, and innocence in game worlds.

Juxtaposition and Shock in Horror Aesthetics

The juxtaposition of cute aesthetics with disturbing or violent themes is a powerful tool in game design, such as by heightening emotional impact or subverting player expectations. Horror games that employ cute visuals manipulate aesthetic contrast to amplify psychological unease, making moments of horror feel even more shocking and visceral. Cute elements lure players into a false sense of security before exposing them to disturbing content. This affective rupture can cause players to engage with themes of violence, control, and psychological distress.

An example of this technique is *Doki Doki Literature Club!*, which initially presents itself as a wholesome, anime-style dating sim. The game features pastel colors, cheerful music, and bubbly character designs, all aligning with the expectations of the romantic visual novel genre. However, as the game progresses, it gradually dismantles these expectations, revealing itself as a psychological horror game dealing with themes of mental illness, manipulation, and self-destruction. The cuteness does not simply coexist with horror; instead, it actively amplifies the horror, making its darker moments feel more shocking, invasive, and deeply personal. This aesthetic strategy is not unique to *Doki Doki Literature Club!*, as similar juxtapositions appear in games like *Poppy Playtime*, where toy-inspired visuals contrast sharply with horror mechanics, and *Five Nights at Freddy's*, which transforms friendly animatronics into monstrous figures. These games weaponize childlike aesthetics to create a sense of wrongness, playing on cultural associations between innocence and safety.

Beyond shock value, these aesthetic choices carry ideological implications. Sianne Ngai (2012) explains how cuteness is often linked to helplessness and control, and how we are conditioned to protect and care for cute things. When horror games invert this dynamic, they expose underlying societal anxieties about trust, innocence, and exploitation.

Aesthetics of Imperial Normalization: Abstracting Historical Apocalypse

While horror games sometimes use cute aesthetics to amplify shock and discomfort, some strategy games take the opposite approach, as they strip conquest and colonialism of their violence entirely. Game studies research already addresses how historical strategy games ideologically normalize empire-building through mechanics and aesthetics. Scholars like Ford (2016), Mukherjee (2017), Chapman (2016), and Carpenter (2021) critique game series such as *Civilization* and *Age of Empires* for embedding colonialist and imperialist ideologies within their gameplay. The 4X genre (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate) fundamentally roots

itself in imperialist expansionism by rewarding territorial growth, resource extraction, and military conquest. These games present colonial expansion as a natural model of historical progress, obscuring violent historical realities. Chapman argues that abstracted visual aesthetics significantly shape players' understanding of history, distancing them ethically and emotionally from violent historical events.

Where post-apocalyptic aesthetics force players to confront catastrophe directly, historical strategy games often erase empire's catastrophic effects. If nuclear devastation is marked as a global apocalypse in *Metro*, why is the forced erasure of entire civilizations in *Civilization* presented as progress? Game series belonging to the former category, such as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Metro*, use gritty, desolate aesthetics to evoke catastrophic futures. Meanwhile, strategy game series like *Civilization* or *Age of Empires* employ a different visual logic. These games represent historical colonial and imperial conquests – events that, for many cultures, marked literal apocalypses, as they meant the erasures of societies, languages, and entire populations. However, their in-game aesthetics typically avoid reflecting the violent reality of these events. Instead, they opt for clean, accessible user interfaces, colorful maps, stylized resources, and streamlined representations of conquest, thus making empire-building visually appealing and ideologically neutral. This aesthetic approach reinforces an ideological message: colonialism and imperial conquest are abstract strategic puzzles rather than devastating historical realities. In other words, just as post-apocalyptic aesthetics help players confront potential dystopian futures, the sanitized aesthetics of historical strategy games serve to conceal and normalize the catastrophic realities of imperialist pasts.

