

Re-Writing Recent History: developing a National reconciliation pedagogy using a video game for school age children.

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Abstract

Australian Aboriginal people have suffered ignominy through British policies and practices since the legal conquest of their land in 1788. They have been historically and socially misrepresented on the premise of their race alone. Recent attempts at reconciliation have come some way towards a shared culture. However, the national curriculum has not been effective in promoting reconciliation as an important part of a student's education. As a pedagogical tool for advancing notions of reconciliation a game was developed. The pedagogical goal of the game is for students to experience notions of trust, empathy and collaboration – core to notions of reconciliation. Initial evaluation of the game suggests these goals are being met. The game provides a vehicle for notions of reconciliation to be broached in way school-age children can engage with the concepts at a familiar level (in a game). It promotes reflection on their own role in the reconciliation process.

Keywords -- **reconciliation, pedagogy, indigenous, 3D, video game**

Introduction

As a nation, Australia is young by European standards. However, its youthfulness is predicated on the accepted notions of its colonisation by the British Empire in 1788. Initially 'acquired' by 'settlement', this could only be achieved if the land was Terra Nullius; belonging to no one. At the time, only land that was uninhabited satisfied the definition of Terra Nullius. This posed a significant problem for the British colonists, as Australia was inhabited. As such, the colonists sought to broaden the concept of Terra Nullius. The inhabited territory might still be defined as Terra Nullius provided the inhabitants could be said not to own the land. They applied Locke's theory of private property, 'that one had to mix one's labour with common land in order to convert it into private property' (1690, *Second Treatise*, cited in [9], p288) as interpreted by Vattel (*Law of Nations* 1758). Moreover, the cultivation of land was the only manner in which to prove this. As a result, the British colonists were able to affect that Australia was

Terra Nullius, as Aboriginal Australian people did not appear to cultivate and therefore did not own the land. Instead, it was argued, Australian Aboriginal people simply roamed the land as migrating animals. A reason the British Empire was eager to define Australia as Terra Nullius can be found in the legal implications of the different methods of acquiring territory. More specifically, if Australia was conquered, the English common Law and public international law applicable at the time, would maintain that the conquered peoples' laws would remain in force until such time as the conqueror explicitly extinguished it. If, on the other hand, Australia was settled, then the settlers bring their law with them in order to fill a legal vacuum, as only land defined as Terra Nullius may be settled. This was only the first of many acts of disenfranchisement that Australian Aboriginal people have had to endure since 1788. Aboriginal Law was not acknowledged and Australian Aboriginal people have endured ignominy through British policies and practices since. Australia was held to be settled, and British law prevailed.¹

The intersection of law, property ownership, scientific racism² and land rights have been key factors leading to the ongoing discrimination towards Aboriginal people in Australia. For example, Aboriginal Australians were excluded from the census in the Federation of the States in Australia in 1901. This and other exclusions demonstrate how they have been historically and socially misrepresented on the premise of their race alone. This paper discusses in brief the background to the separatist practices of a colonised nation, and contemporary attempts at reconciliation and the lack of such recent attempts to redress past wrongs in the national curriculum. More specifically, it outlines a game for school-age children to play and learn about notions of

¹ Even in the famous Mabo case, in which it was held that Australia was not Terra Nullius, to acknowledge that Australia was therefore conquered by the British was problematic, as such acknowledgement may have brought the entire contemporary legal system into question.

² Scientific racism refers to the methodologies and systems of categorisation used to define, distinguish and order races of people.

reconciliation, its history and implications. Preliminary evaluations indicate some efficacy in using a game to explore reconciliation as a concept.

Background

Notions of race and racialisation are not new [8; 12]. In the early days of colonisation in Australia racism played a major role in how Aboriginal Australians were treated. This led to policies and laws which by and large ignored the people they were affecting. Although, recent attempts to reconcile past wrongs towards Aboriginal Australians in the law, media and education system are thwarted by misrepresentations, such as the use of stereotypes.

The idea of 'race' has a history that was constructed³ through emerging anthropologists who vied for status in the field of science in the 19th century. The 19th century saw the rise of evolutionary anthropology that drew from Darwin's theories from his *Origin of the Species* (1859). The Scientific Darwinist, Herbert Spencer, developed the theoretical premise that races were 'fundamentally different and fixed' [13, p20]. Social Darwinist⁴ principle ideas justified slavery, dispossession and massacres of Aboriginal people in Australia throughout the 19th century. By the early 20th century, Spencer defined Aboriginal Australians as the most 'backward race extant' (cited in [20], p41). This sort of prejudicial misrepresentation led to the management and control of Aboriginal Australians through Government policies.

