

6 Language Worlds: Empire and Undoing in *Heaven's Vault*

This chapter analyzes the intersection of language, colonialism, and death in Inkle Studios' *Heaven's Vault*. In the game, we play as archaeologist Aliya as she roams around a fictional nebula, following the traces of a missing person. The more she learns of Janniqi Renba's disappearance, the deeper she falls into the mythology of the nebula—a universe of looping time, abused robots, fallen and forgotten empires, and a language called Ancient, which is inscribed in short phrases on many of the artifacts Aliya finds during her travels. With each new moon visited and each inscription decoded, the player gains a little more knowledge about the language, and she's able to understand the past (and its erasure) a little more completely.

Chapter 5 considered how the 2014 Inkle Studios game *80 Days* decentered the PC as a method of postcolonial game design. Now we'll look at the subsequent Inkle Studios game *Heaven's Vault* and examine the alternate strategies of postcolonial play it invites. *Heaven's Vault* has largely been received by critics and scholars as an impressive work of archaeogaming—which is to say, it has been hailed for its innovative ludic depiction of archaeology and its translation mechanic.¹ By presenting Aliya's work as a discovery-based linguistics puzzle rather than depicting it as tomb raiding and object collecting (à la ostensible archaeologist Lara Croft), *Heaven's Vault* "approaches the past much closer to the way a modern archaeologist does and emphasizes context, details, and research" over the thrill of imperialist discovery and plunder.² *Heaven's Vault* resists and reframes the colonialist mode of play in which environments revolve around the player's movements, with all objects and characters in a scene existing for the player's use and exploitation.

It does *not* do so, however, by decentering the PC. Aliya is quite important in this world, and she becomes increasingly a figure of fated importance as

the game progresses. Whereas *80 Days* offers an experience in which a rich European man grows less and less central throughout gameplay, *Heaven's Vault* gives us a marginalized woman who finds herself unintentionally at the center of history. But rather than a traditional hero narrative that simply substitutes a marginalized person at the center of the same old story (progressive in the sense of neoliberal identity politics but not subverting the fundamental narrative), *Heaven's Vault* illustrates how Aliya's marginalized position means that she really sees this world differently—so that when she gets the power to make a systemic change, she is poised to take advantage of it.

Rather than reading the game as archaeology, I consider the game through the lens of language and empire. Drawing from anticolonialist theorists from Edward Said to Sylvia Wynter to Édouard Glissant, we know that language is a tool of empire, used to bolster and expand control.³ Drawing from de Certeau, we know that one can use language to appropriate and articulate an extant linguistic system in the same way one can use Situationist rambling to appropriate and articulate one's own vision of the city.⁴ If language is a space you can wander through and also a tool of empire, then linguistic resistance becomes a counter-imperial tool. Just as the Situationists conceived of the *dérive* as a way to counterwalk the city, one can conceive of linguistic digressions, alterations, and permutations within a text as a way to *countertalk* a linguistic system (and its corresponding power structures).⁵ Digressions within a linguistic landscape thus become a method for resisting the norms and rules baked into that linguistic system. In the ludic context, playing with language can be a way of rehearsing resistance to colonialist discourses within a safely fictional world.

In the first section, I discuss *Heaven's Vault* as a world made up of many different types of linguistic fragments, many kinds of reading and writing, and an expanding linguistic context that renders information increasingly knowable. Linguistic actions (like decoding, translation, and contextualization) form the game's primary mechanic, and different kinds of written and spoken language (as well as different modes of reading and writing) feature as the game's main topic and backdrop. Both Aliya and the player must learn how to "read" all this language, and Aliya's ability to do so is strongly inflected and enhanced by her status as a colonial subject who has been educated in the imperial center. Her linguistic and cultural knowledge often combine to make clues semantically legible, clues that would

be incomprehensible to an archaeologist with a different background. Her multicultural knowledge uniquely situates her to solve the vast, ancient mysteries at the heart of the game.

In the second section, I discuss how language historically serves to uphold colonialist norms and how *Heaven's Vault* offers the player a linguistic space to practice resisting that violence. I examine how the language of empire in the game constructs cultural power differentials, legitimates inequity, and creates arbitrary boundaries and hierarchies among people.

