

REBEL INC., COLONIALISM SIMULATOR



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Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate.

Edward Said, '[Blind Imperial Arrogance](#)', 2003

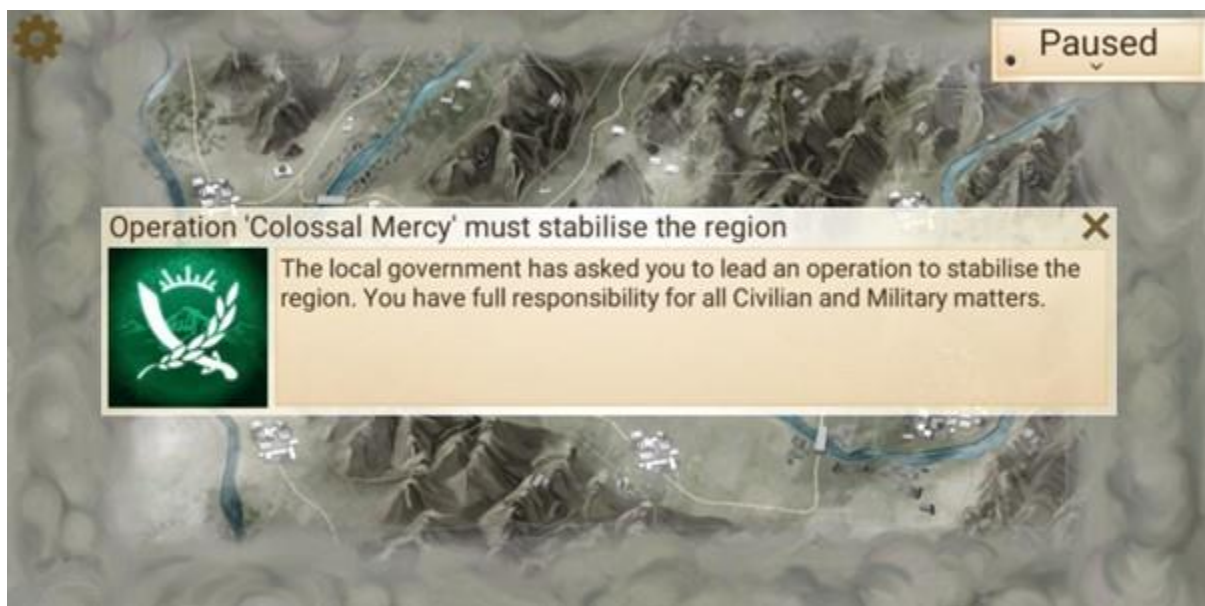
Our mission was never supposed to be nation building.

[Joe Biden](#)

Anybody who has ever played *Risk* (Parker Brothers, 1959) knows that it dramatizes imperial conquest as a form of participatory fun; anybody who has ever played *Monopoly* (Parker Brothers, 1935) knows that it stages the acquisitive pleasures of capitalist landlordism ([despite its left-wing origins](#)). Games, like many other forms of popular culture, disseminate and popularize political ideologies at the same time as they provide enjoyable recreation. One of the most significant ways that video games engage in this political task is by offering us the pleasures of war stripped of

danger, enabling us to vicariously enjoy imperial conquest and, perhaps, to believe that we are doing good in the process.

