

Cultural Heritage at Play: Moral Aspects

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INTRODUCTION

UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage provides an essential reference point for the need to build greater awareness, especially among the younger generations, of intangible (as well as tangible) cultural heritage through platforms such as gaming (Blake & Lixinski, 2020; Meissner, 2021). For young audiences growing up, gaming has become an essential tool for understanding our world. For many, it presents a critical encounter with new forms of storytelling, and a means for communicating with strangers abroad (Gee, 2003; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Greenfield, 2014).

In line with the rise of independent games from a mere festival to an industry (Juul, 2019), new generation of game developers started to engage more earnestly with their cultural heritages; in terms of numbers and as a statement (Eklund et al., in review). Game makers understood that they can benefit from greater attention and sensibility to

their local culture and artistic canons as a source of innovation. They even fling it about as a marketing edge, a killer feature.

There are many successful visions and engagements with local heritage, migration, and appropriation of global game genres by a new generation of developers. For example, in Austria, the independent game studio Broken Rules created *Secrets of Raetikon* (2013). In this open-world 2D game, we play as a bird and explore a stylized version of the Alps and their ancient history and mythology. Also created in Austria, *The Lion's Song* (Mi'Pu'Mi Games 2016–2021) represents a more recent piece of Austrian history. Set against the backdrop of Austria in the early 20th century, it comprises a series of four point-and-click adventure game episodes. Each episode features a different fictional lead character and their struggles to break through with their creative, art or science aspirations. *Year Walk* (Simogo 2014) is an atmospheric Swedish horror game in which players can engage in the old Swedish tradition of the Year Walk, where people tried to catch a glimpse of the future on New Year's Eve. Players engage with creatures from traditional Swedish folklore in a snowy landscape through puzzles. This indie game was very well received (very positive on Steam, 87% on Metacritic) and won several nominations and awards (e.g., 2014 BAFTA Games Awards Finalist, Game Innovation). The game is in English and thus made for a larger audience than the Swedish market. Yet, it is inherently a Swedish experience which allows players to engage with local, intangible cultural heritage.

It seems that no one would argue that cultural heritage is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for making games that honor the sociality of play; keep a deep connection between the content, the game, and the creators. The interest of game developers to turn to their own cultures in quest for innovation in storyline and aesthetics, gameplay and worldbuilding is clear. This has also been the case in more traditional arts. The model of world cinema and world music push this action further. These somewhat equivalent movements were popularized in the 1980s as a marketing category for non-western traditional styles. They are identified with various national or local cultures as opposed to global commercial culture's aesthetics, themes and values (Vidal, 2012; Dennison & Marlow-Mann, 2018; Matsumoto & Norton, 2019).

Following this logic, it is reasonable to imagine that games will continue to follow this line, perhaps even with greater vigor. Can the market for games based on diversity stemming from different cultures and artistic traditions grow to the extent that will absorb or incorporate the Indie games industry of today? This industry encompasses a wide variety of games and developers, and not all of them focus on diversity or cultural representation. However, the local, localness of the game might play a bigger part in the content and marketing of the game and studio. The annual reports on the state of the game industry illustrate the potential growth in the market for diversity-focused games and the potential for these to appeal to a wider range of players. There is growing demand for games that represent a diverse range of cultures and perspectives, and this trend is likely to continue (ESA, 2018; Dickey, 2019; GDC, 2023).

Such developments have naturally many positive outcomes: multicultural games can promote diversity and empathy for once; a competitive edge to peripheral gaming industries is second. With Europe in mind, several academic initiatives have highlighted the potential of cultural diversity characterizing game-making (e.g., Haggis et al. 2018; Navarro-Remesal, Pérez-Latorre 2021; Theodoropoulos 2022; European Commission 2022). Written with a pan-European perspective, they feel obliged to adhere to unified characteristics, ethos, aesthetics of empathy and moral play. They also aim to encourage industry standards that are different from those of mass media produced by multinational corporations.