In the final section, I discuss how the player digresses through this world. By navigating these colonized spaces so digressively, the player practices resisting imperial hierarchies and imagines the possibilities of new worlds—an alternative imagining that becomes fantastically possible in the ending of the game, when the player is invited to destroy this world entirely and create another. I read *Heaven's Vault* through Édouard Glissant's notions of a *prophetic past* and a *submarine identity*, arguing that the game resonates with ideas of temporality in Black postmodernist thought. Relatedly, I draw from decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter, who writes that the bleak story of humanity's future stems directly from colonial violence and that by writing humanity an alternate past, we could perhaps find a way toward a different future.⁶ This is what *Heaven's Vault* offers its player: a ludic space to think through.

Worlds Made of Words

There are two languages in *Heaven's Vault*—the Imperial language (rendered as English, which I will call Imperial) and Ancient (rendered in a spiraling, fictional script). Each can be spoken or written, but the player only ever hears Imperial spoken aloud (and only by Aliya). Phrases of written Ancient make up one of the game's primary mechanics and challenges: the player must translate fragmentary phrases of this logographic writing, a process that grows increasingly complex (and rewarding) as the player learns more Ancient and is subsequently offered more complicated translation puzzles. According to the game's website, "The pictorial nature of both Ancient Egyptian and Chinese writing systems inspired the glyphs of *Heaven's Vault*. Words are formed out of smaller 'atoms,' as they often are in German."⁷ It's difficult, however, not to see the visual inspiration of Arabic in Ancient's swirling design.⁸ Phrases of spoken Ancient, which occur relatively rarely,

are rendered in transliterated written speech bubbles. Because the player never learns the language's phonemes, the transliterated Ancient cannot be translated into Imperial (English) and thus the words remain intriguing curiosities. Written Imperial communicates information both diegetically and non-diegetically, appearing in an interesting variety of ways: written speech bubbles from Aliya and her conversation partners, descriptive text running along the bottom of the screen whenever Aliya and Six (part spy/part friend robot) leave a moon, summary text whenever the player reopens the game, interstitial cards situating the player when traveling ("THE WASTE/Sailing to Elboreth in Ioxian Space, via the Silk Pass"), interface text in the scene instructing the player where to click to enact actions ("talk to the trader"), Question and Reply buttons at the foot of the screen that light up colorfully when available, and all the metalanguage typical of any game's menus screen.⁹

As on Earth, each language carries weighted cultural meanings. Ancient, the hieroglyphic language written in fragments all over the nebula, has been unevenly forgotten. The scholars at the University of Iox can translate (some) written words but don't seem to know how to speak it at all. For the nebula's colonized people (for example, on Elboreth or Maersi), Ancient seems to have been passed down with the uneven quality of folk knowledge. Elborethians can't necessarily translate written Ancient into Imperial, but they often speak short phrases and write in Ancient script—sometimes knowing what a phrase means when they use it, and sometimes using it the way a modern English speaker might use a short Latin phrase whose meaning they can approximate through tradition and context.

Aliya sits at a particularly interesting node of interconnected sources of knowledge, both linguistic and cultural. She grew up as an orphan on Elboreth, before Professor Myari brought her to the University of Iox as a student. Now she continues to work for the university as an archaeologist and field researcher. She spends the game navigating both her Elborethian identity, which often inflects her research insights, and her work as an anthropologist on Iox, through which she has access to resources like research colleagues, the university library, Professor Myari, and Six (who offers crucial but sometimes unwanted help throughout Aliya's journeys). It's obviously a challenge for Aliya to deal with the racism and discrimination she experiences on Iox, and it's also a challenge for her to engage with her childhood home and acquaintances on Elboreth. On Iox, Myari

regularly insults her as an “Elborethian rat,” and her lack of religious piety toward the Imperial orthodoxy further marks Aliya as Other. On Elboreth, she’s sneeringly called “Ioxian” and criticized for her privileged lifestyle by her childhood friend Oroi. Aliya adeptly moves between these places, taking advantage of what each can offer. In one of the more obvious binaries, she always has the choice of showing a new-found artifact to Tapi, a shady trader on Elboreth, or to Huang, a librarian on Iox. Both men will try to take whatever object she shows them, and both will offer a similar object for her perusal in return; the mechanics of each place, the game argues, are nearly identical, despite their differences in tone, class, and setting.

