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"Train a Scribe" card from *Lost & Found*, illustration by Annie Wong and Mimi Ace







## ***Video Game Development in Asia*<sup>i</sup>. A Research Project on Cultural Heritage and National Identity**

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### **Abstract**

A report of the 2017 collaborative research project *Video Game Development in Asia*. Cultural Heritage and National Identity.

**Keywords:** Video Game Development, Asia, Cultural Heritage, National Identity, gameenvironments

**To cite this article:** Grieve, G. P., Helland, C., Radde-Antweiler, K., and Zeiler, X., 2017. Video Game Development in Asia. A Research Project on Cultural Heritage and National Identity. *gamevironments* 7, 102-115. Available at <http://www.gameenvironments.uni-bremen.de>.

Supported by the University of Helsinki's Future Development Fund, in 2017, our collaborative project researched cultural heritage and national identity in video game development in Asia. This report details some initial findings of our study, in which we each concentrated on one of four exemplary Asian nations — India, Japan, Nepal, and the Philippines. Each of us spent approximately three to six weeks exploring game development in our respective nation through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and ethnography with individual game developers and game developer companies. In 2017, we presented our initial findings at the 7th South and Southeast Asian Association for Culture and Religion (SSEASR) Conference<sup>ii</sup> held in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam July 9-12, 2017.

Why study Asian video game development and cultural heritage and national identity? Our ongoing exploratory, multidisciplinary and international project

investigates how cultural heritage is implemented in video game narratives and utilized by game developers in Asia. Existing research, however, is limited to social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as older media such as radio, television, and newspapers. Though one of the most influential media genres, especially for the younger generation, video games have so far been overlooked. Understanding video games matters for two reasons. First, video games are already with the people. They are a popular mainstream media that pervades society regardless of age, gender and social status. Second, games are increasingly complex, interactive virtual worlds in which cultural heritage and national identities are, literally, constructed by game designers: they are 'secondary worlds' in which e.g. national identities are imagined, histories are re-constructed, and traditions are (re)invented.

### **Nepal: Gregory Price Grieve**

This initial entrée into the relationship between Nepali video development, cultural heritage and national identity is still a work in progress and is in need of further data gathering and analysis. Yet, as a first step I ask, 'How is Nepal represented in video games?' To answer this question, I compare an AAA American video game set in Nepal, *Far Cry 4* (2014), to a game developed by a Nepali team, *polyTricks* (2016). *Far Cry 4*, developed for consoles and Microsoft Windows, is an open world, first-person shooter, which takes place in Kyrat, a fictional Himalayan country, and follows the protagonist, Ajay Ghale as he is caught up in a civil war. *polyTricks*, developed as an Android mobile application, is an endless-runner game, in which the player can tilt their device left or right to move the character to the left or right side of screen, and follows a corrupt politician as he works his way from rookie to president. Thus far, I have played through both games and analyzed player comments on several websites. I also engaged in a month of ethnography with the Arcube game design



they already knew. The game pictures Nepal not only as pre-modern, but somehow outside of time; a Shangri-la that offers, with an almost desperate longing, an untouched ancient wisdom by which the West can be redeemed. The developers see Nepal as a place in which Westerners can find themselves, by breaking from the scripted routine – late capitalism’s soul-crushing wage-labor, ant-like corporate careers, and shallow consumerism. The makers of *polyTricks* depict Nepal as underdeveloped, corrupt, and peripheral to the world economy, but a land of immense beauty (mountains), cultural heritage (temples) and potential for economic development. As Rabin Shilpakar, Arcube’s team leader said,

“The main purpose to build this game is to uplift the gaming industry in Nepal. The gaming industry can be next career building opportunities for many IT students and artists. The gaming industry can help us to present our folk, mythological stories, our history, culture, art in the form of the game. This can also educate our current generation, future generations to come and entertain them as well.”

### Japan: Christopher Helland

Unlike the other Asian nations studied, Japan has one of the world’s deepest and most complex video gaming cultures. With some of the most recognizable gaming companies in the world located there, it is no surprise that it is an epicenter of game development. Although companies like Nintendo, Sega, Square Enix, Sony and Capcom dominate the gaming industry, there is a substrata of independent game designers making names for themselves. Interestingly, gaming culture and development is so large within Japan that there are recognizable levels of developers, each with their own audience and niche. Often a distinction is made between those that work for large companies as official developers, Indie developers, and “*doujin*” developers. Doujin is a general Japanese term for a group of people or



for a number of significant developers to emerge with large cult followings and significant cultural impact. They are creating a magical world of games and gaming that exists beyond the control of the gaming industry. As these higher profile doujin game designers become established, many are being recognized as a unique type of indie developer. A good example being ZUN (Jun'ya Ota), who has developed over 25 games in the last 20 years, some of which are classified as doujin and some of which are considered indie. Zun's creation and development of the "Touhou Project" is my primary focus of research. His work draws upon Japanese mythology and folklore, religion, culture and tradition to create a fantastic gaming genre. The first game in the series is called *Highly Responsive to Prayers* (1997) and recently Touhou 14.5 *Urban Legend in Limbo* (2015) was adapted for the PS4.