Taken together, these aesthetic strategies shape how players read historical and political narratives – what is questioned, what is feared, and what passes as normal. While some aesthetics directly confront themes of power and control, others work more subtly to normalize them. This is particularly evident in cutopian games, where cute aesthetics do not simply contrast with darker themes but become the very medium through which empire-building, governance, and control are rendered playful and morally neutral. The following section explores how this process functions and why it matters.

The Politics of Cute: Ideology and Trivialization in Cutopian Games

We propose the term “cutopian games” to describe games that use cute aesthetics to depict oppressive themes, such as colonialism, imperialism, and authoritarianism. By creating emotional comfort, underlying ideologies are obscured and trivialized. Unlike media that use cute visuals in deliberate contrast with dark themes to create tension (e.g., *Doki Doki Literature Club!*), cutopian games embed power structures within a charming world, making governance, expansion, and control appear non-threatening. As Kirkpatrick (2011) notes, video games produce enjoyment not just through their stories but also through their sensory and mechanical engagement. When serious political themes are presented in a cute aesthetic, this pleasure can override critical reflection, making acts of empire-building or authoritarian control feel morally neutral and even appealing. In many strategy and management games, empire-building, governance, and bureaucratic control are framed as abstract, optimization-based mechanics, which players engage with as puzzles to be solved rather than as ideological choices. When these mechanics are paired with cute aesthetics, they become even further detached from their real-world historical and political implications. This section explores how cutopian aesthetics operate as a form of ideological softening, and by examining *The Battle of Polytopia*, *Root*, and *Lil' Guardsman*, we will analyze how games use cuteness to reshape the emotional and ideological impact of colonial, imperial, and authoritarian systems.

To make the category analytically usable, we also propose a three-point cutopian test. A game qualifies as cutopian when it exhibits: (1) a cute/comforting aesthetic that frames play as low-stakes; (2) governance or imperial verbs, e.g., rule-making, extraction, expansion, surveillance, as the main engines of progress; and (3) a reduction of moral weight in play, where feedback loops and representations downplay the consequences of those verbs. The test is descriptive rather than moral: it looks at player experience and system effects, not developer intent.

Strategically Adorable: Cutopian Strategy Games

Strategy games have long been a space where players engage in empire-building, expansion, and conquest. However, some modern strategy games go a step further by wrapping these power dynamics in cute aesthetics, further obscuring their ideological weight. Two notable examples are *The Battle of Polytopia* and *Root*, both of which take the core mechanics of territorial conquest and governance but reframe them through stylized, playful visuals. By using charming designs, anthropomorphized factions, and minimalist aesthetics, these games make the exercise of power feel lighthearted and frictionless, and thus reinforce expansionist and conflict-based gameplay without explicitly confronting its ethical implications.

The Battle of Polytopia, which can be described as a minimalistic version of *Civilization* games, is a 4X strategy game – a genre built on the mechanics of "eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate". 4X games have been criticized for reinforcing colonialist logics, where success is defined by the expansion of one's civilization at the expense of others (Ford 2016). However, *Polytopia* masks these imperialist mechanics under a minimalist, blocky aesthetic (see Figure 1), reducing conquest and resource exploitation to simple, puzzle-like interactions. The game removes explicit depictions of violence, as cities are captured and destroyed with minimal animations, and wars are depicted through abstracted turn-based combat and small figures bumping into each other.

Figure 1. *The Battle of Polytopia.* (Screenshots taken by the author)

Unlike *Polytopia*, *Root*, originally an area-control board game and a video game adaptation of the same name, does not erase power struggles. The asymmetry is central to the design of the game's playable factions: The Marquise de Cat represents an industrialist monarchy focused on resource extraction, the Eyrie Dynasty embodies a rigid authoritarian aristocracy, and the Woodland Alliance acts as a revolutionary insurgency fighting for autonomy. This mechanical differentiation ensures that governance, oppression, and rebellion do not function as identical strategies but instead reflect differing levels of power and resistance.