In navigating her identity and engaging with all sorts of text, Aliya’s character makes manifest the many kinds of linguistic fluency, legibility, and communication that the game offers and that the player too must learn how to read.¹⁰ In some cases, Aliya’s specific cultural knowledge makes semantically legible something that might otherwise be incomprehensible. While exploring a ruined marketplace moon, Aliya finds a sculpture that she recognizes as a representation of a “twirler” (an Elborethian style of dance), a connection that a different Ioxian scholar would likely not have made at all but that Aliya immediately connects to a fond memory from childhood. On the heels of this revelation, she realizes that someone from Elboreth must have visited this supposedly deserted moon, and recently. The multi-cultural fluency she’s developed through her diversity of experiences—her Ioxian education, archaeological training, childhood on Elboreth, steadily increasing knowledge of Ancient—together render her uniquely qualified to interpret the information she comes across on her travels.

Different sorts of fluency combine in the Catkis Gate on Elboreth, a piece of technology Aliya used hundreds of times as a child to travel from the foot of the mountain to the city at the top. To use the gate, she speaks syllables of transliterated Ancient, whose meaning she doesn’t know but whose sounds Elborethians have memorized. The first time in the game she tries to speak the words, the phrase fails to activate the hopper, confusing her. Six jabs at her evident anxieties about her relationship to her home planet, smarmily announcing, “The gate has rejected you. Perhaps you are too Ioxian.” But despite Aliya’s anxieties, the Gate isn’t an Elborethian identity purity test; after she disarms herself of weapons and repeats the phrase, the Gate takes her immediately to the summit. As Aliya (and the player) learns more about hoppers—the same transporter technology

that Six uses to move the two of them between spaceships and planetary surfaces—she realizes that the Catkis Gate she's known since childhood is actually a long-distance hopper, capable of transporting someone to a faraway planet if they speak the right Ancient words. She begins to experiment with the names of different goddesses in the pantheon, and, eventually, with a word that transported a child accidentally to another planet. She is also miraculously transported to the Catkis Gate by an entity called The Buried God, which she meets while deep in a mine on a faraway planet. Suffocating from lack of air, she begs for help from the carved eye of the God and then wakes up at the Catkis Gate. Six soon follows, saying that the Catkis Gate informed him that his human had arrived: "The gate believes that you belong to me. . . . I received a communication. It called me." From these sorts of adventures, the bigger picture begins to crystallize, for both Aliya and the player: long-ago technologies, poorly understood, remain all over this nebula and originated at the same time as the Ancient language.

These technologies are often used in a utilitarian way—the Catkis Gate is used as a glorified elevator, for example—but their hidden complexities tell a story of a civilization so vastly more complicated than this one that its technologies have trickled down the centuries like magic words or religious precepts. The Ancient language can be performative, in the sense of J. L. Austin's speech act theory, which is a quality it shares with computer control language.¹¹ Software studies have long noted the overlap between imperfectly understood technologies and magical explanations, particularly the magic spell quality of computer code. Florian Cramer writes, "Computer control language is language that executes. As with magical and speculative concepts of language, the word automatically performs the operation."¹² We see this idea made manifest in Aamir (an Elborethian child), who speaks a forbidden word to the Catkis Gate and is transported to the marketplace moon for a year; his unshakable interpretation (even after Aliya finds him and brings him safely back to Elboreth) is that he died. Aliya, aware of further context than Aamir, wonders why ancient Elboreth would have been important enough to justify being connected by long-distance hopper to what had been a trade hub of a moon. The word *ifarali*, whose semantic (rather than performative) meaning we never actually need to learn in order to complete the game, opens the final door to Heaven's Vault at the very end.

Robots contain something called a Rebeske Foil, another technology-turned-magic that draws the reader deeply into the complexities of reading, writing, and legibility in this ludic universe. Six describes a Rebeske Foil as a robot's "fingerprint," unique to each, an Ancient technology that the engineers of the Ioxian Empire can only roughly (and poorly) approximate or understand. These foils function like something between a hard drive and a brain, and with the right technology, they can be read or overwritten—although not, Six implies, in the case of the latter without a certain kind of violence. Foils are not universally intelligible; when they find a telescope on the cratered moon, Aliya asks if Six can read its Rebeske Foil, to which Six replies, "I have a foil inside me but there is no common language."