Much of the destruction of the prior way of life for Aboriginal Australians is ignored in the literature and historical records. Most of what has been written is from a Eurocentric perspective. The 'untold' history of Aboriginal people in Australia includes massacres, poisoning, torture, dispossession, internment, enslavement and genocide [20]. In contemporary history, the process of reconciling the past atrocities only began with the 1967 Referendum that provided Aboriginal Australians the right to be included in the Census. Decades later, a Royal Commission into *Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991) outlined the historical and social disadvantages that have occurred and continue to occur as a result of the dispossession of the Aboriginal Australians. This led to the Reconciliation movement which culminated in the current Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd's Sorry⁵ speech (2008) where he apologised to

Aboriginal parents on behalf of the Government and the Australian people for taking their children during the assimilation period.

The process of reconciliation of past wrongs that began in 1967 with the referendum and most recently confirmed with the 'sorry' speech (Rudd, 2008), has not, however, fully entered the mainstream education curriculum in Australia. The continued privileging of an Anglo perspective in our contemporary history still dominates the Australian curriculum content regarding notions of Aboriginality.

Aboriginal Australians continue to be misrepresented or are absent in national history. Schools are still grounded in the values of 'whiteness' (Foley 2000, p. 48). To redress this, it is necessary to not only shift students' views, but also the majority of the views of teachers. This is part of a larger, recent, debate on the history curriculum in Australian schools in general (see [17 on Howard; 2; 21]). Notions of racialisation⁶ can be used to address the machinations of whiteness that assumes and maintains the principles of Social Darwinism. The dearth of literature addressing misrepresentations of Aboriginal Australians through the curriculum and education system remains largely unchallenged.

A Reconciliation Pedagogy

In order to address the gap in the curriculum for Australian contemporary history the authors of this paper proposed a new 'reconciliation pedagogy' (see [10]). Reconciliation is the process of reconciling differences, whether they be historical misrepresentations of cultural identity or any other site of dissonance. A 'Reconciliation Pedagogy' aims to educate for a more holistic, shared Australian Cultural Heritage. It is a pedagogy that requires the building of trust and reciprocity between students of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal background that are required to work towards a space that embodies reconciliation. A guiding epistemological framework emerges from Aboriginal standpoints on process orientated practices that aims to overturn discrimination towards Aboriginal Australians; an Aboriginal methodology that employs critical race theory that acknowledges and deconstructs history and calls for a recognition of Aboriginal pre-existence and ignominy; a process of empathy, trust and collaboration; in the Australian context, a pedagogy that attunes students' understandings of themselves, as raced subjects who have a responsibility to care for others in a world

³ Construction is used here to refer to the ways in which social theorists, anthropologists and eventually the media represented Aboriginal people as 'native savages'.

⁴ Social Darwinism was a quasi-scientific discourse that applied Darwin's notion of survival of the fittest in regard to animals and transferred the concept to human races.

⁵ The term 'Sorry' is significant as it carries symbolic weight for many Aboriginal families. Sorry Business or Sorry Camp occurs when someone dies. Mourners go

through a long period of remembering and mourning the dead. After a period of time mourners are able to move to a space of healing. In a similar way, Rudd's 'Sorry' gave public recognition to the families and their children who were taken away for over 100 years by those in power at the time [11].

⁶ Racialisation is a term used in reference to the deconstruction of theories on race and racism.

that diminishes those that are either objectified or omitted as First Nations peoples⁷.

Reconciliation pedagogy fosters collaboration between students that directly involves them in decision making and connections between the past and present history and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Both teachers and students are required to engage with the questioning process regarding their own location as raced subjects; how being one particular race can lead to incommensurate privileges often unseen until faced with an empathetic response of walking in another's shoes. Students are provided with the opportunity to engage with emotions that emerge from certain locations of advantage or disadvantage. The penultimate aim is for students to navigate, collaboratively, notions of sharing and empathy in order to achieve the aims of reconciliation.

