Video Game Development In Asia: Voices From The Field

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Abstract
Introduction to the Special Issue "Video Game Development in Asia: Voices from the Field".
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Recent political and societal developments point at worldwide transformations of societies. Such developments, including re-negotiations of societal and cultural themes such as national identity, cultural heritage or religion, are not restricted to certain "Western" world regions. On the contrary, shifts in political systems and emerging re-definitions of cultural and religious values are currently to be found especially in Asia.

For instance, national identities are not an attribute of a *conditio humana*, but rather are communicatively constructed (Knoblauch 1995). Under the influence of economic, political, and cultural globalization, nation states lost much of their legitimation, and identity formation has become an increasingly important, active, open-ended and contested process. It no longer merely concerns a small political elite, but has become a collective 'social practice' or form of 'cultural labour' performed by ordinary citizens. Collective identities are expressed in cultural materials, such as "names, narratives, symbols, [and] verbal styles. . . ." (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 285). Media play a prominent role as they function as a major model *of*

and *for* national identity construction (Jenkins 2008). Media narratives are not only powerful vehicles for conveying the covert or overt meanings of national identity, but they also shape and reshape identity building processes. In times of *deep mediatization* media are inseparable from all aspects of social life (Hepp 2016), and this entails viewing media as instrumental in constructing and conveying national identity, which can lead to nationalism and populism.

The role of media in the construction of national identities is already well accepted and researched. However, the research on the relation between media and nationalism has so far been limited to studies of mass or social media (Erikson 2007) or cyber-nationalism. For Asia, a number of publications discuss the role of mass media in constructing national identities (e.g., Brosius 2005).

Yet, the role of video games, though one of the most influential media genres, especially for the younger generation, so far has been overlooked. Indeed, video games are woven into our everyday lives and stimulate the emergence of new patterns of social interaction, communication, and shared meanings. They are increasingly complex, interactive virtual worlds in which national identities are imagined, histories are re-constructed, and traditions (e.g., religion, art, and overall, culture) are (re)invented. Video games actively contribute to the construction of perceptions of norms, value systems, identities and, in general, society. Whereas most blockbuster games are developed in the USA for global audiences, many smaller ("indie/independent") gaming companies successfully develop regional games.

The Project

Our collaborative study of video games, video gaming, and video game development in Asia has been going on for several years, with a special focus on India, Japan, Nepal and the Philippines. We first discussed this initiative in 2014, and have since begun a number of multidisciplinary and international sub-projects. All of these projects are based on fieldwork in the four Asian regions, including interviews, participant observation and ethnography with individual game developers and game development studios and companies. For example, during 2017, each of us spent several weeks in our respective nation to intensively research the development of games in our respective locale. Thematically, we have focused on game development in Asia in relation to cultural heritage, religion, and national identity.

Most of the research has been funded by two institutions and organizations, apart from our home universities who supported us on many financial and non-financial levels. The University of Helsinki Future Fund supported our initial fieldwork in Asia, conference panels and workshop meetings in Asia, as well as in the USA and in Finland, by funding our 2017 collaborative project "Video Game Development in Asia. Cultural Heritage and National Identity" (gamesculturesia, 2017). A project report can be found in the 2017 winter issue of this journal (Grieve et al. 2017). In 2018, we were awarded a collaborative research grant by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) for the project "Religion and Video Game Development in Asia - National Identities, Nationalism and Radicalization" which enabled us to have a workshop, writing retreat, and also to present at a conference and to meet with colleagues.

Our ongoing collaborative project (see Grieve et al. 2017) researches how game developers implement and utilize religious and cultural heritage themes in video games in Asia, namely India, Japan, Nepal, and the Philippines. Such a comparative approach allows one to study the specific entanglement of nationalism and religious identity in Asian video games. Based on intense fieldwork, the aim of the project is to systematize the collected data, compare the different country results, and develop theoretical approaches to study the relationship between religion, media, national identity and cultural heritage.

Over all, the aim of this issue is to make Asian game development visible to a greater audience and to show the growing importance of this area as a research field. Accordingly, instead of having only analytical papers about video game development, we give space to the voices from the field, both in the form of interviews (from the Indian and Philippine contexts) as well as in the form of field notes (from the Japanese and Nepali contexts).

India

In India, video game development is just some ten years old. One of the interesting facts is that games made in India right from the beginning featured themes related to Indian cultural heritage - themes which are still experimented with today, and to which the interviews presented in this Special Issue attest. Video game development in India has evolved and grown rapidly in the past decade. Between 2010 and 2015, market studies had predicted growth rates as high as 30% for the Indian gaming industry (exchange4media News Service 2012), and the number of gaming studios increased from fewer than 20 in 2010 to more than 500 studios in 2012 (Handrahan 2012). Most games produced in India currently focus on movies, sports, as well as

card and casino play. But there are also games which are set in Indian cultural and social contexts, at times having an educational character. In this issue, we give a voice to actors in the field, and so, four game developers from India speak about their work and their games, and how they do or do not relate to video game development and games played elsewhere in the world.

Japan

Japan has been at the forefront of the video game industry for generations. As their gaming industry developed, they created both a market for their consoles and products as well as the support infrastructure to train a workforce dedicated to this billion-dollar industry. This developed into a multi-leveled gaming industry within the country that ranges from Triple A companies like Nintendo, Sega, and Sony to various forms of indie game development and hobbyists passionate about video game creation. Among the indie developers and hobbyists (*doujin*) there is a constant push to develop games that reflect the complexity of Japanese culture rather than to create games for overseas audiences and sales. In “Geemu On: A Preliminary Study of Indie and Doujin Game Development in Japan,” Helland originally explored the religious and spiritual dimensions of Indie games. However, after conducting fieldwork and interviews with developers, he found they often did not consider the Western frame or classification of religion and spirituality in their game creation but rather incorporated aspects of tradition and values that reflected broader aspects of cultural hybridity and even cultural conflict.

Nepal

How is Nepal represented in video games? To answer this question, Grieve compares an AAA American video game set in Nepal, *Far Cry 4* (2014), to a game developed by a Nepali team, *polyTricks* (2016). Thus far, Grieve has played through both games and analyzed player comments on several websites. He engaged in a month of ethnography with the Arcube game design team, interviewed fifty people about game play in Nepal, and interviewed twelve game designers in Nepal. In his research, Grieve asks: What is the difference between how Nepal is depicted in *Far Cry 4* versus *polyTricks*, and what role do cultural heritage and religion play? Using the theory outlined by Arjun Appadurai (1990) in "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," Grieve argues that in the North American game, Nepal is depicted as "Shangri-La," as a spiritual place outside of time, while in the game designed in Kathmandu, there is a keen awareness of Nepal being on the edge of global culture, and a desire to display Nepal's natural beauty and culture.

Philippines

What do the constructions and interpretations of national identity in video games show about the Philippine's cultural heritage? More than other nations, video games play a prominent role in the Philippines because half of the population is under twenty-four years of age (cf. (Index Mundi 2018). In the past, the majority of Filipinos played mostly North American or European games. However, due to the incredible increase in the number of mobile phones, today there are many Indie gaming companies in the Philippines (Steamspy n.d.). Many of these games refer to the nation's current politics. An example of a popular mobile game is *Go Duterte* (2016) by Kulit Games, where the gamer has to play the Philippine president Duterte and

“shoot the incoming villains! Restore peace and order. Fighting crime has never been this fun!” Other highly popular games focusing on the current Philippine president include such games as *Duterte Boxing Game* (2016), *Duterte Fighting Crime 2* (2017), *Duterterador* (2016), or *Flap Your President APK* (2016).

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