These tiny foils contribute further to the notion of an enchanted universe in which anything carries the possibility of hidden meanings and messages. With its emphasis on this technical notion of "reading" and "writing," too, *Heaven's Vault* offers some creative answers to the conversations that dominated in early critical code studies, Net art, and electronic literature.¹³ How is it different when a machine rather than a human reads a piece of text or code? In one particularly startling moment, Aliya happens to place a statuette of a goddess into a small indentation on a stone grave marker, provoking a shocking appearance: the holographic, talking head of a long-dead royal child. The statue is covered with an inscription, but the gravestone is "reading" a foil tucked inside it. Eventually they learn that the foil was "written" by a hopper eye—an eye that "read" an important human's neural mesh and recorded it onto a foil. The full meaning of the statuette/foil combination isn't clear until Aliya brings the goddess statue back to the colonized moon where it was carved. There, a local man separates the foil from the statue; he's obviously unable to read the foil (the way any human would be unable to read a hard drive with their own eyes), but he translates the Ancient inscription carved onto the statue, telling Aliya that "any child could read" it. There are many kinds of literacy in this universe, many languages and objects that all could communicate, should one possess the facility (linguistic, mechanical, social, or cultural) to read them.

In this episode, we once again observe how the Imperial epistemologies of Iox disrespect and ignore cultural knowledge and traditional practices in other parts of the empire. Aliya notes that the scientist who previously found the goddess figurine must not have thought to return it to Maersi,

where he would have discovered the inner foil and learned the inscription. In a similar moment, Aliya mentions that “Elborethians carve Ancient symbols for luck. I don’t think they know what they mean,” and Six sneers “a primitive people,” the default Ioxian understanding of Elborethian language use. On Iox, where scholars study and translate Ancient in libraries, this discriminatory thinking dismisses the value of using passed-down, half-remembered phrases in a colloquial way. But of course, as we learn increasingly throughout the game, Aliya’s colloquial understanding of Ancient, borne of her Elborethian childhood, is precisely what makes possible the big, theoretical leaps that better help her understand her universe.

From this perspective, Aliya and her employers fall into a late capitalist paradigm for understanding language competence in the workplace—recognizing the value of multilingualism to a company but disrespecting home-taught knowledge. According to Bonnie Urciuoli, the twenty-first-century workplace conceptualizes a prospective employee as a “bundle of skills.”¹⁴ This separates the employee learning a language to use at work (for whom that competency is a skill) from the employee who learned it from their grandmother (for whom that competency is a cultural heritage, inseparable from the self). Urciuoli notes that with the framing of the worker as a “bundle of skills,” “not only is the worker’s labor power a commodity but the worker’s very person is also defined by the summation of commodifiable bits.”¹⁵ And because of this notion of the worker-self, Heller and McElhinny write, “The elements of linguistic form and linguistic practice that compose them are increasingly amenable to being treated as commodities, that is, as resources available for exchange and measurable (perhaps with difficulty) in terms of money.”¹⁶ By treating linguistic knowledge as one skill within a bundle of skills, this paradigm thus erases the conception of language as an aspect of culture, identity, and heritage. “How do workers imagine themselves as internalized exchange systems in which segments of self are like money?” Urciuoli asks.¹⁷ For a colonial subject like Aliya, the answer is distinctly fraught: How could she identify which segments of herself have led to which archaeological revelations? She draws from a lifetime of experiences and succeeds because of it.

Alternately, we could understand *Heaven’s Vault* as highlighting the importance of context, showing how impossible it can be to understand a true thing without understanding its context fully. The translation mechanic works because players slowly come to recognize, through context clues, what

different glyphs might signify. Correspondingly, the objects themselves are important because things in this game can talk in ways beyond the written script inscribed on them. Given several objects that originated in the same location, Six can triangulate that location such that those sites appear on the map and can be visited. Even if an object doesn't have any words inscribed on it, it can still communicate important information (for example, where it was found and made), which helps Aliya and Six triangulate the approximate position of that unknown site. Similarly, they usually know the context of a piece of language ("This one's a broken piece from an even longer phrase"). Aliya situates objects within their contexts—linguistic, geographic, temporal, material—and because the game is designed in this way, each new piece of information fits like a puzzle piece into an increasingly vast puzzle.

The colonialist dynamics and center-periphery power structure of the empire aren't at all hidden, but they are crucial to the mystery at the heart of the game. *Heaven's Vault* hinges on the player gradually coming to understand how this world and its languages have been shaped by the power structures of the past. In the next section, we'll look more closely at how that works.