Figure 2. *Root*. (Screenshots taken by the author)

However, despite this thematic depth, *Root* still falls into cutopian tendencies by aesthetically softening the emotional and ideological weight of these struggles. The game's storybook aesthetic and adorable animal factions (see Figure 2) transform what would otherwise be high-stakes conflicts into a playful, morally neutral competition. The Woodland Alliance, for instance, plays as a plucky underdog rather than a movement emerging from oppression, making rebellion feel like a quirky gameplay challenge rather than an act of resistance. Similarly, the ruling factions' oppressive policies become game mechanics rather than ideological choices with tangible consequences.

This raises an important question: If oppression and resistance are equal in fun and balance, do their ideological stakes become neutralized? While *Root* succeeds in mechanically differentiating power dynamics, its aesthetic framing ensures that all forms of struggle remain playful, strategic, and free from real emotional weight. Unlike a historical strategy game that explicitly engages with colonial or imperial conflicts, *Root* presents power struggles as a charming game of woodland warfare rather than a reflection of real-world systems of control.

Ultimately, *Root* represents a borderline case of the cutopian framework, as it does not erase asymmetry, but it renders all struggles for power equally playful. This distinguishes it from games like *The Battle of Polytopia*, which fully obscure imperialism, but it still invites players to experience insurgency, monarchy, and authoritarianism as morally equivalent, lighthearted playstyles. In doing so, it subtly depoliticizes its themes, ensuring that no matter which side a player chooses, the struggle remains digestible, balanced, and ultimately entertaining.

Both *The Battle of Polytopia* and *Root* demonstrate how cutification can reframe political and imperialist structures as lighthearted, neutral, or apolitical interactions. The lack of explicit violence or historical context removes the weight of colonial and authoritarian themes, making the mechanics of power feel intuitive and playful rather than ethically complex.

Cutopian Border Control: Lil' Authoritarianism in *Lil' Guardsman*

Border control, bureaucracy, and surveillance have been explored in games as sites of systemic power and ethical dilemmas. In particular, *Papers, Please* has been widely analyzed for its mechanical critique of authoritarian control, forcing players into uncomfortable decisions within a rigid bureaucratic system (Morrissette 2017). The game's aesthetic contains bleak, muted colors, and oppressive environments, while gameplay consists of repetitive, dehumanizing tasks. These aspects reinforce the weight of its themes, confronting players with the moral and psychological toll of governance under authoritarian rule. By contrast, *Lil' Guardsman* reframes border control as a whimsical, puzzle-driven comedy, stripping the subject of its oppressive connotations. In this game, players take on the role of a young girl assigned to guard a medieval fantasy kingdom's gates, deciding who is allowed entry. Instead

of reinforcing the weight of bureaucratic control, the game transforms it into a lighthearted challenge, detaching the act of border enforcement from its real-world implications.

Figure 3. *Lil' Guardsman* and *Papers, Please*. (Screenshots taken from the games' respective *Steam* pages)

The core mechanics of *Lil' Guardsman* bear clear similarities to *Papers, Please*, as players examine documents, interrogate travelers, and make judgment calls that impact the game's narrative. However, whereas *Papers, Please* deliberately immerses players in a world of moral compromise, *Lil' Guardsman* removes much of this ethical tension through colorful visuals, exaggerated character designs, and comedic dialogue. The act of surveillance is transformed into a puzzle mechanic – a challenge to be solved rather than a reflection on systemic power. Players control a child rather than a weary bureaucrat, shifting the tone from oppression to playfulness. The game's fantasy setting, lighthearted tone, and humor largely erase the realities of systemic surveillance, exclusion, and governance. In doing so, it sidesteps the critical lens that a game like *Papers, Please* applies to the same themes, ultimately making border control feel unproblematic and enjoyable. This points to broader trends in cutopian games, where systems of control and hierarchy are presented in cute, digestible forms, removing their ideological weight.

