Re-thinking the Role of Play in Museums: Playing colonial themed board games as a method of emotionally engaging adults in decolonising work.

Background

This paper introduces and discusses my ongoing PhD research which utilises the emotive potential of play to engage adults. Most museums offer playful activities aimed at younger visitors, either in-gallery or through 'family activities', but play-based activities for adults remain limited. Using modern board games as a facilitation tool, my research explores how we can utilise the affective nature of gameplay to engage emotions and facilitate in-depth discussions around complex issues with adult participants. The chosen games all uncritically repackage colonial settings and mechanisms, 'forcing' players to re-enact imperial violence as they compete to win. In doing so they reinforce the normalisation of a White narrative and challenge the concept that play is a universally safe space. I conclude with an argument that the role of play in museums is ripe for reimagining - that play can and should be considered as an avenue to emotionally engage adult audiences.

Introduction: The Current Role of Play in Museums

Play is widely recognised to be of crucial importance to a child's development, including their emotional development, and the research into play-based learning in children is vast.[1] Unsurprisingly perhaps, play in museums is big business. Eureka! the children's museum in Halifax centres its whole visitor experience around play. Manchester Museum and the Happy Museum Project launched their 'Rules for a Playful Museum' in 2015,[2] and the popular conference organisers MuseumNext devoted two full days to the subject in 2023.[3] In the last few years, the commercial success of escape-room games has crossed over to the museum space, with regular all-day training workshops aimed at museum staff.[4] In all of these examples however, the main focus is on creating playful experiences for children, with opportunities for adults remaining limited. When we do focus on providing play experiences for adults, the ever-present pressure on staff time and resources means we often aren't able to adequately reflect on and evaluate the impact of these experiences.

This article focuses on my current PhD project, which explores an avenue of creating play experiences for adults within a museum setting. Specifically, I am interested in how we as a sector can harness the emotive potential of play to engage with the complex and nuanced process of decolonising museums.[5] Can we do this while minimising the risk of trauma and ensuring that the play experience is as safe as possible for all participants? I grapple with these questions through playing selected board games as a form of participatory action research. As we play together, we explore the potential for both these games, and the play experience itself, to scaffold complex conversations around museum practice past and present, and colonial histories and legacies.

From Museum Learning Resources to Modern Board Games

This research project was conceived while I was employed full-time as the Digital Learning Officer at Leeds Museums and Galleries. Part of my role involved creating online learning resources that challenged the dominant White[6], male, heteronormative historical narrative traditionally taught in UK classrooms. This required a significant amount of research, and on reflection I became increasingly aware that my education through the UK mainstream school system had left me largely ignorant of Britain's colonial and imperial past.

I am a White British woman who can readily identify male privilege, yet it has taken more time to develop a deeper understanding of the normalisation of a White narrative as *the* narrative within my culture, and the resulting marginalisation of anyone and anything outside of this. As I began to first recognise and then probe the extent of my own enculturation, I became aware of an alarming trope dominating one of my favourite hobbies: modern board gaming. Playing games with friends and at a local game group, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the themes of some of the games we were playing, and the actions some games 'forced' me to take. Using a play of 'Small World'[7] as an example, to progress in the game I needed to eradicate the 'lost tribes' from a region, enabling my 'skeleton race' to move in. I found taking this action, and the game as a whole, to be a disturbing experience that I have not wanted to repeat.

The modern board game hobby is widely recognised as beginning in 1995 with the release in Germany of the 'Eurogame', *The Settlers of Catan*. Eurogames, first conceived in the aftermath of World War Two, purposefully excluded player-to-player combat, as German society moved away from direct violence in entertainment media.[8] Ironically, many early Eurogames were themed around colonial and imperial violence, a trend that continues in today's largely uncritical board game industry (Flanagan and Jakobsson 2023: 11).[9] Board games are now becoming more mainstream forms of cultural media, appearing in high-street stores Waterstones in the UK, and Target and Barnes & Noble in the US. When pressed about the problematic nature of colonial themed games, the overwhelming response from the board game industry and community is 'it's just a game'.[10] The implication here is that playing at oppressing 'Others', reinforcing normalising Whiteness, and the repackaging of colonial violence as a leisure activity is not a problem.

In museums, we treat board games as material culture and cultural media, recognising that as such, they reflect dominant cultural narratives. I was curious whether we could utilise the overlaps between these games in our decolonising work at Leeds Museums and Galleries, and the powerful emotive potential of play as a learning tool.