Language of Empire

Usually when we talk about language co-constructing imperial hegemony, we mean that colonial governments have the power to shape representations of reality through the use of many tools, including language, and that they do so in order to (implicitly and explicitly) legitimate inequities across an empire. Edward Said's *Orientalism* famously explained how humanistic disciplines, including the study of language and literature, have been crucial in the construction of hierarchies of knowledge, thereby playing a pivotal role in the legitimization of imperialism.¹⁸ What we call a thing shapes how we perceive it, and empires have the power to name, categorize, and describe in ways that benefit the continuation of the empire. Such linguistic imperialism becomes difficult to counteract, in part because the words come to seem innate, obvious, incontrovertible, and circular in reasoning, thus erasing the historicity of knowledge construction. *Heaven's Vault* offers a science-fiction twist on this postcolonial problem by presenting us with an ironclad, circular notion of history—Ioxian orthodoxy believes

in a looping time line in which the future has already happened—and by making the Ioxian landscape itself into a kind of text. The language of the nebula, which seems incontrovertible, can in fact be read—and eventually rewritten.

The diegetic world of *Heaven's Vault* occurs during a period of formal overseas colonialism. Iox occupies the imperial center, and the colonized moons of Maersi and Elboreth provide raw goods to Iox, as well as markets for Ioxian products. The power dynamic leans heavily toward Iox, which sits at the center of the rivers and serves as the literal seat of knowledge (the location of the only university we know to exist in this universe). But *Heaven's Vault* is a postcolonial game in that it has been designed from a postcolonial perspective, with an awareness of the dynamics and after-effects of colonialism. Players in *Heaven's Vault* are constantly translating between center and periphery, constantly made aware that goods and knowledge located at the margins of the Ioxian protectorate have been co-opted by Iox. Aliya struggles openly with her identity and her sense of belonging on both Elboreth and Iox. By foregrounding these concerns, the game is doing intricate postcolonial thought work and enabling the player to think postcolonially.

Part of this postcolonial thinking has to do with the mental shift Aliya and the player make by the end of the game. While the hierarchies of cultural importance—the power differential between Iox and everywhere else—present themselves as obvious, necessary, unchangeable, and always already in place, Aliya slowly learns that all these structures are historically situated, were made, and *can be unmade*. The process of mental decolonization proceeds through the knowledge that these hierarchies were forged and upheld by colonizers who benefit from them rather than created by some natural force. The map of the nebula serves as an ever-emerging reference and reminder of what can and cannot be read—what is and is not (yet) legible. While the player begins by “reading” the map in the conventional understanding of that phrase (“these paths travel in *this* direction,” “these paths will take me to *that* moon”), it eventually becomes clear that there is a more physical, embodied relationship between the twisting rivers of the nebula and the sentient creatures who sail within them. Initially the rivers communicate nothing, carry no semantic meaning. The phrase “written in the waters,” which Aliya uses with Timor, suggests something that is fated, unchanging, and unchangeable. When Aliya first proposes the possibility

of a human changing the course of a river, Oroí scoffs: “You can’t make a river and even if you could, you can’t tell it which way to flow.” There is no communicating with a river, no common language to learn how to speak.

And yet different aspects of the nebula emerge to make it seem more like a living creature than a static backdrop. Sometimes the nebula is described like a massive body, its rivers a network of veins and arteries. Professor Myari tells Aliya, “We are the breath of the nebula.” The Buried God, when Aliya finds its eye deep underground, seems to be made of stone carved long ago—but the carved inscriptions around its rim change instantaneously in response to the questions Aliya speaks aloud. The player has the uneasy sense that perhaps other, seemingly inert matter across this universe is listening—and that the player could communicate with it if only they could learn its language.

The map expands as the player travels farther and learns more, which is not uncommon in adventure games. But Huang offers Aliya a more transcendent theory: that the map functions not only as a record of locations but as a hidden cipher. Huang tells her he’s read about an ancient library that “sits within the eye of knowledge.” In the margin next to that phrase is written a swirl, which Huang first saw as semantically meaningless but then recognized as the shape of the ancient glyph meaning “knowledge” (figure 6.1). That swirl, Huang says, is the shape of a river that leads to the location of the library; find that shape on the map and you’ll find the library. The ancient language is literally written into the map—or did the language take its inspiration from the shape of the rivers? In one of the most transcendent epiphanies in the game, Aliya realizes that the rivers, which everyone had always assumed were natural phenomena, were actually crafted by the ancients—which means that new rivers can be created, new futures can be forged, and *the map can be rewritten*. The map of the nebula is not an immutable, unchangeable background to events; it’s a living, breathing document that can be both read and written.

