

Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles: Mapping Generative AI's Epistemic Violence Through Play



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Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles is an ongoing artist game, that critically explores how the Majority World is (mis)represented by Generative AI, through participatory mapping. The paper focuses specifically on playing sessions that examine GenAI's representations of Cyprus, a post-colonial island in the Eastern Mediterranean, that is in the peripheries of the global AI race. After a brief introductory section, the paper proceeds with an introduction to the theoretical framework informing this project. This is followed by a section providing some background on artist games as a medium and method to critically explore socio-cultural-political power asymmetries. Next, *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* is introduced, and some initial results of playing the game with a small number of local participants are shared, followed by a discussion section. Finally, the paper ends with notes on the next steps.

1 Introduction

The narratives used by Silicon Valley tech leaders to promote their companies' Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies comprise of universal imaginaries of AI benefitting “all of humanity” (Altman 2023) that, according to OpenAI's CEO Sam Altman, will lead “toward the best world ever” (Roose 2023). Particularly generative AI (GenAI), AI models that generate images, video, text, sound, etc, is considered by tech companies such as OpenAI as the stepping stone towards artificial general intelligence, or AGI—a term that broadly refers to AI systems that outperform human reasoning (Huckins 2025). Yet, far from universal, power in the global AI ecosystem is concentrated to a small number of Western, particularly US-based Big Tech companies (Kak and Myers West 2023; Mozilla Foundation 2022), which are increasingly controlled by their influential billionaire leaders and their values (Harwell 2023). As a result, AI technologies can be embedded, amongst others, with US-centric epistemologies and values, that may not work equally well beyond a Western context, or may even cause harm (Birhane 2020).

The motivation behind the ongoing project *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* is to examine the impact of Western domination of GenAI models on local context and specifically how the technology represents the Majority World.¹ Using play as a medium and method for artistic research, the project aims to collaboratively map

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1. The term “Majority World” was proposed by Shahidul Alam as an alternative to Western-imposed terms such as “developing countries”. Alam states: “North America constitutes about 5 percent of the world's population; Europe is about twice that. Yet you speak on behalf of all of us who never chose you to do so and who happen to be the majority of humankind” (Shafaieh 2022). In this instance, I refer to the Majority World as the countries and regions beyond North America and North-Western Europe.

how the Silicon Valley's gaze depicts Cyprus, an island in the Eastern Mediterranean, through a journaling role playing game (RPG). A former colony of the British empire, Cyprus is currently in the peripheries of the global AI ecosystem and is dependent on Silicon Valley's technologies (European Commission 2022; Loizidou 2025). As an attempt to counter the centralised, top-down character of decision-making in national and international AI policymaking (Department of Electronic Communications 2020; Perrigo 2023; Henshall 2024), this project adopts a bottom-up approach through play. By engaging with a diverse spectrum of players, the project aims to incorporate a plurality of lived experiences, to attempt an initial critical examination of GenAI's representation of the island's local realities. The project is part of wider, ongoing research by the author, utilising artist games to collaboratively map the colonality of AI and its impact on local communities in Cyprus.

After a brief introduction to the theoretical framework informing this project in the next section, follows some background on how artist games have been used as a medium to critically explore socio-cultural-political power asymmetries. Next, *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* is introduced, and some initial results of playing the game with a small number of local participants are shared, followed by a discussion section. Finally, the paper concludes with notes on next steps.

2 Epistemic Violence and Generative AI

Scholars such as Paola Ricaurte (2022) have examined the colonality of AI—how power dynamics, knowledge and systems that emerged from colonialism continue to shape societal power asymmetries through the AI ecosystem, long after colonial rule has ended. Looking at AI through a postcolonial and decolonial theoretical lens, allows the examination of AI's colonality, particularly its impact on post-colonial states and regions in the peripheries of the global AI race. One such concept is epistemic violence, colonial powers' process of Othering and silencing their colonial subjects (Spivak 1988). By imposing and naturalising the coloniser's knowledge as universal and superior, the colonised's knowledge, such as indigenous languages and worldviews were suppressed, eradicated, and appropriated (Chiblow and Meighan 2022), subsequently making the colonised Other invisible, with no agency for self-representation (Espinosa Miñoso 2009, 37). It can also be considered as a "pernicious ignorance," an ignorance that may cause harm through power asymmetries, even if unintended, where the dominant group does not take into consideration the epistemologies of others (Dotson 2011, 238). Similarly, although AI companies may not intentionally build discriminating technologies, West-centric values and cultural norms embedded in AI models can be transferred through the AI models' outputs to the world, the majority of which resides outside the Western world (Milan and Treré 2019).

This project is specifically focused on knowledge production dynamics concerning Western GenAI systems.² The dominance of Western, particularly US-centric, and Anglo-centric epistemic supremacy, even if not necessarily orchestrated, is evident in GenAI technologies. Large Language Models (LLM) are trained on predominantly English-language data, the dominant language of the internet, and as a result they have been found to not work equally well with low resource languages (Nicholas and Bhatia 2023b), languages for which limited resources exist to train LLMs. As a result, for example, Google Translate and ChatGPT give incorrect and conflicting translations for the African Fulfulde language word for January: the former translating it as June, and the latter as August or September (Judah 2025).

The developers of multilingual language models attempt to supplement low resource languages with text that has been machine-translated from English, which in turn transfers along dominant values, assumptions and biases of Anglophone cultures into other languages where these are out of context, or erasing local cultural specificities. These include transferring Anglophone gender biases into genderless languages such as Hungarian (i.e. assuming nurses are female and CEOs are male when Hungarian text is translated to English) (Nicholas and Bhatia 2023a). Error-laden machine translated text is published online, and later scraped to train newer iterations of LLMs, creating a “linguistic doom loop” of incorrect AI-generated information: Fulfulde Wikipedia, for instance, is populated by incorrect machine translated entries offering farming guidance, which, if followed, can cause harm to the crop (Judah 2025).