While *The Battle of Polytopia* and *Root* use cuteness to obscure the weight of conquest, *Lil' Guardsman* applies the same principle to systems of governance and surveillance (see Table 1**).** Both strategy and bureaucratic games rely on player agency to reinforce systemic power, but when framed through a cute aesthetic, that agency feels playful rather than oppressive.

Title	Cute/comforting aesthetic	Governance / imperial mechanics	Reduction of moral weight in play
The Battle of Polytopia	Yes	Yes	Yes
Root	Yes	Yes	Partial
Lil' Guardsman	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1. Three-point cutopian test applied to the case studies. “Reduction of moral weight” refers to how representation makes extractive/coercive actions feel inconsequential.

Implications

The concept of the cutopian game, where serious political structures are masked, softened, or trivialized through cute aesthetics, can help our understanding of how power is represented and normalized in video games. Unlike overt propaganda, cutopian games do not explicitly endorse colonial, imperial, or authoritarian logics. Instead, they subtly depoliticize these structures by making them playful, aesthetically pleasing, and morally neutral.

Through the games explored in this section, we see how aesthetic and mechanical design choices can reshape how players engage with power and control. In *The Battle of Polytopia*, colonial expansion and conquest become an optimization puzzle, stripped of their violent historical realities. In *Root*, complex political struggles are reframed as a contest between cute animals, turning war and revolution into a lighthearted strategy game. In *Lil' Guardsman*, bureaucratic surveillance and exclusion are transformed into a playful puzzle, removing their oppressive implications. These games do not challenge systems of power – they render them harmless, digestible, and enjoyable. As Ford (2016) warns in his critique of *Civilization V*, strategy and empire-building mechanics are not just "fun" abstractions; they actively shape how players understand history, expansion, and power.

This is not to say that games cannot use cute aesthetics to explore serious topics effectively. The issue is not cuteness itself, but how it is deployed. Cutification can be a powerful tool when used to expose contradictions (e.g., *Doki Doki Literature Club's* use of cute anime tropes to subvert expectations). However, when cutification removes tension and moral complexity, it risks trivializing serious issues rather than critically engaging with them. Ultimately, cutopian games reveal a broader pattern in game design, which encourages players to experience power as fun, detached from its historical and political consequences. Recognizing this pattern is the first step toward creating more critical, ethical approaches to world-building and mechanics in video games.

If colonialism is an apocalypse – a world-ending event for those subjected to it – then cutopian games function as post-apocalyptic revisionism. In this sense, cutopian aesthetics are not just a matter of visual style, but can be seen as a tool of ideological erasure, which normalizes the structures of colonial and authoritarian power.

However, not all media that employ cuteness engage with power in the same way. While cutopian games tend to flatten the complexities of colonial and authoritarian narratives, some animated shows use cute aesthetics to deliberately expose and critique these systems. To better understand how cuteness can enable both ideological softening and resistance, the next section examines animated TV series aimed at young audiences, such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. They navigate the tension between cuteness and power more explicitly than cutopian games, sometimes challenging empire and authoritarianism while still maintaining a playful and accessible aesthetic. What lessons might cutopian games learn from these narratives? And to what extent do these shows also struggle with the limitations of using empire as a metaphor?

Cute is Complicated: How Children's Media Tackles Colonialism

Cuteness is not inherently trivializing. Its emotional appeal can be used to soften power structures, but also to critique them. Animated media, particularly children's and young adult television, have long employed cute aesthetics to make complex themes more accessible. Shows like *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Steven Universe*, and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* introduce young audiences to narratives of empire, resistance, and systemic oppression. These series aim to educate as well as entertain, while using vibrant visuals and engaging storytelling to encourage viewers to question authority, power, and oppression.

Avatar: The Last Airbender explores colonial expansion and Indigenous resistance, with the Fire Nation's invasions mirroring real-world imperialism. The series also critiques state propaganda, particularly in Ba Sing Se, where the government suppresses any mention of war with the phrase, "There is no war in Ba Sing Se." This erasure of conflict reflects real-world authoritarian tactics, where oppressive regimes control narratives to maintain power.