In line with recent advances in pedagogy using play-like activities for deep learning outcomes (see [3, 4, 6, 18]) the authors of this paper have begun developing a game-based tool for teaching a reconciliation pedagogy (see figure 1). The tool embodies the aims of the reconciliation pedagogy: empathy, trust and collaboration. The game uses the popular Torque 3D game engine. In the game, participants are represented as either a sheep (introduced European domestic animal) or Kangaroo (indigenous fauna). Sheep and kangaroo characters were chosen to abstract the roles away from explicit race issues (ie Caucasian and Dark-skinned characters). Participants need to cooperate to maintain a sustainable environment. This is achieved through the sharing of resources and empathy with the other's plight. Notions of superiority are replaced with cooperation and collaboration towards common goals and overcoming differences whilst respecting the other's specific cultural ideals. Comprehensive teaching notes accompany the game. Preliminary evaluation in a school setting suggests there is much efficacy in this approach.

The Game

The game attempts to foster notions of empathy, trust and collaboration. These underpin the core values of reconciliation. The goal of the game is to discover the need to work together to share resources. Events in the game are structured to simulate the harshness of the outback Australian environment. In the gameplay, this harshness translates to the rapid loss of 'health' – players need to constantly attend to health-giving acts to preserve themselves. In time, they discover that they also need help from others and to help others to achieve the same health-preservation goal. Any number of players can play the game at the same time from different machines – typically, however, 12 players play, on 2 teams of 6. Players are randomly spawned in the game as either a sheep or a kangaroo. Hence, they do not know,

in advance, which team they will be on. Kangaroos and sheep have different healing and destructive powers or spells they can cast (see figure 1). For example, only kangaroos can cast the fire spell which takes away the food source, but they can also invoke rain which puts out the fire. Sheep can foul/poison the water holes and create erosion pits but they can also be contained behind fences which prevents them from spreading their damage.

A subplot of the game is to collect treasure and bring it back to the team base. Once the maximum number of treasure items (same as the number of players on a team) have been collected the game is over. However, as players' health deteriorates quickly, much time is spent on health preservation tasks rather than treasure collecting alone. This provides players time to reflect upon and discuss strategies for helping each other. The 2 different teams have different types of treasure. Boomerang treasure is used to represent land claims and is associated with kangaroos. Scroll treasure is used to represent land titles and are associated with sheep. There is no limit to how long a single session of the game can be played before all the treasure has been returned to base.

Once the game is complete students, gather in a circle sitting on the classroom floor and discuss their feelings about the game: strategies, teamwork, and when they discovered they needed to work together to succeed (if they did). This is then discussed in more general terms around notions of empathy, trust and collaboration. Finally, the history of reconciliation is revealed to bring these notions into the context of a shared Australian culture.

Evaluation

Six primary school students between the ages of 6 and 10 (2 male and 4 female) played the game for one hour in a controlled lab situation. The students were not given any information on the game or what its purpose was. They were simply asked to play the game and find a way to win. Their actions and conversations were recorded. Following the game session, a discussion was conducted where open-ended questions were asked about feelings invoked by the game.

All six students started the game within half a minute of each other. They spent the first 3-5 minutes investigating the controls. They were delighted to find they had spawned as a sheep or a kangaroo. They had no way of knowing who the other sheep or kangaroos were in the game. They immediately identified with the other animals that matched their's. By moving and shouting out to each other they were eventually able to discover which character was associated with which other student in the room. However, this did not last long due to the sameness of all the characters (sheep or kangaroo), causing some confusion.

⁷ First Nations Peoples is a generic universal term applied by colonised people who were the original inhabitants of their land.



Figure 1 Screenshot of 'Aussie Recon' reconciliation pedagogy game interface.




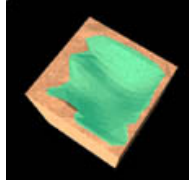






				
Fence – sheep contained	Broken fence – sheep escape	Grass – gives health to all	Waterhole – gives health to all	Erosion pit – takes health away from all
				
Fire – death to all within its reach	Water – recovery to all from fire	Fouls waterhole – poison to all who drink from it	Poison – maliciously cast by one to another	Antidote – beneficently cast from one to another

Figure 2 Spells available for casting by players – healing or destructive.