Rebel Inc. is a 2018 resource-management-based strategy video game by Ndemic Productions, the British developers behind the 2012 smash hit *Plague Inc.* Where Ndemic's first game invites players to eradicate humanity with various different pathogens, their second proposes the more complex task of crushing an insurgency whilst fostering the conditions for democracy in Afghanistan. This intricate business of post-conflict reconstruction has the triple aim of achieving 100% stability whilst maintaining a high reputation and defeating the insurgency. To do this, the player has to manipulate a detailed range of subtly moving parts, organized under the separate yet interacting categories of civilian, government, and military objectives: funding civil initiatives, such as healthcare, employment, and infrastructure; developing political structures to address broader problems like corruption, public relations, and law and order; and organizing a broad and deep military counterinsurgency strategy including infantry, airstrikes, garrisons, civil integration, and drone surveillance. An extraordinary insight into the colonizing mindset, *Rebel Inc.* reproduces colonial logics and dynamics of power by constituting Afghanistan as a war space in need of fundamental ground-up reorganization, positioning biopolitical micromanagement as an effective means of nation-building and representing Western intervention in Afghanistan as a necessary project conducted for humanitarian reasons. The participatory nature of the gaming medium, crucially, enables the game to articulate a unique vision of the processes and choices involved in colonial governmentality. When we play *Rebel Inc.*, we engage in the colonial fantasy of rationally and methodically establishing a functioning modern society where previously there was only primitive, uncultivated space. When we play *Rebel Inc.*, that is, we play at colonialism.



Playing Empire

The colonial and imperialist politics of games have been examined by a range of scholars, who often argue that games reproduce what Edward Said (1979) influentially defined as Orientalism—the particular way Western representations, narratives, and knowledges construct an image of other nations as corrupt, squalid, exotic, or as particularly ripe for Western military or economic intervention. Orientalism in tabletop gaming has been notably described by Talen Lee (2018) as a form of “background radiation,” an ingrained feature of game design that is so omnipresent, so taken for granted, that it can often go unnoticed. More specifically, Will Robinson (2014) writes that

colonial Orientalism is ingrained into the formal properties of trade-based economic board games, and, importantly, that the way these games frame their subject matter as neutral, adventurous, or purely economic has significant ideological consequences. “Taking violent histories and turning them into resource management/worker-placement games for family audiences,” he writes, “creates an ideological fairy tale.” Going further, Borit et al. (2018) write that “games provide an informal entry point for the idea that the West needs to intervene in the East” (p. 34). Games are one of the many ways in which militarized ideology is disseminated throughout ordinary civilian life in the guise of fun and entertainment (consider military movies, toys, or fashions, for instance) and they contribute to the presentation of this ideology as normal, natural, and objectively correct.

Where these scholars identify ethical concerns principally in terms of stereotyped representations and sanitized histories, however, the ethical concerns of video game scholars are perhaps more acute. These concerns often relate to the much more strident racism articulated in video games (Šisler, 2008) and the ways in which video games encourage players to identify much more closely with colonial invaders and, often, to perpetrate military violence; in first-person shooter games such as the *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward et al., 2003–present) franchise, for instance, the violence is very obviously the main attraction. Elsewhere, Mirrlees and Ibaid (2021) write that war games naturalize permanent war by expressing “a convergence between the real wars being fought by the US military and the simulated wars people play” (p. 38). Like other contemporary cultural products, video games are bound up with the circulation, constitution, and normalization of many of the most troubling contemporary political currents, notably racism and the justification of international military interventions. *Rebel Inc.* synthesizes many of these militarized political discourses: though it may not seem to be a particularly violent game, its perspective is always the distant, disinterested, oversimplified perspective of the colonizer for whom violence is one particularly effective civilizing tool among the many at their disposal. This recalls one of the most troubling aspects of colonial domination: namely, the way in which complex and nuanced political problems are routinely represented as though they can be dealt with through the one-size-fits-all solvent of force.

The Colony as War Space

Scholars of colonialism, from Frantz Fanon in the 1960s to Achille Mbembe today, have written a great deal about the colonial territory as a ‘space of exception’—as a zone where extreme violence is considered effective and necessary by those people and organizations in charge of governing these spaces and their populations. The forms of force used ‘at home’ in the imperial heartland are rarely considered tough enough for the establishment and maintenance of ‘order’ in the colony—that is, policing by consent is not considered a robust or strict enough form of law enforcement in the colony, where ‘maintaining order’ is in fact a euphemism for the much harsher task of eliminating resistance to the capitalist exploitation of land and resources. As a consequence, colonial conflicts are often marked by forms of extraordinarily violent policing and military security strategies that are nigh-unthinkable at home, including systematic torture, scorched earth tactics, collective punishment, and the targeting of civilians. The colonial territory is often conceptualized by its colonizers and their soldiers as a place where anything goes, where the ordinary rules that constrain human behaviour do not apply. In the frontier, only force is good enough.