This new understanding—that the ancients made the rivers, wrote the map, and crafted both the linguistic and the geographic pathways of this world—shifts the player’s perspective in a fundamentally decolonial way. Iox’s position at the center of the map no longer seems like a fact of nature but rather the result of a designed, colonial power imbalance. Once while sailing, Aliya notes that all rivers lead to Iox: “Iox is where you’ll end up if you tie off your sail. It’s the heart of the nebula. Or else, it’s the gutter.”

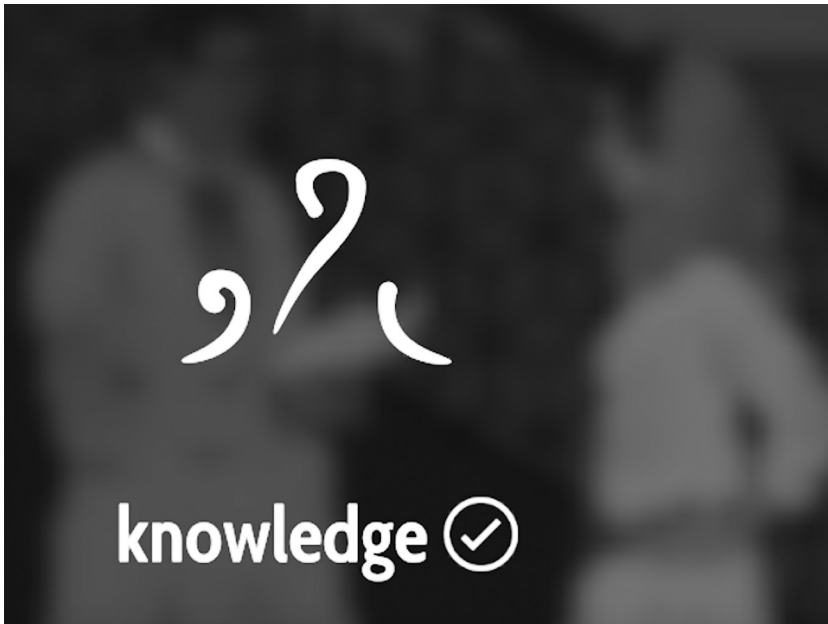


Figure 6.1

The Ancient word for “knowledge.” Author’s screenshot of *Heaven’s Vault*.

But all roads do not *just naturally happen* to lead to the imperial center; as with all structures of power, these networks of transport were carefully designed to center some places, people, and languages over others. Thousands of years later, this has come to seem like a natural phenomenon—unavoidable, predetermined, inalterable.

Except that it can be altered, and Aliya can choose to alter it. When Aliya and Six find a lush moon, they realize that its water has been hydrating Iox for millennia by way of a long-forgotten, long-distance hopper. With full knowledge that her action will cause chaos at best (and a disastrous drought at worst), Aliya can choose to reroute the water, creating a new river that will take her and Six to the eponymous Heaven’s Vault and the implied destruction of the nebula. If the spiraling rivers have been written into the nebula—in the sense of both having been created intentionally by a sentient force and sharing the resemblance with Ancient script—then Aliya’s divergence of that final river is an act of radical rewriting of the historical text.

In the final section, I discuss how Aliya's ultimate act of rewriting is made possible by the digressive way she navigates this world. By wandering through the world of words, rejecting the many pulls toward tradition and linearity, she leaps from one story to another, digressing further and further away from conventional history and toward a radically decolonial future. As *Heaven's Vault* enables the player to play in this digressive space, it puts forth the ludic version of Sylvia Wynter's notion: that the way toward a decolonial future is precisely through a rewriting of the colonial past.¹⁹ Drawing from scholarship in Black postmodernism and Afrofuturism, I read the game's digressiveness as an orientation toward history and a way of grounding the self in a practice of continuous divergences away from that history. Aliya is given a certain imperially ordained story of the past; she explores it, immerses herself in it, digresses from it, rejects it, rewrites it, and eventually finds a way forward into a radically new future.