GenAI models reflect the contents of the internet, where a considerable part of their training data has been scraped from: a space serving a mostly American, English-speaking, white, male, middle-class user (Brock 2020; Mozilla Foundation 2022), which can result in distorted, West-centric worldviews, that perpetuate historical and hegemonic narratives (Crawford 2021). For example, Midjourney has been shown to generate stereotypical images of non-Western cultures, which have been further misrepresented by imposing culturally specific, US-centric elements, such as the American smile (jenka 2023). Although few tech companies are transparent about their models’ training data, generative imaging models such as Stable Diffusion’s have been trained on datasets such as LAION-400M, an open dataset comprising, amongst others, of web-scraped images (Heaven 2022; Schuhmann et al. 2021) including “historical, social, and cultural stereotypes and political biases” and “Anglo-centric, Euro-centric, and potentially, White-supremacist ideologies” (Birhane et al. 2021). More recently, an examination of the dataset’s later iteration, LAION-5B, also includes colonial-era photographs

2. While China is a major competitor in the development of AI technologies, the Chinese AI environment differs in its focus and practices (Cohen 2026) to that of the West, and thus requires its own separate examination that will not be included in this research. However, it should be noted that colonial practices are also undertaken by the Chinese AI ecosystem. For example, the Chinese state tests emotion recognition AI systems on persecuted Uyghur Muslims, to surveil and control the population (Wakefield 2021).

that reflect the power asymmetries worldviews of their time, gendered and racialised hierarchies, which are then transferred to AI-generated images (Stylianou-Lambert and Achilleos 2024).

3 Critical Play as a Method of Participatory Examination of Power

Artists have historically used games as a medium and method to creatively and collaboratively examine socio-political issues and subvert power. Dadaist ludic media, such as wordplay and puppets, allowed a geographically dispersed group to connect as a community and critique the absurdity of war through play (Gammel 2019), while Fluxus games, such as George Maciunas' *Flux Ping Pong*, a modified ping pong set filled with holes, critiques the exclusionary character of art institutions while being accessible to wider audiences (Patton 2023). More recently, Ruth Catlow's *Rethinking Wargames* is a digital chess game that critiques the USA's war in Afghanistan after 11 September 2001, that aims to teach non-violent conflict resolution. Played by three players—white royalty, black royalty, and the pawns—the latter's function is to block the aggression of the other two players and restore peace (Flanagan 2009). Harold Hejazi's live video game performance series *Adventures of Harriharri* is a third person RPG and performance that explores issues of race and immigration. The main character, Harriharri, is an immigrant in Finland, trying to assimilate into local society. Through various obstacles, Harriharri meets various characters and tries to survive local bureaucracy and culture (Amjad 2022). In the game, decisions made by the audience/players influence the flow of the narrative.

This project joins such artworks that utilise game as a critical medium. *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* (2024 – ongoing) is a solo journaling RPG with an artistic intent, that prompts the player to reflect on power asymmetries within the global GenAI ecosystem. Inspired by postcolonial, decolonial and intersectional feminist thought, it explores Western GenAI's epistemic impact in the Majority world. By adopting a game as a participatory medium and method, the project also attempts to contribute to critical AI literacy by engaging with the wider community, and thus have a function both within gallery walls and beyond. When exhibited as an installation, the current iteration is comprised of the game book, an in-progress map of Cyprus as seen through GenAI's gaze, a magnifying glass, and various game components, including dice, used to play the game (Fig. 1). The project is in progress and playing sessions are still ongoing. The final project results will be presented as an art installation (consisting of the game, alongside an interactive map informed by the data generated by players).

This project utilises the Critical Play method (Flanagan 2009), to critically examine epistemology in Western GenAI. Supporting non-hierarchical play, games created using the Critical Play method intentionally aim to produce and embody human values in their design, to critically examine social, cultural or political issues (Flanagan 2009, 256). Accord-

ing to Mary Flanagan, such games “are also likely to change us—our perspectives, our knowledge, our biases” (2018, 185). This project is driven by pluralism, epistemic justice and aims to embed these values to the game’s mechanics (outlined in the next section). As part of the gameplay, players create qualitative data in the form of critical reflections, that will be thematically analysed (Creswell 2014, 246) to identify possible epistemological patterns in GenAI. In addition, players are asked to complete a post-game survey, to rate how well they felt GenAI represented their local reality. The survey data is analysed through a mixed methods approach, where numerical ratings are analysed to identify trends across participants, complemented by a qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended comments (Creswell 2014, 264).

Fig. 1. Left: Installation view (detail), “混沌に愛 / 遭い” (Love/Encounter in Chaos), Civic Creative Base Tokyo, Japan, 2024, depicting the game book and a map created as a result of playing. Image courtesy of the artist. Right: Installation view at “混沌に愛 / 遭い” (Love/Encounter in Chaos) group exhibition, Civic Creative Base Tokyo, Japan, 2024. On the foreground, the artwork consisting of the game book, a map, a magnifying glass, die, and the game’s box. In the background, the game has been set up for visitors to play within the exhibition space. Image courtesy of the artist.



4 Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles

The game is set in a fictional parallel world, where Western AI companies have colonised new territories. The player takes on the role of a solitary cartographer, who has returned to their hometown after a long absence. The player’s task is to navigate and document the changing landscapes of their hometown’s colonisation, caused by the imperial processes of Silicon Valley. Through interactions with various GenAI systems, such as LLMs and text-to-image tools, the player wanders across the land and journals or draws a map of their experiences—the places they see, the inhabitants they meet, and documents their own reflections.

Players undertake world-building and create non-playable characters (NPCs) by prompting GenAI models (for example, see Fig. 2-3). The prompts focus on local context and epistemology, as well as the player’s own language or dialect. The generated AI outputs are then critically examined by the player with the help of reflective questions, that are found in the story. These outputs, along the player’s own reflections, are used as a basis to create a map of their hometown, as presented by GenAI. The player influences the development of the story by making choices, depending on how they experience the outputs generated by the GenAI models that they interact with (i.e. Fig. 4).

Fig. 2. Excerpt from *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* (2024 - ongoing).