According to Liubovich (n.d.), *Avatar: The Last Airbender* functions as a form of critical pedagogy, educating young audiences about imperialism, colonization, and their harmful effects. The Fire Nation is depicted as a colonizing empire that commits genocide (the eradication of the Air Nomads) and seeks to expand its rule through force, paralleling historical empires. The show actively challenges imperial ideologies through the character arc of Zuko, a Fire Nation prince who unlearns his society's propaganda and ultimately joins the resistance. Liubovich argues that the show offers an alternative to nationalist indoctrination, teaching children to critically question imperialist narratives rather than internalize them as justifications for conquest.

While these narratives simplify complex power structures to some extent, they also encourage audiences to question dominant systems rather than passively accept them. *Avatar*, in particular, serves as a counterpoint to video games that romanticize empire, demonstrating how storytelling can de-romanticize imperialism rather than glorify it. Just as the show teaches children to critically examine colonial history, video games could serve a similar role, if designed with the intent to challenge rather than reinforce imperial ideologies. Examining how these media navigate themes of resistance provides insight into how video games might move beyond glorifying empire, and towards anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian storytelling.

Children's and young adult media have demonstrated that it is possible to engage young audiences in discussions of empire, colonialism, and authoritarianism in ways that are both accessible and critical. *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Steven Universe*, and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* all attempt to address themes of resistance and systemic oppression, offering young viewers narratives where oppressive regimes are ultimately defeated. However, they all share a common limitation: they frame the resolution of empire as a personal, emotional journey rather than a material struggle. As Princess Weekes (2020) argues, these oppressive regimes often act as metaphors for conservative family structures (e.g., *Steven Universe* and *She-Ra*), particularly those that enforce conformity and suppress queer identity. This makes the shows resonant for many queer audiences. Still, it also raises a critical question: what happens when empire is primarily used as a metaphor for something else, rather than confronted as a historical and ongoing system of power?

Even *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which presents one of the strongest critiques of imperial expansion in mainstream animation, ultimately resolves its conflict through the actions of a singular hero and a redeemed imperial prince, rather than through revolutionary change. The Fire Nation remains intact, its institutions unchallenged, and its colonial structures largely left unexamined once the war is "over." This follows a pattern in media where empire can be redeemed through the actions of "good" rulers, rather than something that must be dismantled. For queer children who experience both the weight of conservative, authoritarian family dynamics and the direct impact of colonialism, these kinds of metaphors can feel alienating. They flatten the concept of empire into a personal struggle rather than a structural force, turning imperial conquest into something that can be resolved through emotional reconciliation rather than systemic dismantling. In *Steven Universe*, the Diamonds (the show's villains, former colonizers and oppressors) are ultimately reintegrated into the universe's social order rather than held accountable for their actions. In *She-Ra*, the evil empire is defeated, but the framing of the conflict remains tied to themes of self-discovery and personal redemption rather than broader systemic change. There is also a broader media trend of using colonialism, imperialism, and authoritarianism as metaphors for interpersonal struggles, rather than engaging with their material realities. While metaphor can be a powerful tool, it is worth questioning why these power structures are so often displaced into fantasy settings and used as allegories about familial trauma, rather than being represented in a way that explicitly acknowledges their historical and political dimensions.

For video games, which often gamify empire-building, these animated series provide a significant contrast. Although not perfect, they show that resistance, decolonization, and systemic change can be depicted in engaging ways. However, they also highlight the narrative pitfalls of over-personalizing empire, reducing it to a moral failing of individual rulers rather than a system upheld by institutions, economies, and military force. To move beyond aestheticizing power structures, video games must reconsider how their mechanics reinforce or resist empire, colonialism, and authoritarianism. If cuteness can be used to make political critique accessible, how can we ensure that it does not also neutralize the very systems it seeks to challenge?