The first strategy to emerge was the urge to 'kill' their opponent – regardless of which team they were on. Teams had not established any collective strategy at this stage. It was not until players found being killed was annoying that they then started to collaborate. This required discussions outside and within the game (using the online text chat facility). However, they also began to notice that the reduction in health due to either inactivity (due to chatting online or outside the game) and not paying attention to seeking healing spells, many simply expired. They could be instantly respawned back at their base by clicking the LMB.

Within the first 12 minutes of gameplay one student identified the need to assist another in protecting them from harmful spells and thus maintain their health levels so they could retrieve the necessary treasures and win the game. This was the first explicit evidence of collaboration.

Many short games were played in the first hour of the session. This was possible as, with only 6 players, either team only needed to retrieve 3 treasures. However, once the notion of working together to protect each other, thus last longer and retrieve the necessary treasures, became apparent, the game-play shifted from the 'kill-em' all' gameplay to a more empathetic game of role negotiations. In time, this even included members of the other team who were willing to be co-opted for a common good.

Following the gameplay session an open-ended discussion was held with the students. Students were asked about their general feelings over the time they were playing the game and immediately after. Students claimed not to 'get' the game at first, but then, when they had played it for a while, they could see how it worked better if they 'worked with others'. They highlighted those salient moments when they felt 'hopelessly doomed', such as when one player was trapped in a ditch and needed help getting out, or elation when 'saved by rain' after having a fire spell cast upon them.

In general, there was a consensus that:

- the game brought players together rather than divided them
- teams were fluid. Players could help each other out regardless of which team they were on, and
- winning was not the main goal (although for at least one player it was).

Discussion

From the evaluation it appears that the author's goals of using a game to approach the question of a reconciliation pedagogy was being facilitated, at least in part. The pedagogical goal of the game is for the students to develop empathy, trust and collaborate – the core values of reconciliation. These goals can be seen to have been met by the way the students interacted with the game and their comments after the game. For example:

students were delighted with their characterisation as a sheep or kangaroo. This helped them to identify with

their character and other similar characters/animals. Identifying with a group is an important part of understanding collective feelings. Although there was some initial confusion about who a particular sheep or kangaroo was outside the game, this fostered notions of the collective rather than the individual player. Individual player mode was witnessed when they were playing the game: 'kill 'em all';

once simply killing others got 'boring' discussion ensued on how to work together. This was the first signs of the sorts of empathy, trust and collaboration central to reconciliation. Through collaboration, understanding the other's need, they could themselves last longer in the game. At this stage, the object of the game had become role negation. This was further extended to co-opting others when needed; and,

although the students did not 'get' the game initially, reflecting upon their gameplay, it became clear that the meta goal of the game was to work with others. They expressed feelings of 'doom' and elation, suggesting the game invoked strong emotions. To fully understand the goals of reconciliation, strong emotions are necessary.

Conclusion

Australian Aboriginal Law was extinguished in 1788 by British Law, claiming *Terra Australis* as a *Terra Nullius* – effectively uninhabited. Australian Aboriginal people have suffered ignominy through British policies and practices since. The intersection of law, property ownership, scientific racism and land rights have been key factors leading to the ongoing discrimination towards Aboriginal people in Australia. They have been historically and socially misrepresented on the premise of their race alone. Recent attempts at reconciliation have come some way towards a greater shared culture. However, it is the concern of the authors of this paper and others that the national curriculum is not effective in promoting reconciliation as an important part of a student's education. To this end we proposed a reconciliation pedagogy (see [10]). As a pedagogical tool in this reconciliation pedagogy a game was developed. The pedagogical goal of the game is for students to experience notions of trust, empathy and collaboration. Following game play, these experiences are discussed in an open forum in the context of reconciliation more generally. Initial evaluation of the game suggests the author's goals are being met, at least in part.

The importance of a reconciliation pedagogy in the national curriculum cannot be understated. A shared Australian culture without prejudice is only possible when empathy, trust and collaboration towards a common future is assured. The game provides a vehicle for these notions to be broached. It does so in way that provides a risk-free, non-threatening, environment for school-age children to engage with the concepts at a level with which they are familiar – video games. It promotes reflection on their own role as a part of a collective rather than focussing on the individual. Whether this proves to be sustainable remains to be

tested. After further evaluation and improvements, the authors of this paper propose to introduce the game as part of a National reconciliation pedagogy and monitor its effectiveness over the next 24 months.

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