

Preliminary Research Methods Proposal

Introduction

Are Video Game a Good Vehicle for Telling Cultural Stories?

This is the core question to my proposed research. In modern culture, where video games are more and more prevalent, can they be used to convey oral tradition and folklore stories in such a way that people will 1) want to engage with them and 2) appreciate the games for the story being told. There are plenty of people who play, for example, Call of Duty on a daily basis, but their enjoyment of such is less likely from the lens of wanting to experience the story of glory in wartime as it is from wanting to beat another player in an (ultimately) pointless arena. Not to discount those who play MOBA's (of which Call of Duty is not) seriously. Those ladies and gentlemen work hard just like any other professional athlete.

While I find it difficult to fully articulate sub-questions at this point, I would expect some to come up involving the cultural/folklore storytellers' cultural groups and whether or not they were 1) aware of this telling of their story, 2) if it has been helpful to them in some way, or 3) if they feel that their culture is being co-opted and marketed without them.

Acknowledging my biases:

I am someone who is very immersed in new media, video games especially. It would please me to no end if I could be instrumental in assisting the world of cultural storytelling to using this method (I would not be the first), but more than that, I feel that *games* in general are necessary to human development and that, sadly, the stories of vanishing cultures will do the same without some method of preservation that is relevant to growing demographics in this day and age.

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During my undergraduate research I picked apart the nature of ‘play’ and in doing so began a more comprehensive understanding of how the brain works. Play does not exist just in human society. To the contrary, play exists in almost every social animal in some sense. To the point, the common *Canis lupus*. The dog exhibits play frequently, and amongst their fellows. At times, especially while young, this play can appear to be hostile and dominating, but it is not. Animals play to learn. As such must humans. As a preview of part of my literature review, I would indicate the writing of Jane McGonigal (2011), who writes about the *Quest to Learn* school in New York. In which, students are presented all the same topics as a standard state-school students, but in the guise of play. In this, the students have less of an ‘I need to learn this to pass a test’ mind-set and more of a ‘if I learn this I can beat my next quest’ mind-set. I would not be the first to argue that this leads to a better overall understanding of the subject matter. I would even go so far as to challenge you, the reader, to recall a time in primary or high school in which you were studying for a test, just memorising what you were sure would be asked of you not because you genuinely cared about the subject, but because it would be on the test. You, I’m sure are guilty of this, as am I.

Literature Review

In examining the effects of video game playing to the desire for Japanese culture and cultural products in Taiwan, Chen (2013) uses both quantitative and qualitative methods: issuing a survey to 110 students from Asia University in Taiwan and following up with interviews with 13 of the respondents. The survey analysed usage based upon time and console preference and correlated those to the respondents’ attitudes and desires related to Japan. Chen’s hypotheses were that 1) heavy console gamers identify with Japanese culture more positively than light users, and 2) heavy console gamers are more likely to favour consuming Japanese products than light users.

Chen noticed that most of the respondents indicated a strong positive affection for the Japanese people and Japan in general, opting more towards Japanese-made game consoles (Nintendo Wii and Sony

PlayStation) over the United States' (Microsoft Xbox). Even in the instance where one respondent preferred the XBOX, they strongly preferred games produced by Japanese companies such as Koei and Square Enix. It was also noted that several of the respondents began to start watching Japanese historical TV dramas as a result of their impression of Japanese storytelling in media based upon the storytelling in games.

Dini (2012) states at the beginning of *On Video Games, Culture, and Therapy* that “[Video games and virtual worlds] have grown as a part of the culture and have become a culture in and of themselves.” Much as life has many spaces for people to be pulled into at any given time, for example answering a text while having a conversation, there exist many fully-functional otherworlds. When someone is engaged with one of these, they can be far away from the space in which they are physically occupying. In a word, games, as one of these otherworlds, are immersive. Virtual spaces have cultures of their own, and the longer one spends within it, the more attuned to it they become. In the human world, in a city for example, there exist many separate cultures in a shared space and it would be nearly impossible to know them all.

McGonigal (2005) looks into the topic of ‘more’ when it comes to gaming and social interaction. In the article, it is highlighted how, in many aspects of gaming and technology, there is an ever-present desire for ‘more’ (more people, more parts, more connection). The article goes on to describe four ‘social experiments’ of massively-multiplayer events (or flash mobs). While the concept is a bit disparate from the more intimate setting of sitting down in your living room or office and switching on a gaming console or computer system, does that mean that it is not applicable? The War of the Worlds, and Orson Welles (in)famous broadcast of it in 1938 is raised as an example. During the opening acts of the radio drama, the events of a Martian invasion are presented as a simulated newscast, leading many people (who perhaps had not heard the introduction to the drama as fictitious) to interpret the ‘news’ as real and therefore go into an ‘appropriate’ level of panic. They became a community engaged in a culture of

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possibly apocalyptic survival. Can this be applied to video games as a cultural vehicle? I would like to reference a more contemporary (and intentional) version of something becoming this kind of transformative game experience: Twitch Plays Pokémon.