This understanding of colonized spaces remains with us. It recurs throughout multiple strains of political thought and is found throughout popular cultural representations of contemporary warfare, including, of course, gaming. Johan Höglund (2008), for example, writes that military shooter games “are especially concerned with dramatizing the necessity of continuous military violence in the Middle East by describing this space as a site for perpetual war.” Much the same is true of *Rebel Inc.*, in which Afghanistan is characterized as empty and primitive, an undeveloped

blank slate without infrastructure, civil society, even agriculture. In addition to sharing this implicit understanding of the colonized space as vacant and uncivilized, *Rebel Inc.* also shares and promotes a method of engagement with this terrain and its population which we can summarize as militarized biopolitical governmentality.

Governmentality, Gameplay

In his later works, Michel Foucault (1992) theorized what he called ‘biopower’ as a characteristically modern form of government in which sovereign power is exercised over spaces and populations through complex systems of bureaucratic governance. Modern power in democratic states is administered through successive layers of institutional and organizational governance and control which embed the coercive power of the state into every part of our daily, ordinary activity. We no longer have the Pharaoh or the Dictator: in their place, we have an elaborate state apparatus conducting the work of power on a microscopic level, its surveillant gaze and violent potential dispersed throughout every aspect of our lives. Contemporary biopower—that is, power in the age of neoliberal capitalist imperialism—is a form of totalizing micromanagement which engages all aspects of life, from education and healthcare to religion, work, and even war.

In *Persuasive Games* (2007), Ian Bogost writes about Josh On’s *Antiwargame* (2001), a post-9/11 war simulator that is in some ways surprisingly similar to *Rebel Inc.* In On’s game, players manage resources—public and private, civilian and military—in order to successfully colonize an unspecified Middle Eastern nation. Crucially, the game’s moral and political argument is built into its gameplay mechanics, as “business and the military are indistinguishable; there is no way to support one without the other, suggesting a fundamental tie between the two” (p. 83). In *Antiwargame*, every aspect of intervention in the Middle East is a means of exerting imperial power. *Rebel Inc.* is built on a similar central argument about the total nature of modern neo-colonial warmaking. However, rather than weaponizing this insight into a pacifist accusation, Ndemie has stripped it of its critical potential and developed it into an entire gameplay system in which the player is rewarded for militarizing aid, justice, education, and governmental infrastructure in the service of a colonial nation-building enterprise. At the beginning of the game, there is nothing in Afghanistan. When the game is successfully finished, the player has established a functioning biopolitical government.

Whenever a player selects a gameplay option, they engage in a process of meaning-making and interpretation. Why, for example, would the player choose to allow charities to operate in their theatre of conflict? Why fund a literacy program, promote women’s rights, or institute free and fair elections? One wouldn’t, of course, unless these projects represented a way to supplement their counterinsurgency operations and thereby win the game. One of the most essential activities for a successful campaign, for instance, is a census: what could be more fundamental to a biopolitical society, after all, than total government control over personal data? The reduction of these civic processes to counterinsurgency gameplay options reveals each and every one of these activities as little more than a contribution to a total war effort. Power, even at its most benevolent, is always violent.

Violence, the Soul of Power

But just as providing public plumbing or school textbooks is part of the player’s work as a war leader, so too is killing. The justice options—those activities which help the player build a functioning system for the investigation and punishment of crime—are some of the most troubling elements of *Rebel Inc.*, as they encourage players either to passively disregard human rights or to

actively commit war crimes. One of the major political initiatives, for example, is the development of a police force. It begins life as a militia of locally recruited civilians, and, as players build it into a more organized and professional force, it gradually becomes more effective at preventing insurgent violence. One of the decisions that players are required to make as the police force grows in strength, however, is whether or not to jettison the security bonus (a gameplay advantage which suppresses insurgent activity and makes combat easier) that has been accrued by the police chief's brutal detention policies. The chief's disregard of human rights—that the player cannot be seen to endorse, and which will incur reputational damage if they retain the security advantages conferred by his cruelty—is one of the reasons that this security option helps the player defeat the insurgency. This works according to the maxim that more force creates more security—that justice, to be effective, must be violent.