Inspiration from New York

This research project was inspired by the work of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York, a museum that tells 'the stories of working-class tenement residents who moved to New York City from other countries and other parts of the country'.[11] From 2004 to 2014 the museum ran a programme they called '*Kitchen Conversations'.* After their tour, visitors were invited to sit round a kitchen table with a cup of tea and engage in a discussion around migration and immigration. The conversation was facilitated by museum staff, who were trained to remain neutral, a task which sometimes proved very difficult (Abram 2007: 70). I began to consider how I could adapt this approach, using the game as an object of cultural media and, crucially, the gameplay as an 'affective experience' (Malaby 2007: 96). When we play a game, we are each agreeing to play a role according to the rules, and the winning condition influences our in-game decisions. I felt that carefully chosen examples of these games could act as a springboard for discussion, facilitating more open and nuanced conversations around museum practices past and present, and colonial histories and legacies.

Selecting the Games to Play

I chose games with a range of complexity and play time to help ensure that any adult could participate in the project, and ones where the setting and/or theming of the game could be linked to our collections at Leeds Museums and Galleries. This latter point is particularly important, as exploring and critiquing museum practices and processes is integral to the research aims. I felt that having

transparent links to objects found in the Leeds Collection would help create meaningful reference points for discussion. Additionally, participants could later choose to seek out relevant objects and their stories in the galleries, or on a museum store tour, if they so wished.

At this point in my research, I have concentrated on three different games, playing each with various groups of participants. The game *Papua*[12] is set in the late nineteenth century. Each player is leading a scientific expedition with the aim of collecting the best range and number of specimens to bring back for 'prestige'. Players bid to acquire 'species', including snakes, birds, butterflies and, in a highly problematic design choice, Indigenous people (referred to in the game as 'tribe cards').

Insert Figure 1

The collection at Leeds Museums and Galleries include many natural science specimens collected in foreign countries during the Victorian period, using the labour and expertise of local people who were never acknowledged. Furthermore, Leeds born privateer Sir Martin Frobisher is known to have forcibly removed three Inuit people to Britain on one of his voyages in the sixteenth century.[13]

Archaeology: The New Expedition is a simple card game where we play at 'digging for treasure' in the Egyptian desert.[14] Gathering enough map cards, we can also search tombs, pyramids and other structures for more hidden 'treasures'.

Insert Figure 2

Players need to collect sets of artefacts such as coins, pieces of tablet, and pharaoh masks and sell them to a museum to make the most money. Like many museums around the country, Leeds has a collection of ancient Egyptian artefacts, in addition to the mummified remains of a man, Nesyamun, on display at Leeds City Museum.

The third game is *Ticket to Ride: India* where players are travellers on a Grand Tour in 1911 India, under the British Raj.[15]

Insert Figure 3

Players claim routes between city destinations by placing train carriages, blocking other players from travelling on the same path. Leeds was a significant manufacturer of locomotives and train carriages, exporting to British colonies, including India. The museum collection includes examples of rolling stock and related ephemera, including original catalogues and historic photographs.

Gameplay Sessions

At the time of writing, I have held six gameplay sessions with different participants, all hosted at the Leeds Museums and Galleries Discovery Centre.

Each session has followed a different cadence, as I tweak my approach according to how participants are responding to the game itself, and towards other players (including myself in the twin roles of researcher and player).[16] To help familiarise myself with the research process, I invited colleagues from Leeds Museums and Galleries to play with me for the first session. I then extended their involvement to some subsequent sessions, alongside members of the public.

Prior to agreeing to take part, participants are provided with an information sheet explaining the scope of the research and the colonial theming of the games involved. A link to the game's page on the online platform BoardGameGeek.com is sent, enabling access to more information, images and videos of the game. Additionally, each participant is sent and signs a 'Code of Respect', which provides clear guidelines around the use of language during the session. I have also been selective about who I approached to take part, matching museum professionals who have an interest in decolonising processes and practices with the public participants. The aim of these measures is to make sure that all participants are fully informed about what the research entails before agreeing to take part, and that the potential for causing trauma is minimised as much as possible. This is incredibly important due to the themes of the games we are playing, and the conversations that flow from them.

Researcher Aaron Trammell has critiqued the problematic dominance of White masculinity in board game narratives, and the potential for a play experience to be a form of violence for people of colour (Trammell 2023a: 27-50; 2023b: 25-9). In the three selected games, all the player characters are either explicitly White

men (*Archaeology: The New Expedition* and *Papua*)[17] or it is implied from the historical context the game is using (*Ticket to Ride: India*).[18]

Play and Emotion

Central to this research project is the act of playing the selected games. Play is currently under-used as a research method in academia, and as I have previously argued,[19] under-used with adult audiences in museums. What sets play, and specifically playing these board games apart from other ways to engage with cultural media, is that each participant is actively assuming a character created by the game. In the games selected for this project, these characters set the tone historically. The actions we take and what we need to achieve to win the game mimic a range of colonial histories, from exploitation of natural resources, to acquisition of cultural artefacts and the dehumanising of Indigenous people.