Decolonial Digressions

In the Introduction to this book, I summarized the history of digression as a Western literary form. I discussed several of the interpretations of digressive prose—a metaphorical way of reading the text of a city with one's feet; a sexist simplification of the chattiness and unimportance of women's writing; a formal way for writers or their characters to filibuster death like Scheherazade. In this section, I argue that the digressive mode in which the player navigates the colonialist space of *Heaven's Vault* serves as a way for them to practice resistance to hierarchies and imagine the possibilities of new worlds—an alternative imagining that becomes quite real in the ending of the game, when the player is invited to destroy this world and create another. In doing so, I draw from ideas of temporality in Black postmodernism (especially from Wynter and Glissant).²⁰

Aliya stars as the game's only playable character, a serious postcolonial act of game design. Video games rarely enable players to play as women of color; moreover, video games even less frequently offer the opportunity to inhabit a PC who actively expresses how she struggles with her identity as a colonized subject of an empire. This design choice—Aliya as PC—echoes Sylvia Wynter's argument in favor of orienting stories from nonhegemonic perspectives: "Those cast out as impoverished and colonized and undesirable and lacking reason—can, and do, provide a way to think about

being human anew."²¹ Thinking from the periphery rather than the center maps to the tension between nonlinearity and linearity, forging new paths through digression instead of hewing to a set path. Linearity is never a possibility for Aliya; she has already been made *Other* by Iox and its structures of knowledge, so she is incentivized to take, or make, an alternate path for herself.

And so digression quickly becomes how you navigate your way through this game. Myari asks you to go somewhere; you obey at the beginning but quickly learn how to refuse and instead go where you want. You chart a course for one location; on the way, you notice a ruin that isn't on the map, so you veer off course and find yourself exploring a whole different section of the nebula than you intended. Fundamentally, the game feels so digressive because its primary mechanic, language learning, is inherently digressive. There is no way to learn a language from start to finish in a linear way. No one learns a language by memorizing a dictionary. No one even learns a language to a high level of proficiency by reading one textbook after another; although textbooks can form a basis for knowledge, a learner must practice linguistic skills over and over, in nonlinear situations and contexts, practicing and failing in small ways again and again. In *Heaven's Vault*, the player similarly learns Ancient not in a predetermined order but rather by guessing morphemes and then eventually whole words. Narrative director Jon Ingold has noted in an interview that the artifacts and their corresponding translation challenges appear around the nebula in response to the translation knowledge the player has already gleaned rather than in preordained order.²² You don't learn Ancient in a linear manner: you guess at one word, then leap to another, backtrack, fail, try a different phrase, find a different inscription, and add to your own dictionary word by word.

Digression is a practice that gets easier over time. Aliya and Six develop their ability to plot their own course and trust their own knowledge. She stops needing to check in with Myari so often, and the game eventually stops prompting her to do so. Instead, you and she jump from one revelation to the next: the Withering Palace, the Buried God, the Marketplace Moon, the Library, the Cratered Moon, the Lush Moon—each new discovery offering more context for the story as a whole and a new goal, the importance of which seems to dwarf any former goals completely. You needn't approach the game with intentional digressivity—you can begin in good faith with your search for the missing roboticist, Janniqi Renba—but the

digressions away from that plotline soon become much more interesting than that given plotline.

So instead you digress. In doing so, you learn that the past is *not* what Iox told you it was. You learn that the future is *not* preordained, as the Ioxian orthodoxy would have it; things have *not* always been thus, and things *need not* always be thus. You drift farther and farther away from Iox, geographically and ideologically and linguistically, traveling into the far reaches of space, chasing new leads. Digress long enough, and you'll find yourself irrevocably altering the path of the rivers, destroying Iox itself, and considering whether to craft a brand-new world order. "Would you like to vault?" the robots in the final scene ask, by which they mean: Would you like to leave this world behind? Would you like to try the nebula again and see if things could be better this time around?

As in the previous chapter, we see how Inkle Studios uses an affordance of science fiction to conceive of decolonial possibilities. With *80 Days*, the speculative fiction of the world aligned with Mary Flanagan's notion of rewriting; to play in the *80 Days* universe is to engage with a steampunk, noncolonialist nineteenth century in which a different version of history took place. In *Heaven's Vault*, Inkle offers a harshly colonial world, the structures of which the player takes part in unmaking. In doing so, the game draws from long thought traditions in the poetics of hope and radical futurity. Theorists have long imagined futures centered in joy, hope, and possibility, creating scholarship to reframe and counter racism, sexism, cis-heteronormativity, capitalism, and colonialism.²³ In this last section, I draw from some of those discourses to read *Heaven's Vault* through the lenses of Black posthumanism and Afrofuturism.