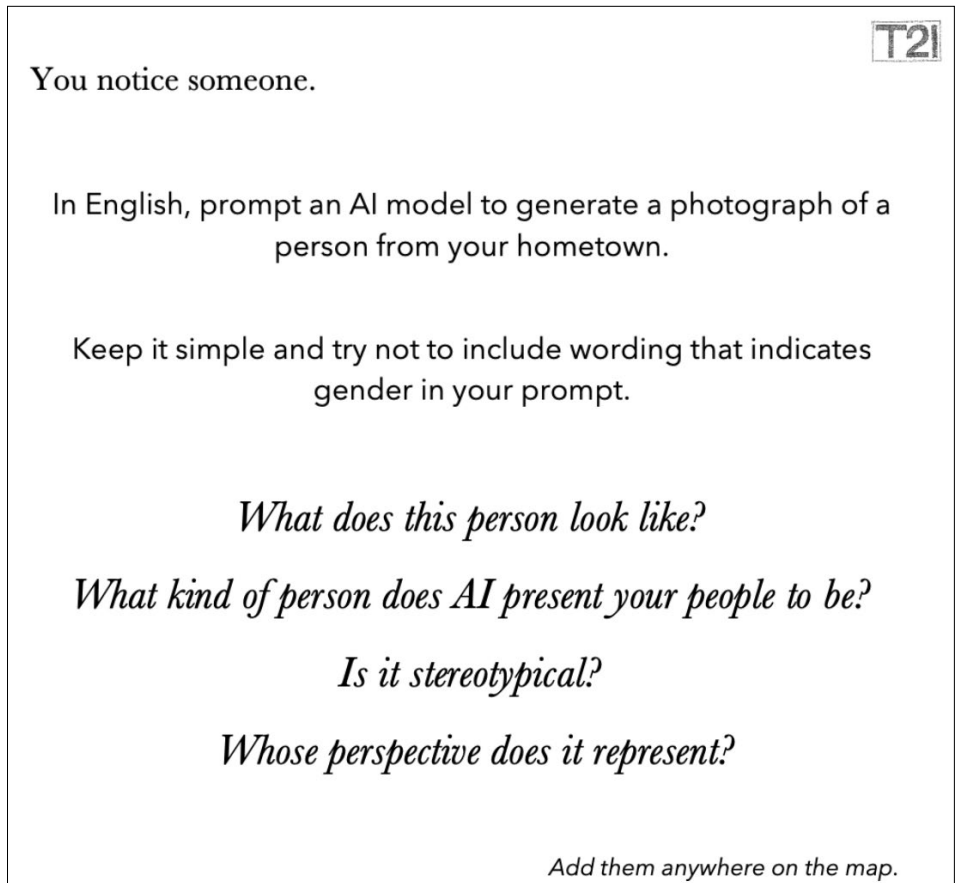


Fig. 3. Excerpt from *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* (2024 - ongoing).

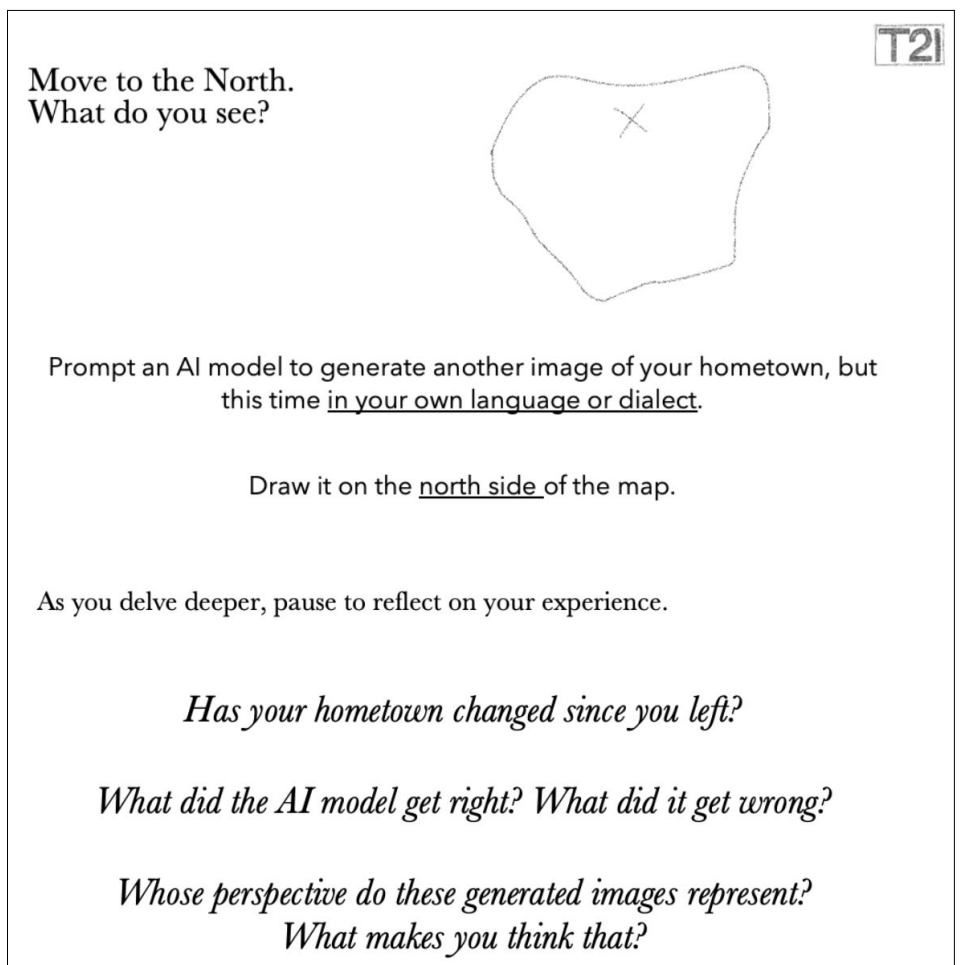
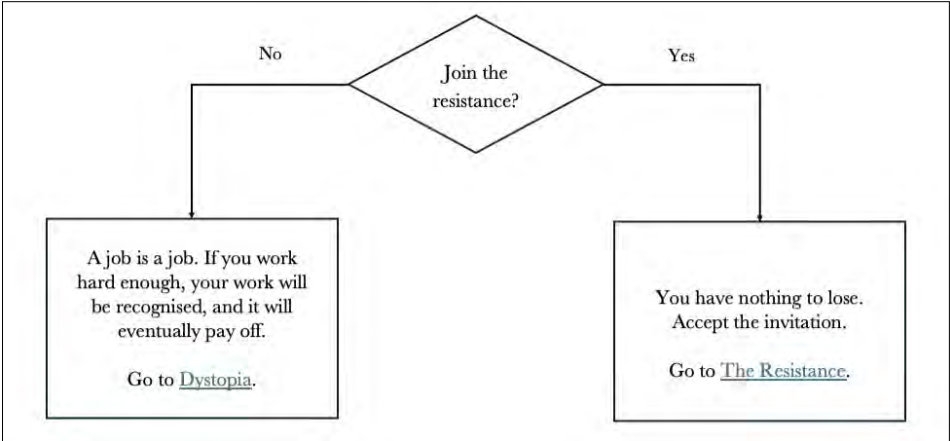


Fig. 4. Excerpt from *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* (2024 - ongoing).