McGonigal (2011) also speaks of a unique school in New York, Quest to Learn. At this school, students aren't graded, they level up. They achieve not out of an expectation to perform, but to learn. Although the article only goes so far as to explicitly mention the standard and dry subjects one would find in any junior high or high school, could these methods not also be applied to cultural history? Imagine crossing the Delaware with George Washington, Japan in the time of Empire, the Chinese New Year festival, Oktoberfest, St. Valentine's day... all of these through their historical and bespoke lenses coming from their originating cultures. How much more informed and engaged would you feel if you were 'actually' there?

Brock (2011) talks of Capcom's Resident Evil/Biohazard 5 and its initial misstep in racial sensitivity. In the early trailers for the game, a group of Black people are shown attacking a White man. This created controversy, similarly to the preceding game in the franchise which was set in a Spanish locale with (appropriately) themed parasite-controlled antagonists. It was later revealed that the image of Black assailants was accurate to the setting as Resident Evil/Biohazard 5 takes place in Africa (and in fact the players can assume control of both Caucasian and West African protagonists).

Research Methods

During the course of this research project I propose the following methods and tools:

In the quantitative realm, I propose to use surveys.

Using the internet at large, concerted as most as it can by publisher's own records if available, I hope to be able to poll people who have played a culturally-based video game, for example *Never Alone*, published by *Upper One Games*.

Questions contained within the survey would possibly include the following:

- 1) Have you played *Never Alone* <*Kisima Injitchuana*>?
- 2) Do you identify as someone with Native American or Alaskan heritage?
- 3) What was the primary reason for playing the game?
- 4) What was your overall impression of the game?
- 5) What was your impression of the scrimshaw-styled cut scenes in relation to the story?
- 6) What are your impressions of the gameplay?
- 7) Did you view any of the 'Insights' videos?
- 8) Have you done any research since playing the game into the Inupiat tribe?

In the qualitative realm, I propose to use interviews, case studies, and content analyses.

Utilising the very contemporary example of *Never Alone*, I would perform a case study of the game and analyse how it has done since its release late 2014. The metrics of game sales alone cannot be used to say concretely whether or not this contributes to the overall body of work that I am proposing here, but I feel that utilising that along with other data gathered through other methods as a part of this overall research umbrella can help to lead to a conclusive answer.

I would also propose to perform interviews with the development team at Upper One Games who created *Never Alone*. Knowing already that they worked with tribal elders, artisans, and storytellers, I would ask them about their process, and about their intentions for this game. The Upper One Games website indicates, at this time, that *Never Alone* is “our first title in an exciting new genre of ‘World Games’ that draw fully upon the richness of unique cultures to create complex and fascinating game worlds for a global audience,” but, as they are an Alaskan-based and created company, with strong ties to the native cultures, can they truly give such treatment to stories from other cultures?

Some questions contained within the interview could include the following:

- 1) What was your goal in creating *Never Alone*?
- 2) Assuming cultural awareness was your goal, have you seen evidence to support whether or not your goal was successful? [This question is possibly problematic in its phrasing as no one would want to admit to failure if that were the case]
- 3) What follow-up have you done with the tribal members you utilised in the creation of this game?

In addition, and if at all possible, interviews might also be done with the Inupiat tribe. Such questions might include:

- 1) Were you a part of those who contributed to *Never Alone*?
- 2) Have you seen positive or negative results to your tribe as a result of the game?
- 3) Do you feel that the game is an accurate representation of your cultural story?
- 4) Do you feel that the game is an appropriation of your cultural story?

All in all, the results of the case stud and interviews would be to glean if *Never Alone* accomplished the supposed goal to 1) raise awareness of the Inupiat tribe, 2) increase lay or possibly professional research into said tribe and related phenomena, and 3) enact policies or other related things in relation of preserving the Inupiat way of life, their cultural stories, or other.

In addition, I would also perform content analyses. I must admit to having not experienced *Never Alone* first-hand, but that is easily remedied. It raises the question though, have other games explored similar topics? I can readily recall one: *Ōkami*. *Ōkami* is steeped in Japanese folklore, however, as the company that created the game, Clover Studios, has since shut down, it would be difficult to question them on their motives in creating such a game. In a cursory scan of the field, it would seem though that many of the creative team members for *Ōkami* are now part of a studio called Platinum Games, so all might not be lost.

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Ōkami would just be a singular addition to the broader study of cultural stories and games, however. It may well be that the creators of *Ōkami* did not intend for the game to be informative, but just entertaining and utilising stories that they knew as Japanese game designers.

A detailed analysis of such games as *Never Alone* and *Ōkami* would undoubtedly help to forward this research topic. By looking at what such games choose to include, one might be able to develop a broader understanding of how the culture is being represented. Most certainly, in the most entertaining way, but beyond that, these stories may have a special significance within the cultures that call them theirs. Further research into the cultural stories and folklore of any such targets of these content analyses would need to be done, and under the assumption that the source materials would accurately reflect the cultures they were analysing.

References

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