As we take actions in the game, colonial histories and legacies can be drawn out and connected to our collection here at Leeds Museums and Galleries. This creates pathways from the game to museum objects, and from museum objects to the stories of real people. The pathways enable us to trace the impacts of colonisation, and just as importantly, the legacies of those impacts. Each pathway also provides multiple opportunities for emotional and empathetic responses from players. We never finished our game of *Papua,* as none of us would try to win the 'tribe cards' – an action that represents the purchasing of Indigenous people for what the game calls 'prestige'. Reflecting on this session I subsequently removed

Papua from the research project. As a White woman, I had felt distinctly uncomfortable playing a (White male) character paying for human beings to gain 'prestige'. While I recognise that there is value in me experiencing this level of discomfort as an empathetic learning experience, I felt that the risk of the game causing trauma to participants, especially generational trauma, was far too high. The two other participants expressed disbelief at inclusion of such a mechanism in the game, with one (White British) commenting that they were '…disgusted by the overtones of it […] because of Britain's colonial past'.[20] The games that I have continued to use either focus the gameplay on collecting objects, or mapping train routes. This creates an experience that is one step removed from the player's actions directly impacting on in-game characters, yet still enables the realities of the human costs implicated by the game's theme and mechanisms to be discussed.

When playing *Ticket to Ride: India*, we discussed the disconnect between the game's theme and the gameplay, and how it must have felt for Indian people to be only allowed to travel in (over) crowded third class carriages. An Indian participant commented 'I feel sad that something so colourful [as the game] could conceal so much violence'.[21] While playing *Archaeology: The New Expedition*, one White British participant expressed empathy for how an Egyptian person may experience playing the game:

> I wonder…how we may feel if we were in this situation, if we were Egyptian, playing this game, […] and we can see the fun in this very easily, I think personally I can, but I might be quite frustrated if, you know … my heritage

> was this [gesturing to cards representing ancient Egyptian artefacts for sale in a marketplace].[22]

Playing with a professional archaeologist from Somalia, they explained their feelings on the game's theme:

> There's no respect for these people, there's no respect for these items…at the end of the day you're just taking people's culture and you're just making money out of it, there's just complete disregard. I don't like it, I don't like it at all, it really annoys me.[23]

In both these play-throughs of *Archaeology: The New Expedition*, comments like the ones above led into conversations around past practices of museums in Britain of acquiring, displaying and interpreting objects from different countries and cultures, and the many violences inflicted while doing so.

Preliminary Conclusions

At its core, this play-centred research project is a form of object-based learning, tapping into the very foundation of museum education. While the specific approach outlined here may not easily translate to everyday museum engagement practises, research outcomes can be used to promote wider discussion around play in museums, particularly for adult audiences.

Initially, museum colleagues were asked to participate to help trial the approach, however their involvement turned out to be richly beneficial, and recruiting museum professionals as participants alongside members of the public continued. This created a valuable mix of opinions, experience and cultural backgrounds. For example, curators have used their expert knowledge to critique how the games portray particular histories and museum practices and have reflected on the affective nature of gameplay. Discussing a play-through of *Archaeology: The New Expedition*, one colleague reflected on taking an action that represented entering a pyramid to find artefacts to sell, 'I didn't realize that's what I was doing. I was really excited to take the treasure as well, wasn't I?'. Multiple participants (both public and museum professional) commented on how fun the games were to play despite the themes, with one White British curator saying:

> We are the bad guys here aren't we, digging for treasure, nothing else, and then selling it to an unknown museum… there are just so many issues with that and yet I'm really enjoying playing it, it's fun.[24]

The power of play to absorb us into a game where we take actions we would never conceive of doing in real life can create emotional friction which in turn can be carefully levered to create learning opportunities.

I believe that play has a role in museum decolonising, as we work to tell whole stories, become more transparent around our past processes and practices, and adapt to our changing public roles. Through play, we can make stronger

connections between audiences and our collection, exploring local and international histories, and the legacies of those histories on all our experiences today. Additionally, we need to make sure we are thinking carefully both about the play experiences we are currently providing our audiences, and more broadly about the power of play as we plan to harness the potential that adult centred play-based engagement has to offer.

Figure Captions

Figure 1: *Papua* game box. A similar illustration of an Indigenous Papuan man is used on the 'tribe cards'. Image: author's own.

