<u>Conquerors in Cute Clothing</u>
Analysis of Colonialism, Empathy, and Japanese Soft Power in *Pikmin 2*

I've always been a Nintendo fangirl. *Pokemon* kept me company when my family moved, and my dad and I tag-teamed our way through *Wind Waker*. However, when I began raving to my dad about how cool Japan was, he cocked an eyebrow at me. He then told story after story of Japanese atrocities, including the beatings he received in the rigidly punitive Japanese education system left in Taiwan and how my grandfather was almost stationed in Nanjing before its infamous Rape. "Given all this history, it astounds me that you think Japan is so cool", he mused.

My dad's not the only one with these concerns. Japan's "soft power", the idea that a country's cultural outreach can be just as influential as typical force, is extremely large and has been seized by pundits and politicians alike as an opportunity to encourage favorable relationships.[1] In particular, the Japanese government has tried to leverage this into reducing tensions about its imperialist past. [2] *Pikmin 2,* a game published two years after the idea of "Cool Japan" emerged, makes it an interesting game to analyze, especially given its central narrative of space exploration and Pikmin labor. Throughout all of its character interactions between Olimar, Pikmin, and the player, *Pikmin 2* whitewashes, naturalizes and promotes exploitation – downplaying imperialist ambitions in both the game and in Japan at large.

We begin by analyzing the relationship between the Hocotatians (Olimar, Louie and the ship) and the Pikmin, the most obvious "colonial" relationship. Despite the fact that Olimar is nominally the captain, the ship is the game's main voice, constantly interrupting gameplay with cutscenes of treasure assessments or tutorials. Meanwhile, Olimar's notes are relegated to side

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[1] Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool" Foreign Policy (Nov. 2009)
        http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/11/japans-gross-national-cool/
[2] Michael Norris, "Exploring Japanese Popular Culture as a Soft Power Resource" Student Pulse (2010)
        http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/253/exploring-japanese-popular-culture-as-a-soft-power-resource

menus, forcing us go out of our way to hear his perspective (Figure 3). So what does the ship think of Pikmin? "Lazy", "lack survival skills", and about to be "devoured" without your intervention! (Figure 1A) To the ship, the Pikmin are incompetent, which seems to contrast with what we see on the screen. When we first encounter Pikmin, they're already fighting enemies and taking care of themselves, a far cry from the ship's concerns. However, as soon as you blow your whistle, the Pikmin immediately start following you, now incapable of acting without your guidance. From these observations, we see the idea of the "White Man's Burden" emerge, the perspective that colonizing others is for the benefits of the colonized[3]. The Pikmin's original activities before you came don't matter; instead, the mindless following is part of your quest to civilize and "save" their species.

However, much like the European conquerors in Africa, despite painting colonialism in terms of a noble "burden", the colonized are actually just treated like subhuman tools. To the ship, Pikmin only matter for gathering treasures – useful but easily disposable. One striking example is when Candypop buds are discovered, which take one Pikmin and output a different colored Pikmin in return. While the ship claims that the Pikmin look like they "yearn to be tossed in", if we do so, we hear a scared scream and a new Pikmin seed being shot out. Pikmin pain doesn't matter to the ship and is ignored in favor of getting more "useful" types. We see more of this callousness the first time a White Pikmin gets eaten (Figure 1B). Rather than lamenting the fact that a Pikmin died, the ship simply notes the White Pikmin's poisonous taste, nearly implying that we should use this as a strategy!