A more critical analysis is required. Cultural heritage is not always a good force. Indeed, it can be very detrimental and part of national identity building in very, very problematic ways. Our work-in-progress adopts a bottom-up approach to form a vision of successful engagement with local heritage, migration, and appropriation of global game genres by future developers. As inspiration, we present several cases of developers who already think of themes in a local setting, having in mind also intangible forms of cultural heritage, e.g., oral traditions, customs, idioms, value systems, skills, traditional dances, diets, performances and other manifestations of a culture.

We also examine how games become representatives of cultural heritage by looking at some that have already gained such status. In Poland, the *Witcher* (CD Projekt 2007) piggybacks on Polish cultural heritage but is given a broader status as a global entertainment artefact. During US President Barack Obama's recent visit to Poland, Prime Minister Donald Tusk presented him with an official diplomatic gift, including *The Witcher 2* and two books that inspired the critically acclaimed computer game. We can see how the government legitimize the game *The Witcher* as a national cultural product with this symbolic gesture. The globally acclaimed RPG games series attracted the world's attention to Poland's vibrant gaming industry. Backed by institutional support, the game became part of the country's cultural canon. Dialogue-heavy role-playing *Disco Elysium* (2014) by ZA/UM is in the process of becoming part of Estonian digital cultural heritage considering its unique art style, storyline and settings. The personal and financial struggles of the development team, a collective of artists and musicians headed by novelist Robert Kurvitz and oil painter Aleksander Rostov, as well as the legal issues surrounding their dissolving, adds additional flavor making the game a perfect fit to this category.

MISAPPROPRIATE USE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE.

Regardless of what we wish for culturally invested games to promote, let us not forget that they can also do the opposite. The developer's primary concern remains to make a fun to play (popular) game. With this in mind, games can significantly benefit from the use of stereotyping and tropes. Being philistine and offensive, with great concern as to this genre of local games representing their respected people abroad. Taking the cue from the golden age of cinema in several countries in the Eastern Mediterranean for example, a genre of local comic melodrama films made in the 1960s and 1970s. These home-grown farces based on ethnic stereotypes were highly successful in the box office; however, typically they received terrible reviews from critics. The so-called 'burekas films' in Israel, the 'Yeşilçam era' in Turkish cinema, and the golden age of Greek cinema encapsulated something of that spirit. The protagonists are often caricatures based on ethnicity, lower social status, clearly poor, canny and street-smart. regarded by audiences these days as the epitome of their respected nations in terms of ethnicities, storyline, looks and aesthetics. In this sense, the tendency to distorted humor and stereotypes is built into this case. These films are unapologetic for being the ugly mirror of the image of the public and organizational life in their respective countries. While being politically charged and addressing controversial topics, it does not pretend to have a blunt statement about society. They are both low-brow and vulgar, but also honest about what they are (Shohat, 2010; Savaş, 2011; Vrasidas, 2012).

In a speculative future for multicultural games, games will travel internationally and be consumed because they express something profound about the cultural environment in which they were created. However, while doing so we must be also mindful of the potential pitfalls of the same agenda, i.e., games that foster stereotypes, cultural appropriation, the misrepresentation of minorities, and a general lack of sensitivity in game development.

To give some examples, Afrika (2008) developed by Rhino Studios, has been criticized for its portrayal of African cultures and wildlife as exotic and primitive, perpetuating colonialist stereotypes. Fez (Polytron Corporation, 2012) has been criticized for its use of Indigenous Mayan imagery and iconography without proper attribution or understanding of its cultural significance. Papo & Yo (2012) developed by Minority Media has been criticized for its portrayal of Brazilian culture and its use of cultural stereotypes. Beyond Blue (E-Line Media, 2020) has been criticized for its portrayal of Indigenous Pacific Islander culture and its use of cultural appropriation. Oriental Empires (Shining Pixel Studios, 2017) and Shenmue III (Ys Net, 2019) have been criticized for its use of cultural stereotypes and inaccurate representation of Chinese history and culture. Kingdom Come: Deliverance (2018) was criticized for its lack of diversity and inclusion, as well as for its portrayal of medieval Europe and history. Crusader Kings III (2020) - developed by Paradox Development Studio, this game has been criticized for its portrayal of medieval Africa and its use of inaccurate and offensive stereotypes. The Order of the Red Banner (2021) - developed by Hammer Games, this game has been criticized for its depiction of Soviet Union and Russian history, as well as its use of Russian stereotypes. Afro Samurai 2: Revenge of Kuma (2015) - developed by Redacted Studios, this game has been criticized for its stereotypical portrayal of African American culture and its use of racial slurs.