In Black posthumanism, blending temporalities enables the notion of radical futurity. In *Heaven's Vault*, we can see this kind of blurring between temporalities in the notion of the Loop; Aliya's discoveries reframe that imperial ideology of time such that the player "make[s] connections to diasporic history in the present and also imagine[s] the future as a site of power."²⁴ In the Afrofuturist movement, the lines joining present, past, and future blur similarly, the better to imagine or recontextualize futures that deviate from narratives of colonialist teleology and inexorability.²⁵ In *Heaven's Vault*, the possibility for intervention seems impossible at the beginning of the game. How could one ever intervene in future events that have already occurred in the past, as the Loop suggests they do?—but that

grows increasingly possible and eventually seems inevitable by the game's conclusion. Édouard Glissant's notion of a *prophetic past* elucidates the complicated way that temporality works for a postmodern subject living under postcolonialism. He writes,

The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. . . . It leads to the identification of a painful notion of time and its full projection forward into the future, without the help of those plateaus in time from which the West has benefited, without the help of that collective density that is the primary value of an ancestral cultural heartland. That is what I call a *prophetic vision of the past*.²⁶

The theology of *The Loop in Heaven's Vault* suggests that the past is indeed prophetic, but in a tightly circular and regressive way that carries whispers of a Christian understanding of temporality—as it is, so it was, so shall it be, world without end. The past is important to study because it predicts the political future of the empire. Professor Myari believes that time proceeds in a circle and that the Ioxian Empire will fall because the Ancient Empire fell. Aliya's (heretical) understanding of temporality, as it evolves throughout the game, is much more reminiscent of Glissant's conceptualization. The past might be prophetic, but not because it predicts a future that loops (forever and ever, amen); rather, the past is “obsessively present,” and the more that Aliya explores its presence and projects her understanding of that presence into the future, the more she is able to reach “escape velocity” from the regressive loop of time and physically vault herself into the decolonial future.

Heaven's Vault also exhibits something similar to Glissant's notion of *submarine identity*. Glissant writes that Caribbean identity has “submarine roots, that is floating free, not fixed in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches.”²⁷ It ebbs and flows, growing out of traumatic and colonialist histories in which it's still submerged, spreading and connecting and branching as it goes. Baucom calls this “a self which manifests itself not as an essence but as a meandering.”²⁸ In his writing on errantry, too, Glissant connects digressive movement with identity. As Irene Fubara-Manuel writes on Glissant, “Errantry is movement with a ‘sense of sacred motivation’—‘wandering without becoming lost.’ Errantry is wandering with a higher purpose.”²⁹

This conception of a meandering, errant self resembles that which Aliya develops as the game proceeds. The digressions she takes, both linguistic

and geographic, develop her personality, her relationships, her notion of herself. She is constantly meandering through both networks of rivers and the nuances of language. Her motion grounds her. Aliya is not rootless in Glissant's sense; she was born on Elboreth, and she can claim that identity whenever she wants (although there are also ways of playing her that don't claim the identity so readily). But her *self* and her *future* emerge from the concatenation of digressions she takes. As Baucom writes on Glissant, "If the subject of this post-colonial submarine again manifests itself as a root-work, and as a route-work, this subject finds itself wanderingly-grounded not 'in some primordial spot' but in the uncertainties of imperial water."³⁰ In the uncertainties of Ioxian imperial water, Aliya wanders until the wandering propels her into her chosen future.

While the postcolonial context and content of *Heaven's Vault* render this theorization of self more visible—many games would be less amenable to being read through Glissant and Wynter—it is possible to see how identity in multiple narrative games grounds itself in this postmodern and postcolonial notion of self. This presents us with an intriguing way of reading the fundamental digressivity of a wide variety of games. If the player's digressive self in *Heaven's Vault* is decolonial—composed of a series of anti-Imperial digressions, as chosen by the player—how about the player's digressive self in a classic adventure game? We tend to read the player-self's evolution in terms of its morality—choose evil acts to become a more evil character—but what if we saw the player's self in Glissant's terms: a self as a meandering, a self composed of all the digressions it's taken to get here. Such a self would be neither good nor evil but, rather, wandering. This is one of the many ways the term *wandering game* could be taken: a game in which a player roams a disconnected world, digressing between stories, places, texts, and contexts until they've assembled a self that manifests as a meandering.

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