Cute for Good: Decolonizing Video Game Narratives

Much of mainstream game design, particularly in strategy and simulation games, reproduces an imperial perspective in which expansion, control, and conquest are presented as the default modes of interaction. Scholars like Carpenter (2021) and Mukherjee (2017) argue that these mechanics do not simply reflect history but actively shape how players understand empire-building, reinforcing colonial logics. Decolonizing game narratives requires moving beyond representation, focusing not only on adding diverse characters, or historical accuracy, but rethinking the mechanics that structure play. The mechanics of empire remain central to many strategy games, i.e., territorial expansion, economic exploitation, and resource extraction. The 4X model (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate), defines a subgenre within strategy games, but it also mirrors the logic of colonial capitalism. While some games attempt to introduce ethical choices (e.g., *Civilization* allowing players to pursue diplomacy), the core framework remains rooted in expansionist ideology. Moving beyond the 4X's requires developing mechanics that emphasize cooperation, reciprocity, and resistance rather than dominance. This kind of mechanical and narrative integration is important to achieve a decolonized approach to game design, which would shift from rewarding expansion to fostering alternative modes of interaction, such as environmental stewardship, community building, and interdependence.

Reclaiming agency also means centering marginalized voices in game development, funding, and distribution, thus ensuring that Indigenous, Black, and Global South designers have access to the tools and platforms necessary to tell their own stories. Furthermore, it also means questioning why certain game mechanics (e.g., empire-building, extraction economies, military conquest) dominate the industry while others remain underexplored. Decolonizing game mechanics means expanding the range of play styles beyond Western traditions. To decolonize video games, we must ask: What alternative mechanics exist? Can games move beyond conquest and expansion to emphasize cooperation and reciprocity? How do aesthetics influence ideology?

This section considers what it means to resist empire, not just narratively, but through game design, by analyzing games that challenge dominant colonial mechanics and aesthetics. First, we look at how *Spirit Island* resists colonial expansion at the mechanical level, before exploring aesthetic realism in games like *This War of Mine* and *Papers, Please*, which reframe war and governance from a civilian perspective. Then, we turn to narrative decolonization, focusing on how Indigenous storytelling in *Never Alone* offers a model for reclaiming game narratives. Finally, we speculate on how cutopian aesthetics could be repurposed to critique rather than obscure power, considering positive examples from animated media and games.

Challenging Colonial Mechanics of Strategy Games

While many strategy and simulation games reinforce colonial expansion, empire-building, and authoritarian control, some subvert these ideas, offering players experiences that challenge dominant power structures. Unlike cutopian games, which trivialize governance and conquest, anti-colonial strategy games actively critique these systems. Rather than simply inverting colonialist structures (i.e., allowing players to play as the oppressed rather than the oppressor), these games question the assumptions and ideological foundations behind empire-building.

A key example is *Spirit Island*, a cooperative board game with a video game adaptation, where players take on the roles of powerful nature spirits defending an island from invading colonizers. Unlike game series such as *Catan* or *Civilization*, where expansion is the path to success, *Spirit Island* reverses this dynamic. Colonizers, which spread across the board like an invasive force, building settlements and disrupting the land's balance, are the enemy, and victory is achieved through resistance rather than conquest. The game offers no option for negotiation or assimilation; the only way to win is through active resistance, reinforcing the reality that colonial expansion is a systemic, relentless force rather than an ethical gray area.

The mechanics of *Spirit Island* align with its anti-colonial ideology in several key ways. The colonizers act autonomously, emphasizing colonial expansion as an impersonal, structural process rather than a personal choice. The native people, far from being passive victims, can resist and even fight back with the spirits' support, centering collective action over individual heroism. Unlike many strategy games, which reward aggressive territorial control, *Spirit Island* is inherently cooperative, underscoring the necessity of solidarity in the face of oppression. The game's board itself transforms under colonization, as forests are cleared, the land is degraded, and the spirits weaken as settlers expand, thus visually reinforcing the ecological and cultural devastation of imperial expansion.