Clearly we can not consider a game like Ethnic Cleansing (National Alliance, 2002) and Muslim Massacre: The Game of Modern Religious Genocide (Vaughn, 2008) a successful engagement with cultural heritage. These games were widely criticized for their white supremacist, hate, and depiction of stereotypical characters. How can we discourage cultural heritage games from promoting ideologies that foster hate and violence? Conversely, how can we encourage diversity and fragmentation based on a shared ethos of respect?

Digital games can tell complex stories while providing playful experiences around moral choices or themes. A rich narrative layer opens up the potential to engage more with local cultures instead of international and global ones. But they can also choose not to do so, or do the opposite, or even aim for empathy but fail to engage with a moral issue in a proper way. The pile of games dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are a testimony to that, games like Under Ash (Afkar Media, 2001), Rising Eagle: Futuristic Infantry Warfare (Invasion Interactive, 2007), Special Force 2: Tale of the Truthful Pledge (W3, 2013), Fursan al-Aqsa: The Knights of the Al-Aqsa Mosque (Nidal Nijm, 2022) have all sparked controversy for its use of violent imagery and portrayal of the conflict in provocative almost propagandistic way, instead of raising empathy or proper discussion in the conflict and its outcomes.

It has also been suggested that the 30-year era of globalization is in its death throes, and that we are entering a new world order characterized by decentralization, fragmentation, distinct opposing values, and different ways of doing things (ref.). We do not consider this as a positive future outlook overall, albeit one that presents a chance in this particular space. Big companies notice this trend and adjust. Technical tools allow more people to develop interactive experiences and independent games in their language, and enhance their circulation locally, among national and cultural communities. For instance, in 2022, Valve expanded the Steam platform to 74 additional languages that games can support (Steamworks Development, 2022). Roblox introduces localization tools to allow users' experiences to travel easier between cultures and languages (Roblox Corporation, 2022). The metaverse is potentially stateless yet VRChat promotes worlds that speak certain languages and have a strong sense of national identities (ref). In Russia, private investors continue to support the development of a national game engine (Murray, 2022). This advancement can significantly change the gaming landscape. For once, it necessarily enhances the

significance of clusters, as well as national domestic markets. Secondly, it allows independent developers to create games in their language for their “people,” so to speak, reflecting local culture and personal experiences, as well as local characters, storylines, rules and goals.

While we do believe that the current trend has the potential to promote diversity and ethics at play, it can also do the opposite as well as immoral play. These issues should be approached with greater attention and sensibility if indeed we believe in a future in which games are creators and preservers of cultural heritage.

How can we maintain shared values such as empathy, respect and tolerance in designing the games of the future? Should a multicultural game industry express shared values at all? If so, how can we build an industry where every narrative, value system and social experience expressed through games is accepted and valued? Then, how can we encourage players from different parts of the world to open up to new stories and myths from different cultures and histories? Multicultural games' challenges are not only the risks of marginalization or a lack of empathy and tolerance by the societies that play, they can also be the result of what is called “games of empire” (Dyer-Witheford & Greig De Peuter, 2009), the prevailing culture and those that do not see themselves part of it.

Since similar concerns were expressed in the framework of this present workshop, we regard this as an opportunity to discuss with fellow scholars, and experts in the field, a possible theoretical framework to tackle the issue at hand.

A FRAMEWORK FOR THE APPLICATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL ETHICS IN DESIGNING CULTURALLY INVESTED GAMES.

On this occasion, we would like to step forward in building a framework to deal with this issue and questions regarding the accommodations of more cultural and cross-cultural practices in future game production. We debate between us several paradigms that can provide an adequate framework to tackle this issue.