When the player is prompted to select a character at the beginning of the game, they have a range of governor personas available to choose from, each of whom, naturally, has certain strengths and weaknesses. Several of them have particular forms of punitive violence that they enjoy. Selecting the Warlord allows the player to institute forced labour and execute deserters, for example, and the

Tank Commander can eliminate corruption by flattening corrupt officials with a tank. In each of the strategic decisions that are presented to the player throughout the gameplay of *Rebel Inc.*—whether it is sanitation projects, vaccination programs, prison reform, or the public executions made available by certain governors—the solidification of a political tactic into a gameplay option that can confer advantages or incur penalties represents a political truth claim about what each decision or activity *is*. The deep cynicism of *Rebel Inc.* is that every single political, civil, or practical intervention in Afghanistan exists exclusively to exert violent pressure against insurgents. Any activity is only worth doing if it helps the player win: the option to execute sleazy officials by tank, though gruesome, must be conceptualized and accepted as an essentially effective tactic, and therefore as morally neutral as building a library. Over there, anything goes.



The insurgency itself has a fascinating biopolitical character: the insurgents exist only to be defeated. They provide a purely antagonistic, unconditional opposition, as immune to compromise as the viral, fungal or bacterial pathogens of *Plague Inc.* Ndemie's first game was structured around public health, and *Rebel Inc.*, too, takes a public health approach to terrorism. The insurgency is a disease that must be eradicated through the hygiene of modernization. Crucially, insurgent violence is the only part of the game that does not contribute to the total system of counterterrorism in which the player participates; or rather, their contribution is negative, in that they contribute to

the pacification of Afghanistan through their destruction. They are the problem that is solved through the civilizing work of counterterrorism.

It is interesting, too, that religion only appears in relation to the potential counterterrorism advisors. The Religious Leader—an ‘advisor’ option available to be chosen before gameplay begins—is represented as being able to exert an influence upon the insurgents which decreases their combat capability. This redeployment of the stereotype that imams are conduits to insurgents is a mainstay of Islamophobic racism, as it casts religiosity as an index of terrorism. All of the improvements that players make to Afghanistan in the course of the game are secularizing. Religion is only mentioned in connection to insurgent violence, as a vague and sinister motivational force, and it has no further role in the player’s political improvement of Afghanistan. It is conspicuously not the player’s job to build mosques.



Conclusion: The Great Game

This logic of total counterterrorism—violently secularizing, holistically modernizing—in which every aspect of life is a form of counterinsurgent warfare, gives us a glimpse into Ndemie’s model of the ideal reconstructed Afghanistan. Afghanistan would be, once all of the biopolitical micromanagement is completed, the ideal liberal state: a technologically advanced, secular, capitalist democracy, with [full employment](#), a powerful police presence, and an efficient, popular government administered through representative electoral politics. *Rebel Inc.*, then, is an ideological fantasy in which rational processes of colonial governmentality can create safe, happy, civilized states. It does not simply represent Afghan society as primitive or celebrate the thrilling utility of colonial violence (although it does do those things): it reproduces an entire way of knowing the colonized territory, in the process reproducing an ideological image of both Western military intervention and a certain model of Westernizing post-conflict reconstruction as not only possible but as necessary, benevolent, and civilizing. The recent precipitous US military withdrawal from Afghanistan reveals to us that this image of the West’s role overseas was only ever spectral, illusory, a fantasy. *Rebel Inc.* is not only a particularly vivid glimpse into this rhetorical projection of imperial benevolence but also one of the ways in which this ideological fantasy has been seeded through the popular imagination in the later stages of this most recent Afghan war.

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