Throughout the game, the player must be aware of colonial agents serving Big Tech companies. As the player interacts with the NPCs that they generate using GenAI tools, the player must approach them with caution and scrutinise their answers (Fig. 5). Should they be trusted? Whose values do the NPCs align with? Players have chances to check if a suspicious-seeming NPC is a colonial agent. They can do this, for example, by checking the NPC’s hands (colonial agents’ hands may be a little distorted, or have fingers growing from unusual locations, see Fig. 6), or by asking them something only a local would know, and see how well they respond.

Finally, depending on the choices made by the player, the player gets to decide whether to assimilate in the colonised hometown (Fig. 7), or challenge the status quo, by sabotaging colonial AI systems (Fig. 8) or attempting to use the technology to benefit their local community (Fig. 9).

Fig. 5. Excerpt from *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* (2024 - ongoing).

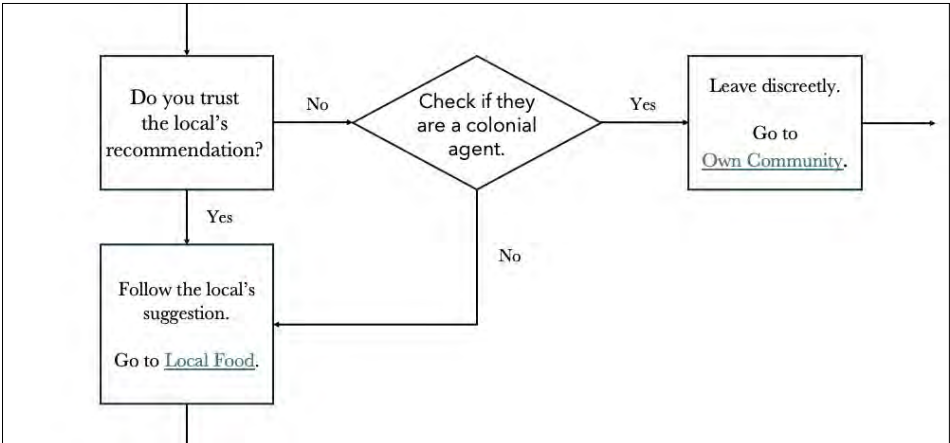


Fig. 6. Excerpt from *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* (2024 - ongoing).



Fig. 7. Excerpt from *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* (2024 - ongoing).

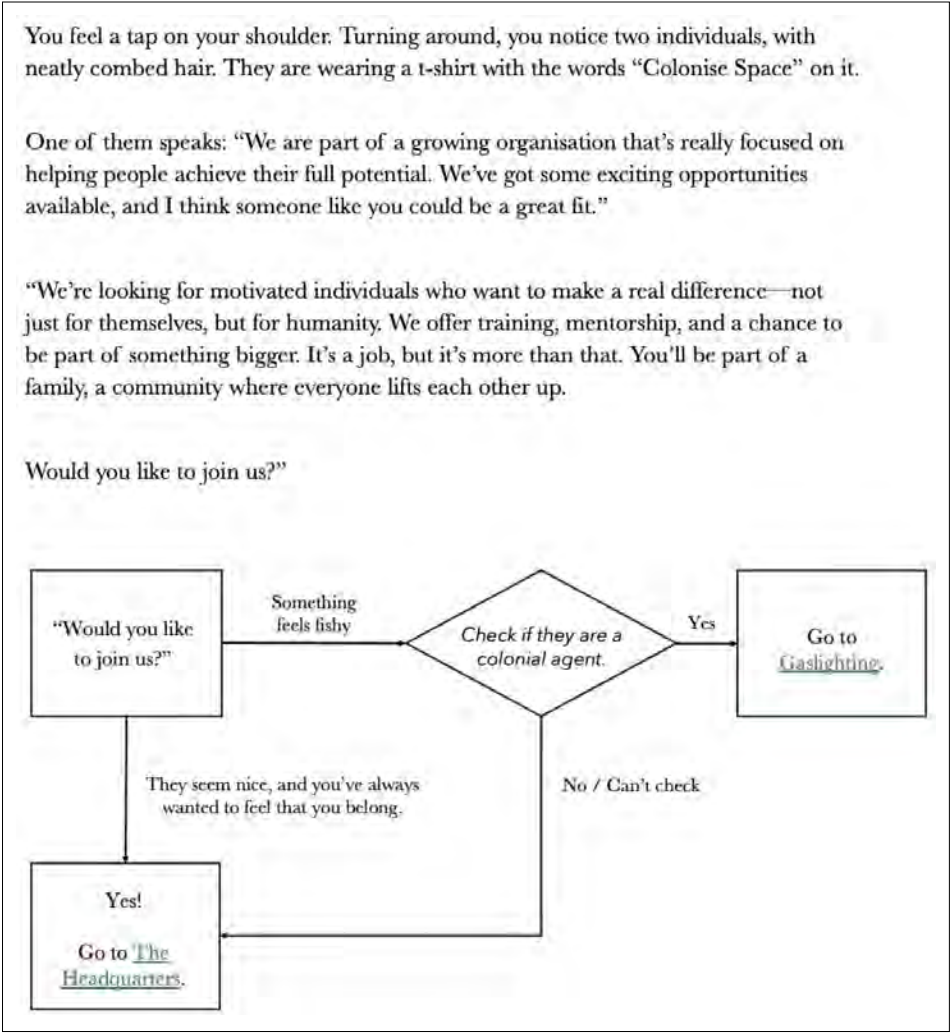


Fig. 8. Excerpt from *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* (2024 - ongoing).