The concept of cosmopolitanism proposes that all of humanity should belong to a single community which transcends other forms of allegiance, connected by ideas of universal standards of morality, political action, and law. The creation of “world citizenship” (Binnie et al., 2006). From this perspective, the ideal of empathy and avoidance of materialism is used to embrace a worldview that rejects the problematic implications of globalization. Cosmopolitanism asserts greater confidence in expressing the self as part of others and within real-world circumstances (Lane, 2006). Cosmopolitanism is about developing a platform for mutual cultural expression and tolerance; however, in some other contexts it also gained negative connotations. If cosmopolitanism has to do with ethics and values, then we need to address this issue further, which we are not doing right now.

Gerald Delanty argues about cosmopolitan multiculturalism which might help. Quoting: “This cosmopolitan conception of multicultural thus goes considerably beyond conventional liberal and communitarian approaches in that it opens up the possibility of the achievement of unity through diversity.” Multiculturalism on its own has a more liberal content, and is based on the idea that there is a dominant culture. On the other hand, Delanty notes: “Thus, instead of presupposing discreet cultural groups, as in liberal multiculturalism, a cosmopolitan perspective requires the internal transformation of all groups in a process of ongoing deliberation and interpretation. Unlike postmodern or radical multiculturalism, cosmopolitan multiculturalism does not jettison the possibility of creating a common public culture. However, this is not a pre-

existing normative system, but an ongoing deliberative process created through the active contribution of all groups."

Arturo Escobar's concept of pluriverse as a world built upon acknowledging that there are many worlds, or, as he defines the decolonial project, "a world where many worlds fit"—the pluriverse here is about defending relational territories and worlds against exploiting the globalizing project. Respect differences and promote localized design. Design for the pluriverse.

Another academic reading of video games over the last few years is being inspired by the growing interest in the term of translocal or translocality, as an attempt to define and probably, redefine the relationship between local and global in terms of population mobility, immigration, and human geography. The importance of locality under the new conditions of mobility, relatedness and situatedness brought about by the new technologies and the ensuing shifts in socio-political powers, has led to the emergence of a new concept in which networking and the circulation of people, ideas and commodities, created a new sense of living and a new sense of self (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013). Translocality as a theoretical tool has been used as an umbrella term, featuring different aspects of geographical cultural perspectives, among which we highlight two characteristics: a) translocal spaces are being produced by both a mobile population that moves around, discusses new ideas, imagines different situations, produces new concepts, and an immobile population that acts as a custodian of local memory, recalling and remembering the local culture (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013; Sun, 2006); and b) actors shape these translocal networks through their own practice. At the same time, they are defined by the structure and the powers of these networks (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013; Steinbrink, 2009).

Using Appadurai's theory (1995) on the construction of locality, Nico Carpentier (2003) provides us with an interesting terminology of translocality. Where Appadurai noted that local communities and neighborhoods not only produce but also require context, and they become affected by bigger social systems that surround them, such as nations or states, Carpentier (2003) proposes that this is where translocality is born: local actors and networks work with global systems in a symbiotic way. This is the point where the local context meets global conditions, initiating a new dialogue on old or new ideas. In this light, we look at global networks from a different perspective, using as a starting point the local and how it extends to global systems.

"It is the moment where different worlds and their local agents—individuals, organizations, machines—co-operate with global and nomadic agents within networked environments. It is the moment where the local merges with a part of its outside context, without transforming itself into this context. It is the moment where the local simultaneously incorporates its context and transgresses into it. It is the moment where the local reaches out to a familiar unknown, and fuses it with the known. It is—to use Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) words—the place-based version of the rhizome".

In video game production studies, translocality can be a useful analytical lens as it emphasizes important parameters and specifically:

1. Unfolds the relationship between the global game industry and the local Indie communities and how game studios infuse the industry with context, but simultaneously being defined by the roles, values and production of symbolic meaning that the industry imposes.

2. Redefines our analytical interest, shedding light on the local communities and local actors and the conditions through which they produce context. Instead of examining the global and how it affects the local, we pose a different kind of question. How can the local reach the global or as Carpentier (2003) mentions “without transforming itself into this context” (p. 6).

3. It raises new questions about the future of local game dev communities and particularly, whether we can discern a tendency in which games with a strong local identity from different regions can form transnational networks and agencies within the video game industry, producing new trends in terms of aesthetics, gameplay, and narrative tropes (on the issue of translocal, see Bjarke Liboriussen & Paul Martin, 2016).

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