## The Philippines: Kerstin Radde-Antweiler

When it comes to national identity and cultural heritage, video games in the Philippines have a long politicized history. Originally, cabinet arcade games, such as *Space Invaders* (1978) and *Asteroids* (1979), were viewed as corrupting and dangerous to the youth, and were forbidden along with pinball machines, and slot machines. In fact, the Philippines were one of the first nations to ban video games. During the Marcos regime in 1981 video games were banned through presidential decree no. 519:

"Whereas, there has been widespread use of pinball machines in amusements places all over the country; Whereas, the proliferation of these gambling devices adversely affects the moral regeneration program of the Government under the New Society, especially the youth; Whereas, it has come to my attention that there has been indiscriminate issuance of permits and/or licenses to operate pinball and slot machines and other similar devices to the detriment of the public interest"



the gamer plays the Philippine president Duterte and one can “shoot the incoming villains! Restore peace and order. Fighting crime has never been this fun!” Games focusing the current Philippine president became highly prominent and succeed in a bundle of quite similar games such as *Duterte Boxing Game* (2016), *Duterte Fighting Crime 2* (2017), *Duterterador* (2016), or *Flap Your President APK* (2016). Nearly all these games allow the gamer to play a political figure (mostly president Duterte) and kill drug addicts, or other criminals.

A first overview makes clear that Philippine identity is constructed mostly through politics and history. In contrast to PC games such as *Anito: Defend a Land Enraged* elements from religion, art or music do not play a role at all. A further research question is, if we can see explicit communicative demarcation processes and if so, why these fields are considered as not being relevant to video games design.

## India: Xenia Zeiler

In India, video game development is a rather recent phenomenon. Video games made in India first emerged about ten years ago, and from the get go, featured themes related to Indian cultural heritage and national identity. For instance, the game *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* (Aurona Technologies Hyderabad for Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, 2009), a console game produced by Sony for PlayStation 2 in 2009, was criticized for an overall low technical quality but also, a small number of groups opposed the incorporation of Hindu deities in video game environments. The overall situation changed as the game development industry in India quickly and immensely evolved. Between 2010 and 2015, market studies estimated growth rates as high as 30% for the Indian gaming industry (exchange4media News Service 2012). The number of gaming studios exploded from below 20 in 2010 to more than 500



India” (Kickstarter campaign *Raji: An Ancient Epic*). All these elements are clearly inspired by Indian cultural heritage (see e.g. *Raji: An Ancient Epic - Game Teaser 2017*) – and this is not accidental but rather a conscious decision by the Pune based game’s developers who state “We are working on the game we always wanted to make, a game which reflects lore, myths and stories from our motherland” (NoddingHeadsGames 2017). Currently, the game has released a demo on Steam and at the time of writing this report had initiated a kickstarter campaign (running until 12 Dec 2017) to secure funding and the future development work. Whatever the outcome of this will be and however the development process is taken further from the beginning of 2018 onward, *Raji: An Ancient Epic* is “a project that speaks to both the inventiveness of a community too often regarded as a back-up workforce, and the art, culture and history of a country that is seldom represented in video games” (Evans-Thirlwell 2017).

## Conclusion

We have now completed an initial explorative study on video game development in Asia, cultural heritage and national identities, which focused on four comparative settings in Asia: India, Japan, Nepal, the Philippines. Each of us is a specialist in our region, and we interviewed and engaged in participant observation with game developers. This insured systemized, coordinated data collection and analysis, as well as the comparability of the data and analysis results, making them usable as case study information for theory building beyond the four researched national contexts. As can be seen from our initial research, there are similarities and differences in game development and its relationship to cultural heritage in India, Japan, Nepal, and the Philippines. As became apparent, while Japan has a long history of game development, it was not until the mobile phone that video games exploded on the

scene in the other countries. Also, while Nepal and India shared some examples of the relationship between cultural heritage and development, in the Philippines national identity is constructed mostly through politics and history. Finally, while religion was important for some Indian game developers as a marker of national identity, it was not apparent in the other locations. Obviously there is still much that needs to be done. One thing is evidently clear, however. While they may have originated in the West, video games have become a global phenomenon, which takes on unique forms throughout Asia.

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