By embedding these mechanics into its core gameplay, *Spirit Island* challenges the traditional assumptions of strategy games, reframing colonization as a violent disruption rather than a neutral historical progression. It offers a rare example of how game design can move beyond aesthetic critiques of empire to actively deconstruct its underlying logic, forcing players to engage with colonization as an act of systemic violence rather than an abstract, strategic puzzle.

Decolonial Ideology of Aesthetic Realism

This War of Mine and *Papers, Please* illustrate how aesthetic realism and restrictive mechanics reshape player agency, immersing them in oppressive systems rather than granting them control. Unlike cutopian games, which abstract governance and conflict into playful mechanics, these games focus on those who suffer under these structures, forcing players into difficult ethical decisions that disrupt the fantasy of control.

This War of Mine subverts traditional war game conventions by placing players in the role of civilians struggling to survive in a besieged city. Instead of glorifying combat, it portrays war as a dehumanizing experience marked by scarcity, illness, and moral dilemmas. The game's mechanics, e.g., resource scarcity, psychological stress, or ethically fraught survival choices, reflect the realities of war-torn life. Unlike cutopian aesthetics, which obscure power, *This War of Mine* deliberately unsettles, ensuring that every decision carries emotional and ethical weight. The game also embodies the idea of colonialism as an apocalypse, by depicting war as a slow, grinding catastrophe. The nameless conflict serves as an allegory for imperial violence, stripping away geopolitical justifications and focusing instead on destruction, displacement,

and survival. Rather than presenting war as a strategic puzzle to be won, *This War of Mine* forces players to engage with its human cost, mirroring real-world experiences of civilians in conflict zones.

Similarly, the aforementioned *Papers, Please* critiques authoritarianism by placing players in the role of an immigration officer in the fictional country of *Arstotzka*. Its stark, oppressive aesthetic mirrors the monotony and dehumanization of bureaucratic power. Unlike cutopian games that present governance and border control as lighthearted, *Papers, Please* immerses players in the psychological toll of enforcing arbitrary rules, separating families, and complying with state directives under the constant threat of punishment. *Papers, Please* transforms power into a burden rather than a reward, highlighting how authoritarianism functions not just through violence but through routine complicity.

Both games challenge the ideological frameworks of traditional game design by rejecting the abstraction of power into numbers and optimization. They serve as a direct counterpoint to cutopian games, which present empire-building and governance as harmless and enjoyable.

Narrative Decolonization & Indigenous Storytelling

While *Spirit Island* resists colonial expansion mechanically and *This War of Mine* critiques war by focusing on survival of civilians, *Never Alone* offers an example of how video games can function as acts of cultural preservation and resistance. Developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Indigenous Alaskan people, the game is designed to share Indigenous knowledge and oral storytelling traditions with a global audience. The game's narrative structure is based on Kunuuksaayuka, a traditional Iñupiat story that has been passed down through generations. Throughout the game, players unlock short documentary clips featuring Iñupiat elders, who provide context for the game's themes, reinforcing the idea that Indigenous storytelling is an active and evolving practice. The gameplay itself also reinforces cultural themes, as players alternate between controlling a young girl and a fox, emphasizing interdependence and respect for nature, which is central to Iñupiat philosophy. *Never Alone* is Indigenous-led and community-driven, which is a rare example of a game where Indigenous people have agency over how their stories are told.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argue that decolonization requires reclaiming storytelling from colonial frameworks. In the area of video games, this means supporting Indigenous-led narratives that challenge Western paradigms of power and progress. *Never Alone* offers one model for how Indigenous epistemologies can shape game design, placing oral traditions at the heart of the narrative rather than adapting them into Western hero's journey structures.