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[3] Kipling, Rudyard. "The White Man's Burden." Wikipedia.org

Figure 1: The ship's constant vocal interruptions lay down an explicit hierarchy of Olimar and Louie as saivors to the uncultured Pikmin, similar to the idea of the White Man's Burden. (A) shows the judgmental language used by the ship to denigrate the Pikmin while (B) demonstrates the callousness of the ship to the deaths of the Pikmin, only noting how their deaths can be used (Image A from Chuggaaconroy. Image B from Flightship's Let's Play)

This relationship is naturalized by the Pikmin's own relationship to their surroundings. By showing the animal-like Pikmin with the same colonizing attitudes, it legitimizes the idea that all relationships should be fundamentally self-serving. Pikmin have no qualms massacring their environment, much like the Hocatians. Piles of corpses are a common site in the game, but no moral judgment or guilt is given in-game (Figure 2A). The Bulbmin – a normal Bulborb (a common enemy) infected with a parasitic Pikmin – offer a much more extended example. You recruit these creatures after defeating their own Olimar analogue and using the whistle, again acting as savior as they literally run lost in circles. Although in-game, they're played off as just a helpful addition to your team, the implications of parasitically mind-controlling someone to not only help your enemies, but also cannibalize other members of your species is horrifying. Leaving them behind in the cave just drives home the point that they're just tools that can be discarded at any time once the main treasure-seeking objective has been completed (Figure 2B). Similar to how Social Darwinism became more widespread by using nature as an excuse for racism, these examples of Pikmin exploiting others make it more ok for the Hocatians to do it. Perhaps the most striking example of this normalization is the popular companion song to

Pikmin 2, "Ai No Uta". Sung from the Pikmin's point of view, this song includes the lyric "We'll fight, be silent and follow you, but we won't ask you to love us". Just as they're ok destroying others for their colony to thrive, so too are they ok with you taking control of them – a darkly strange message.

Interestingly, this exploitative relationship goes outside of the game and also serves as a paradigm for how the player relates to the game. In a meta sense, collecting serves as a way for the player to exert power and control over their environment.[4] Getting all of the treasures in the game give the player the pleasure of having a series of goals that can be accomplished methodically and exhaustively. However, as a result, the player focuses more on their own wants,

Figure 2: The Pikmins' relationship with the environment underscores the exploitation theme displayed in the ship / Olimar's relationship to the Pikmin. (A) shows the land littered with corpses after Pikmin killed a bunch of animals – a common sight during gameplay underscored by the upgraded gold plated ship. (B) shows the group of Pikmin following Olimar out of the cave, notably leaving behind the Bulbmin (parasitic Pikmin hosts) who have helped you in the cave. (Images from Chuggaaconroy's Let's Play)

thus exploiting Olimar and friends for the selfish goal of satisfying that collection need! The game interface itself strongly emphasizes personal gain over all else. In the end of day summaries, treasure records are given before Pikmin birth / death rates, implying that treasure should be your primary concern. Also, in the second half of the game where the debt has been

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[4] Andersen, Kara Lynn. "Immaterial Materiality: Collecting in Live-Action Film, Animation, and Digital Games (2010)

paid but Louie is missing, the menu screen starts telling you roughly where all of the treasures

can be found and how many remain, but no word or clue on how to find Louie! (Figure 3).

Perhaps most damning, even after we find Louie, the nominal goal of Olimar now that the debt

has been paid, the game refuses to give you a successful ending. Instead, it forces you to find all

121 of the remaining treasures, insisting vehemently that your quest for personal satisfaction

matters more than the plight of Olimar and Louie. All of this exploitation is accentuated by the

fact that we, the players, know that all of the "treasures" are actually trash, and yet we still force

Olimar and the Pikmin to pursue these worthless objects. Although we could read this as the

game encouraging us to see the beauty in everyday things, it still seems ironic that this

understanding needs to come at the cost of hundreds of Pikmin deaths.