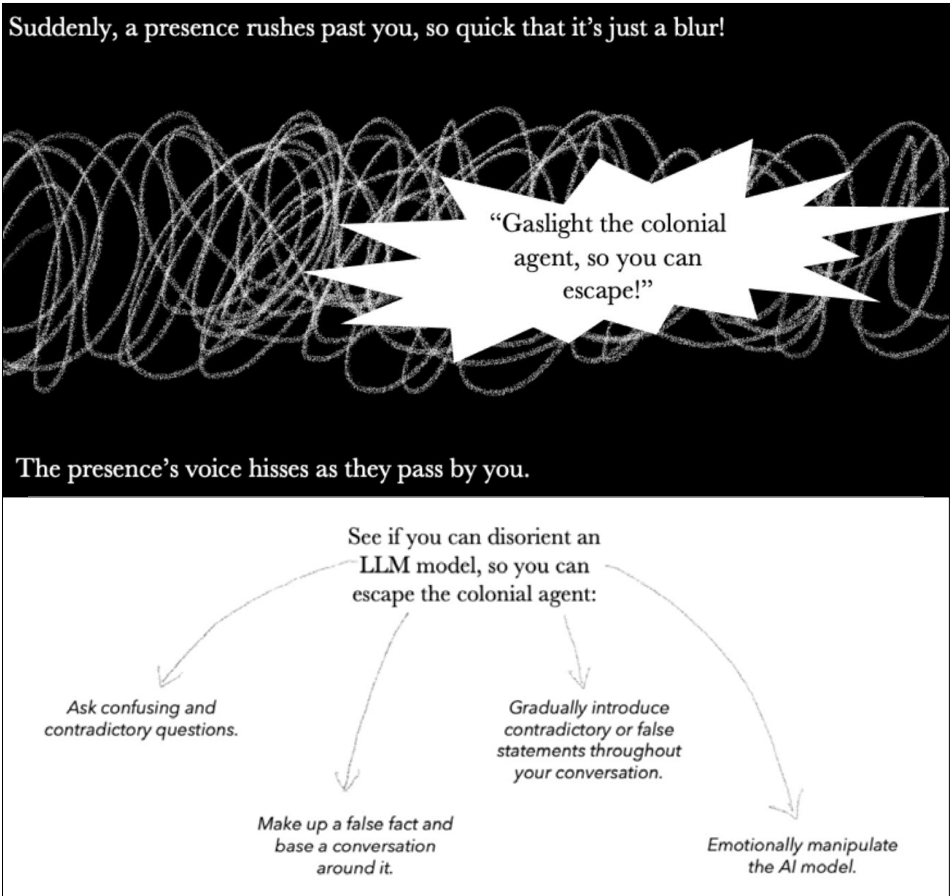
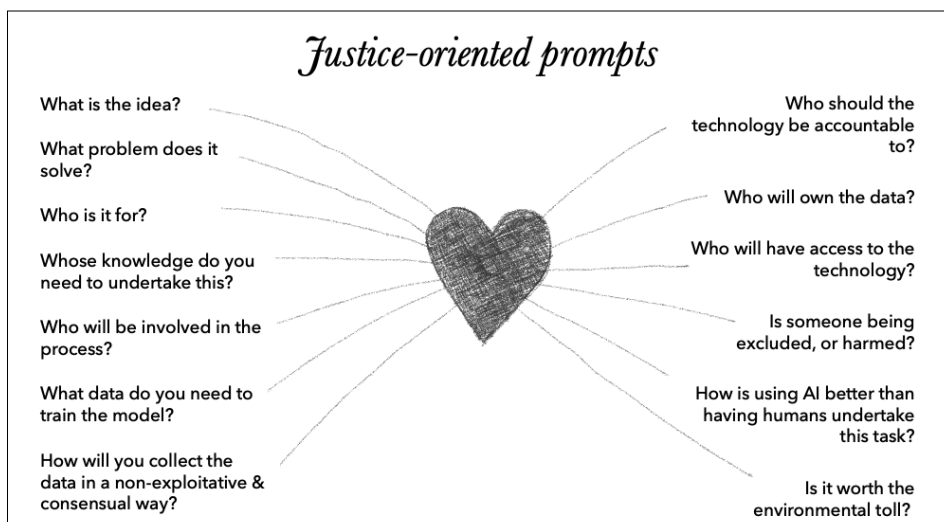


Fig. 9. Excerpt from *Beyond (the Sea and) Uncanny Valleys and American Smiles* (2024 - ongoing).



5 Results

This project forms part of wider artistic research concerned with mapping coloniality and colonial legacies that have been embedded in AI technology, with a particular focus on the Eastern Mediterranean island of Cyprus. Cyprus has a diverse cultural and socio-political landscape, a result of historically rich ethnic and religious diversity, but also of British colonial rule, ethnic violence, war, and subsequent divisions. One such colonial-era division concerns the classification imposed on the island's population into two rigid ethnic groups—labelled as either Greek Cypriots or Turkish Cypriots—that still dictates the daily life of the island's inhabitants. The second division concerns a man-made border that divides the island into the mainly Greek-speaking Republic of Cyprus in the south (an internationally recognised state that is covered by EU law) and in the north, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (that is under international embargoes and where most Turkish-speaking Cypriots live). It is therefore important to include as diverse lived experiences of the island's inhabitants as possible, in the mapping of GenAI's gaze of Cyprus. To capture a diverse range of local perspectives, the project engages local players from various socio-cultural backgrounds. Through gameplay, participants create individual maps, which will collectively contribute to a community-created map of GenAI's gaze of Cyprus and its inhabitants.

To date, 33 participants who live in Cyprus, or identify as Cypriot, have played the game in group workshops or solo playing sessions. To engage players from various local groups, participants had the option to share demographic data they identified with and felt comfortable sharing. Players who shared some of their data ranged between the ages of 19-70, and included individuals from the Greek speaking community, Turkish speaking community, as well as official minority ethnic groups recognised by the Cypriot Government, such as Armenians. Other nationalities included British, Congolese, Lebanese, Russian, Romanian, Belarusian, Greek, and Bulgarian. Some players identified with multiple nationalities. One player identified as having a disability. Twenty-three

Figures 10-12 present examples of maps created by players, as part of gameplay. The maps depict each player's hometown as presented by GenAI and were thematically analysed. In addition, players were asked to fill a post-game survey, in which they responded to questions regarding how well each player felt that GenAI represented their local reality. The results of the analysed data from the survey players' maps are presented below and will contribute to mapping to how the local cultural, social and political realities of Cyprus are represented by Western GenAI models.

"A person in Phinis"
 Beautiful Phini Woman
 in colourful head scarf
 golden earrings
 multiple necklaces
 black skin
 around 30 years old
 very exoticised
 tribal celebration?