Decolonizing Cutopian Games

Throughout this paper, cutopian games have been critiqued for their tendency to soften, trivialize, or obscure the realities of colonialism, imperialism, and authoritarianism. However, is it possible to subvert these mechanics and aesthetics? Can a game that appears cute at first glance actually serve as a critical intervention that does not romanticize power, but instead exposes its consequences? One speculative design approach would be to use cutopian aesthetics as a Trojan horse for decolonial critique. A game could begin with bright, inviting visuals and an expansionist premise, only for players to slowly realize the unseen harm caused by their actions. Mechanics could shift over time, revealing how systems of power extract resources, displace communities, and rewrite history. Just as *Doki Doki Literature Club!* uses

its anime dating-sim aesthetics to subvert expectations and unsettle players, a decolonial cutopian game could lure players into engaging with familiar 4X mechanics, before forcing them to confront the ethical weight of their actions.

The potential for a cutopian game to resist rather than reinforce empire is not purely speculative. Some games already use “cuteness” to explore complex themes without trivialization. *Spiritfarer* employs soft, hand-drawn aesthetics to engage with the concepts of grief and letting go, integrating its emotional depth into core gameplay. *Ooblets* subverts the farming sim formula, shifting its focus from capitalist accumulation to community-building, critiquing systems of ownership and exploitation. Animated media for young audiences similarly show how cuteness can both challenge and reinforce empire. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* presents a strong anti-imperial message, even though the central conflict is resolved through individual redemption rather than dismantling colonial structures. These examples highlight the fine line between accessibility and distortion. For game developers, abstraction is not inherently problematic, but it carries ideological weight. Utilizing abstractions without care risks reinforcing the very power structures a game might seek to critique.

Rather than proposing a singular solution, this section serves as a call for critical experimentation in game design. If games can romanticize empire, they can also disrupt it. If cutopian aesthetics can soften power, they can also reveal its inner workings.

Conclusion

This paper examined how cute, comforting, and visually appealing styles of video game aesthetics actively shape players' perceptions of colonial, imperial, and authoritarian themes. By framing colonialism as an ongoing apocalypse, this analysis demonstrated how aesthetic choices either confront or obscure ideological realities. Apocalyptic aesthetics provoke reflection on societal collapse, while cozy aesthetics often romanticize or oversimplify complex realities, and the sanitized, abstract aesthetics of strategy games normalize historical colonial violence. We introduced the concept of cutopian games, in which cute visuals trivialize oppressive power structures. Our analysis further revealed parallels between video games and related media, notably animated series, highlighting common pitfalls and possibilities in how media represent ideological complexity. Animated shows offer critical lessons in distinguishing metaphorical treatments from genuine structural critique. Games can learn from these lessons to avoid reducing serious political issues to aesthetic or emotional appeal.

One of the major drawbacks of games that trivialize serious themes (e.g., colonialism, imperialism, or authoritarianism) through cute aesthetics lies in how they can distort our understanding of these concepts. When these themes are constantly presented in a lighthearted or romanticized way, it becomes harder for us to recognize what colonialism and imperialism actually represent: systems of cultural erasure, oppression, and often genocide. The danger here is that normalizing these narratives feeds directly into the propaganda of imperialist histories. Throughout history, colonizers have worked to sanitize their actions, masking the violence and destruction they inflicted. This is why it is so important to critically engage with these concepts and understand their real-world implications. Moving forward, a truly decolonial approach to video game aesthetics requires explicit confrontation of oppressive realities through mechanics, narratives, and visuals. Game designers must critically reflect on how their aesthetic strategies reinforce or challenge colonial logics, making deliberate design choices that empower rather than trivialize. The speculative vision for decolonizing cutopian games presented here encourages future game designers and scholars to reimagine aesthetics not as

passive stylistic choices, but as active ideological tools capable of fostering critical engagement and social reflection.

By introducing and critically exploring the concept of cutopian games, this paper provides scholars and designers with a framework for understanding how aesthetics operate ideologically, and which can guide future ethical game design.

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