With these colonizing attitudes baked into the game narratively and ludologically,

Figure 3: Game interface the shows up between days. Note that the game interface now tells you how many treasures you're missing, and roughly where to find them, a change that encourages the player to exploit Olimar and his crew in order to satisfy the player's own tether / accretion fantasies. Also note the separate Piklopedia and Treasures tabs – those out-of-game tabs are the only time that you get any commentary from Olimar himself, highlighting the separation of empathy in Pikmin 2, especially compared to Pikmin 1 (Image credits from Chuggaaconroy's Let's Play)

Nintendo succeeds in carrying out soft power goals to make the idea of imperial conquest more

palatable. Although some scholars debate the effectiveness of soft power[5], the theory of

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[5] Norris, "Exploring Japanese Popular Culture as a Soft Power Resource"

proceduralist rhetoric explains how a game can shape players' values more strongly. Proceduralist rhethoric claims that the designer bakes a system of values into the rules of the games system. Although the player may question how the game works, the player is still working and extermporizing within the preexisting defined ruleset, similar to how soft power tries to convince others through cultural outreach instead of blatant force.[6] Thus, by forcing players to adopt the colonizing attitude where personal gain is more important than others' well being, the game subtly sends the message that similar imperialistic attitudes in the past were not actually that bad. Likewise, by making Olimar's name a (Japanese) anagram of Mario's name, the game implies a strong connection between the two. In a sense, Olimar is the spiritual successor to Nintendo's greatest achievement: colonizing the cultural definition of "cool" and aiding Japan in its soft power conquest.

In conclusion, by dissecting each character interaction and evaluating the game interface, we find that *Pikmin 2* promotes imperialistic attitudes - using people for your own ends while promoting yourself as a "savior" for those you invade. Although this exploitive attitude is tempered by Olimar's empathy, the dominant theme of *Pikmin 2* is that personal gain trumps all, including the lives of others. Extending connections to Japanese soft power and imperialist past, this seems scarily reminiscent of the controversies surrounding possible bowdlerization of Japanese history textbooks – erasing uncomfortable truths and replacing them with a much more positive model.

For future research, I'd love to delve deeper into alternate readings of this game and see how they interact with the colonial reading. For example, some fan theories suggest that instead of reflecting an imperialistic quest, the relationship between Pikmin and Olimar is actually the

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[6] Bogost, Ian. "The Rhetoric of Video Games." *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning.* (2008)

typical work / management hierarchy. Given the playable President character and the anecdote that "Ai No Uta" succeeded commercially by striking a chord with Japanese salarymen, there definitely seems to be some legitimacy to those claims, making it perhaps worthwhile to see if Japanese businesses practices also have this exploitative nature to them.

I'd also like to understand Olimar's empathy with the Pikmin more. Although the general progression of the Pikmin series has both emphasized resource exploitation of Earth and relegated Olimar's notes (and caring) more to the sidelines of the main colonizing quest, these notes are still in the game. Perhaps instead of being the pure "slave labor" reading that we've been assuming, Olimar and the Pikmin actually have more of a "co-development relationship", similar to how animal trainers have a mutual respect with the animal they work with.[7] Coupled with Miyamoto's comments that Pikmin's inspiration was from watching ants and wanting to recreate the feeling of connecting with animals, perhaps we can do more of a naturalistic reading[8]. This would contrast extremely well with the industrious labor focus of the prior alternate reading.

Overall, given my family history, I'm not sure where to personally take this analysis. I did not intentionally choose *Pikmin 2* for my analysis expecting to demonize one of my favorite childhood games for spreading an unsavory view of imperialism. On the one hand, I am a Nintendo fangirl who's willing to ignore the game's values in exchange for fun gameplay. On the other hand, as a Chinese American with family who have been hurt by the same colonial-era ideals espoused by this game, I'm not sure how or if playing *Pikmin 2* legitimizes this position. As I interact with more of the Pikmin franchise and games in general, I'm interested to see how

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[7] Attebery, Stina. "Coshaping Digital and Biological Animals: Companion Species Encounters and Biopower in the Video Games Pikmin and Pokémon." (2015)
[8] "Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto: 'What Can Games Learn from Film? Nothing'" The Telegraph. (Nov. 10 2014)

my identity will adapt and change, eventually (hopefully) feeling secure enough to voice my

opinions.

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