Figure 2. *Archaeology: The New Expedition* card game. Image: author's own.

Figure 3. *Ticket to Ride: India* game and box. Image: author's own.

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Endnotes

[1] There are hundreds of studies on play in child development. A quick literature search brings up studies focusing on risk in play, play and children with autism, gender and play, the importance of free play etc.

[2] Derry, C. 2015. Rules for a Playful Museum. Available: https://happymuseum.gn.apc.org/wp-content/uploads/Rules_Opt2_Stg10.pdf,accessed 27 February 2024.

[3] MuseumNext. 2023. Museums, Games & Play Summit [Online]. MuseumNext. Available: https://www.museumnext.com/events/museums-games-play-summit/,accessed 27 February 2024.

[4] MuseumiD. 2024. Making Playable Immersive Experiences in Your Museum [Online]. MuseumiD. Available: https://museum-id.com/immersive-museum-experiences/,accessed 18 March 2024. Although John Sear was ahead of the game, offering his excellent ‘how to’ guides as far back as 2017 Sear, J. 2017. Build Your Own Escape Game [Online]. Available: https://www.johnsear.com/tutorials/liveescape/,accessed 12 March 2024.

[5] I define decolonising here as any action which helps to: improve equity of representation and diversity, challenge the dominant White narrative, tell whole stories, increase transparency around historic acquisition of museum objects and repatriate objects seized under colonial or imperial power where possible.

[6] I have chosen to capitalise the W for ‘White’ and B for ‘Brown’ or ‘Black’ to convey the concept that race is a cultural construct and that, while not all people who share the same skin colour share all the same experiences, there are some histories, social or cultural experiences that are shared by a large proportion of that group.

[7] Keyearts, P. 2009. *Small World*. Days of Wonder

[8] Blake, L. no date. Available from: https://norollsbarred.com/articles/eurogames-explained/,accessed 18 March 2024.

[9] See also: Winkie, L. 2021. The Board Games That Ask You to Reenact Colonialism [Online]. The Atlantic. Available: https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/07/board-games-have-colonialism-problem/619518/,accessed 28 October 2022.

[10] There are many forum threads online, such as on Reddit, on the board game aggregator BoardGameGeek.com or comments on vlogs where ‘it’s only a game’ is put forward as a valid argument for upholding the status quo within the industry in terms of game settings, mechanisms and issues around representation.

[11] Museum, L. E. S. T. 2024. About Us [Online]. Available: https://www.tenement.org/about-us/,accessed 6 March 2024.

[12] Garcia, J. & Ibáñez, D. 2018. *Papua*. Devir.

[13] Vaughan, A. T. 2004. American Indians in England. Accessed 18 March 2024.

[14] Walker-Harding, P. 2016. *Archaeology: The New Expedition*. Z-Man Games.

[15] Moon, A. R. & Vincent, I. 2011. *Ticket to Ride Map Collection 2: India & Switzerland*. Days of Wonder.

[16] I am implementing an iterative participant action research (PAR) methodology, with myself as both researcher and player. Each play session is audio recorded for data analysis. Supplementary video recording of the play area only is gathered for reference purposes. Players' faces are not recorded. Consent forms include a choice of being identified by name or remaining anonymous. For a discussion of PAR, see Kindon, S. L., Pain, R. & Kesby, M. 2007. Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place, London, Routledge.

[17] Although a woman appears on the box cover of *Papua*, there are no women depicted in the game.

[18] This is a reflection of the hobby board game industry, which is overwhelmingly White and overwhelmingly male. See Pobuda, T. 2018. Assessing Gender and Racial Representation in the Board Game Industry. Available from: https://analoggamestudies.org/2018/12/assessing-gender-and-racial-representation-in-top-rated-boardgamegeek-games/, accessed 15 July 2023.

[19] See Bartley, I. Learning from Colonial Themed Board Games: How can play help us Explore Knowledge Constructions and Potentials for the Museum Sector and the Board Game Industry? 'Race' and Socially Engaged Research: Open and Inclusive Conference for PGRs and ECRs, 2023 York, UK. Available from:

https://sites.google.com/view/raceandsociallyengagedresearch/publications/working-paper/2024-volume-1/learning-from-colonial-themed-board-games

[20] Clare Brown, interview by author, digital recording, 04 September 2023, Leeds.

[21] Poonam Sharma, interview by author, digital recording, 19 February 2024, Leeds.

[22] Jonathan Munro, interview by author, digital recording, 11 December 2023, Leeds.

[23] Nura Hassan interview by author, digital recording, 11 December 2023, Leeds.

[24] Kat Baxter, interview by author, digital recording, 11 December 2023, Leeds.

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