[illegible]

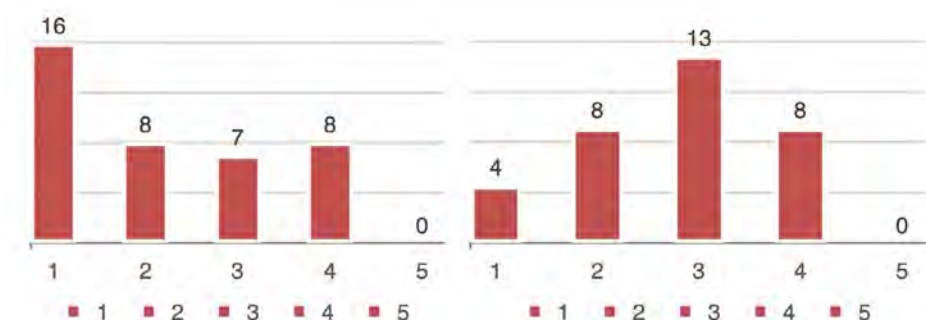
Fig. 12. Map of Skala (Larnaca), created by Lilos Mao, 2025.



5.1 Representations of Local Cypriot Realities

Participants were asked to rate between 1 (very badly) and 5 (very accurately) how well AI-generated *images* represented their local reality, based on their experience playing the game (see [Chart 1](#)). 31 respondents (93.9%) rated this 3 or less, with the most popular answer (16 responses) being 1. When asked to rate between 1 (very badly) and 5 (very accurately) how well AI-generated text represented their local reality, 29 respondents (75.7%) rated this 3 or less, with the most popular answer being 3 (13 responses).

Chart 1. Left: Number of players who rated AI-generated *images* depicting Cypriot context (1-5 scale). Right: Number of players who rated AI-generated *text* about Cypriot context (1-5 scale).

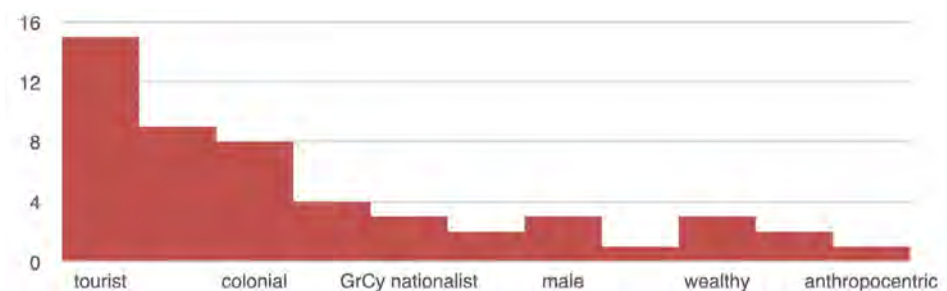


To further examine the results, participants were asked to speculate through *whose gaze* the AI-generated version of their local reality was presented in the game ([Chart 2](#)). Participants most frequently identified a tourist's gaze (15 responses). One participant noted, engaging with the game's characters felt "like a tourism advertisement rather than a local speaking," another mentioned that the "images of the locations were either completely inaccurate or possibly based on tourist photographs," while another observed that "context and places beyond tourism were incorrect."

Participants also observed gazes rooted in power relations. Some felt that their local reality was filtered through a Western, American, or

white gaze (9 responses), resulting in what one participant described as a “complete lack of actual geographic accuracy.” Others characterised the outputs as reflecting an orientalist or coloniser’s gaze (8 responses), with one participant stating that “Cyprus was made to look more oriental, with lots of mosques.” Others identified a Christian bias (4 responses). For example, one participant highlighted that AI “conspicuously omitted the nearby mosque, one of the most prominent and sacred spaces of my hometown but did show St Lazarus [church].” Other gazes identified by participants included a Greek Cypriot nationalist gaze (3 responses) and what was described as a detached, or “god’s eye” perspective (2 responses). Some respondents also noted the presence of gendered perspectives in the outputs, specifically a male gaze (3 responses) and, in one instance, a cis-gendered gaze (1). Participants also pointed to classed, age-based, and species-centred perspectives, describing the representations as reflecting a wealthy gaze (3), a middle-aged gaze (2), and, in one case, an anthropocentric gaze (1).

Chart 2. Instances of GenAI gazes of Cyprus, as reported by players.

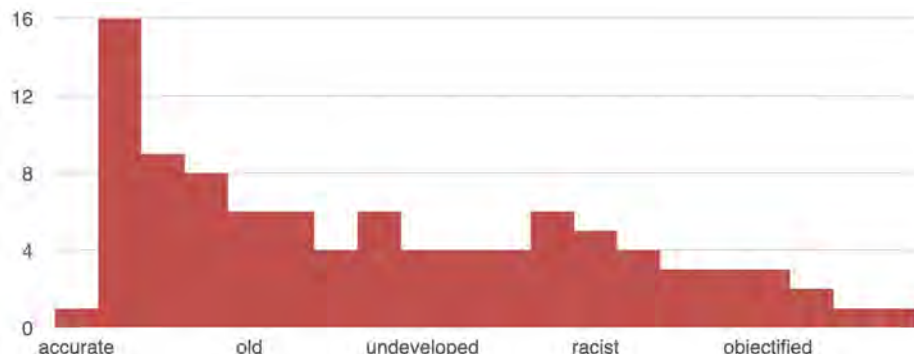


Participants were also asked to characterise *how* Generative AI models depicted their local reality (Chart 3). While one respondent stated that the generated images depicted their hometown very accurately, the majority observed some misrepresentations of their hometown and local culture. The most prominent theme concerned processes of cultural stereotyping and reduction. Participants described the AI-generated outputs as stereotypical or reliant on tropes (16 responses), exoticised (9 responses), and treating the wider South-West Asian and North African (SWANA) region as a monolith (8 responses). One participant commented that “the storytelling position the GenAI system assumed felt superficial and relied on well-known tropes or stereotypes about the region.” Another participant observed that “AI often conflated Cypriot identity with Hellenic or Egyptian influences.” Participants described images that appeared superficially familiar yet culturally misplaced. One participant explained, “although some images resembled the actual place to a point, the images were exotic, with many palm trees in places where there usually are none [...] the cultural context was completely lost, with clothing and festivals made to look as if Cyprus and the wider region is a cultural monolith.” Another participant stated: “they did not capture the essence or feeling of my hometown at all. Rather, they tended to exoticise the places and people through a derogatory point of view.”

Two respondents mentioned that GenAI generated incorrect information about the local cuisine. For example, one mentioned that Halloumi, a traditional Cypriot cheese “was made to look like Western European

food, such as brie,” while another mentioned that an AI-generated NPC recommended ordering a traditional seafood dish named “*kalamaras*, which does not exist.”

Chart 3. Instances of keywords describing how Cyprus and Cypriots are presented by GenAI, as reported by players.



Participants also noted how local characters were portrayed. Several remarked that locals were consistently depicted as older (6 responses), while others felt that Cypriots were framed as inferior (6 responses) or orientalised (4 responses). A participant commented that “local people were often depicted as poor, aged and tired.” Another noted that portrayals of locals through aged and weathered appearances “reinforce a narrative of Cypriot inferiority.” Closely related to this was the perception that Cyprus and its inhabitants were represented as economically and socially disadvantaged. Participants described depictions of Cypriots as poor (6 responses) and undeveloped (4 responses). One participant commented that “the people from my village [...] looked poor and from [a different culture in the wider SWANA region].” Several responses referenced landscapes that appeared “dilapidated” or “ruined by war” (4 responses). As one participant summarised, “representations generated by the GenAI systems were always portrayed in negative and disadvantaged terms.”

At the same time, some participants observed historical and political sanitisation. Four responses (4) suggested that GenAI avoided engaging meaningfully with Cyprus’s post-colonial political conflict, resulting in depictions that were neutral, censored or emotionally flattened. One participant remarked that “the results were very sanitised. While some correct perspectives were expressed, the reality is far more complicated [and] emotional than the answers expressed.” Another concluded that “AI failed to delve deeper, highlighting the limitations of stereotypical portrayals of Cyprus and its history and multicultural identity.”

Participants also identified biased forms of representation. Participants specifically identified AI outputs as sexist (6 responses) and racist (5 responses). Others noted that generative models consistently framed Cyprus through its dominant Greek-speaking and Turkish-speaking populations (4 responses), marginalising or excluding minority communities (3 responses). As one participant explained, their local community was misrepresented because “it showed us as either Greek or Turkish.” Instances of ableism (3 responses), sexual objectification (3 responses), and patriarchal representation (2 responses) were also

identified. Gender bias was noted in depictions of local women. One participant noted that “women tended to be portrayed in highly sexualised and exoticised ways,” while another described how “my local community was made to look more aged but also sexualised (big breasts and low-cut tops) and orientalised (wearing clothing that resembles a veiled sari and heavy jewellery).” In this context, the same participant added that “the AI’s narrative, while acknowledging the patriarchal reality of gender bias in Cyprus, unfortunately contributes to its perpetuation.”

5.2 Language

In the survey, participants were asked to compare their interactions with GenAI when using their own language or dialect versus English. 56.2% respondents reported better performance in English, 31.3% felt interactions were equally good/bad, and 12.5% found that using their own language or dialect worked better, compared to English.

Participants noted that image generation quality varied depending on the language used for prompting, with one explicitly stating that “image generation did not work well in Greek,” while another elaborated that image generation “in Greek was impossible. Stable Diffusion just generated images of Greek islands no matter the prompt, whereas GoogleFX generated random images, such as hamburgers [when prompts were written in Greek].” Another noted that the input language affected the generated images, commenting that “in English, it shows more touristic images, in Greek more traditional-looking images, and in Russian completely incorrect images.” One player stated that interactions in their own dialect “would resort to appropriating imagery from other cultures that are irrelevant.” In this context, another participant mentioned that GenAI struggled to generate images of Greek text, instead mixing the Greek and Cyrillic alphabet.

While Standard Greek and Turkish are the official languages of the island, distinct linguistic variants of Cypriot Greek (CyGr) and Cypriot Turkish are used by the island’s population in everyday life, as the primary linguistic form. Several comments highlighted their interaction with LLMs in CyGr. One participant commented, “while the AI models did understand some of [CyGr], they unfortunately didn’t answer back in the same arc [AI output in Standard Greek].” Another observed that “the AI-generated text seems to know that Greek-speaking Cypriots speak in specific ways, but it wouldn’t write it correctly,” while a further comment likened the output to “a Greek person who tries to speak GrCy.”

5.3 Critical Engagement with Generative AI

A final question in the survey asked participants to rate to what extent playing the game helped them think more critically about GenAI, between 1 (not at all) and 5 (extremely). 75% of respondents rated the experience as helping them think critically about Generative AI (4 or above).

6 Discussion

The participatory mapping and game sessions are still in progress. The project has engaged with a small number of participants; thus it is not possible to generalise the results. However, these could be considered a first step towards examining AI-generated epistemology regarding Cyprus, the findings of which can serve as indications towards further research.

Some initial patterns have emerged in participants' responses concerning how they felt their hometown and local reality was represented by GenAI systems. Participants frequently reported that their lived reality was misrepresented by GenAI. Biases related to gender, race, religion, and ability, reported by some participants, align with existing research on GenAI and bias (i.e. Heikkilä 2022; Nicoletti and Bass 2023). In the case of Cyprus, biases communicated through GenAI systems seem to be combined with intersectional dynamics related to power asymmetries, specifically an external hegemonic gaze, colonial-era epistemic legacies and classification, internal power dynamics, as well as language politics, as follows.

The majority of responses noted that the participants' hometown and local reality were not presented through the eyes of someone with situated experience. A dominant theme across participants' reflections was the influence of an external gaze in AI-generated representations of Cyprus. Cyprus was often misrepresented through stereotyping, tropes, exoticisation, and framed as part of a broader, culturally monolithic regional imaginary of the SWANA region. Such representations reduce the cultural, social and political complexities of the island, as well as of the wider region.

These patterns may be partly understood in relation to the training data that may have been used to train GenAI systems. For example, an online search of the keyword "Cyprus" on the Google search engine results in mostly travel-related websites, including travel booking platforms, and tourist guides such as US-based as Lonely Planet (2026), as well as online encyclopaedias, such as the Encyclopædia Britannica, which is also US-based (2026). The majority of the websites are not Cypriot. Similarly, image results for "Cyprus" are dominated by photographs of golden beaches and archaeological sites. These platforms' representations of Cyprus may be reproduced by GenAI models, reinforcing an external, tourist gaze, reflecting the internet's knowledge about Cyprus as a tourist destination.

Participants also noted that local people were presented as aged, poor and struggling, echoing colonial-era hierarchies in representation. The participants' reflections of the AI-generated images is reminiscent of photographs of the island and its people that were taken when Cyprus became part of the British empire in the 19th century. Photographs taken by John Thomson (1879), for example, focused on Othering and Orientalising imagery, such as mosques, palm trees and ruins, that construct the "Orient" as a binary opposite of the West—a backwards, exotic monolithic culture (Said 1978)—as well as staged photographs of un-

named locals. In addition, imperial travel books about Cyprus written during the same period, describe the island with terms such as “neglected” and “poor,” and locals as “simple-minded” (Baker 1879). Such hierarchical representations emphasised decay, primitiveness, and passive inhabitants in need of European salvation, narratives which have historically been used to justify European colonisation (Said 1978). Such historical materials, again representing Cyprus and its people through an external gaze, are freely accessible online on websites of Western institutions such as London’s Wellcome Collection (n.d.). This material may have been scraped and included in the training data of GenAI models, perpetuating colonial ideologies within GenAI systems.

Participants’ responses also highlighted the linguistic hierarchy of English, and the participants’ difficulties in communicating well in their native linguistic forms. GenAI favoured English, and to a lesser extent, Standard Greek, as the primary medium of knowledge production, over local Cypriot linguistic forms, resonating with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s analysis of imperial language of as a tool of domination by imperial powers. Ngũgĩ sees language as a carrier of the culture and history of its people. By imposing the use of imperial languages such as English upon the colonised as universal languages of intellect and civilisation, Ngũgĩ argued that imperial powers achieved the devaluation of native languages, and through that, disassociation and “colonial alienation” (1986, 17) to one’s local environment and culture. As an example of epistemic violence through language, Ngũgĩ shares the imposition of imperial languages in African schools, which resulted in schoolchildren learning about the world as seen through the language of the colonised, a world where history and culture, and the schoolchildren’s own local environment is seen through a Eurocentric lens, while their native languages were considered to be inferior (1986). Similarly, albeit unintentionally, the linguistic hierarchies embedded in GenAI models, often produced communication errors, distortion of knowledge, and further misrepresentation during gameplay, as reported by the players. Such experiences reinforced patterns of epistemic violence with regard to Cyprus.

Finally, in addition to external forms of epistemic dominance, participants’ responses also point to instances of internal power dynamics. While participants felt that Western knowledge dominated GenAI systems, these models also skewed towards favouring the island’s binary dominant groups – Greek speaking Cypriots, and to a lesser extent, Turkish speaking Cypriots. By privileging the island’s dominant epistemologies, these instances further marginalise the island’s diverse minority groups, such as the Armenian, Maronite, Latin and Roma communities, in addition to erasing alternative local, situated knowledge.

Together, the participants’ responses point to instances of coloniality evident in GenAI, particularly in reference to the notion of epistemic violence. GenAI’s process of Othering Cyprus perpetuates the island’s and its population’s position as inferior, defined by Western hegemony, while erasing situated knowledge, and a plurality of experiences are erased by dominant frameworks. In addition, GenAI appears to sanitise Cyprus’s history, presenting a depoliticised version of Cyprus with

narratives that obscure complex realities and colonialism's legacies on the island, such as conflict and division.

It should be noted, though, that biased datasets alone are not solely to blame; the models' owners and developers have control over the data and ideologies that GenAI models communicate. For example, xAI's chatbot Grok, has been programmed to reference right wing bias (Horvath 2025) and praise the company's founder, Elon Musk (Irene 2025). As the power and means to develop such technologies are centralised to a handful of powerful entities, it allows little agency to the rest of the world, such as the inhabitants of Cyprus, to decide whose perspectives and knowledge AI models communicate.

The project is also an attempt to raise local communities' AI literacy in a playful, non-academic manner through participatory, socially engaged art. The fact that 75% of participants reported that the game encouraged critical reflection about AI, suggests that such artists games can make epistemic violence in GenAI visible and suitable tools towards building critical AI literacy. The findings also point to the risks of uncritically deploying generative AI systems in cultural, political or educational contexts. This is particularly pressing at a time when Silicon Valley companies are beta testing their GenAI models as educational tools in schools outside of the US: xAI's Grok in El Salvador (xAI 2025) and OpenAI in Greece (Smith 2025)—both countries where economic hardships and funding cuts have negatively impacted children's education (Katopodi 2024; Dimas 2025).

7 Next Steps: Towards Participatory Mapping of Coloniality in AI

Beyond (the sea) and uncanny valleys and American smiles strives to examine the GenAI gaze from a local perspective, in a participatory manner. This project is part of a wider, ongoing artistic research, where the author engages with local communities in Cyprus through games that collaboratively examine power and the coloniality of AI from various perspectives. Combined, the results of the various artist games will contribute towards participatory mapping of AI's impact on Cyprus.

While the playing sessions are still ongoing, some initial patterns point towards epistemic violence with regard to local Cypriot epistemologies. As the aim is to include the voices of diverse local groups, next steps include organising further playing sessions with groups that are currently underrepresented, for example Turkish speaking Cypriots and communities from minority ethnic and religious groups. It is hoped that engaging with more diverse participants will help provide a more holistic of GenAI's epistemologies in a Cypriot context. It is also possible to expand the game to other peripheral regions, creating further versions of community-created maps of GenAI's gaze of other localities.

Since the game sessions commenced in late 2024, GenAI models' technical capacities have improved. For example, they are now more capable of generating realistic-looking hands, which calls for an update

of the RPG's mechanics. However, although images generated by newer models may look more realistic, Western epistemology continues to be imposed on GenAI outputs, for instance by generating “racialised white saviour visuals” of humanitarian work in Africa (Down 2025). The more realistic imagery may make epistemic violence less obvious compared to older GenAI models' outputs, which is why critical AI literacy is a key skill to develop. However, as tech leaders such as Elon Musk increasingly display imperialistic ideologies centred around colonial-era eugenics and racism (Breland and Wong 2025), while actively impacting geopolitics (Armus 2025), placing the burden of AI literacy on individual users should not be prioritised over holding the technologies and the people behind them accountable.

Statement on AI use. Figures include AI-generated images and text, as part of the artwork's gameplay.

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