CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ROLE-PLAYING VIDEO GAMES: A MAP OF APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, considerable attention has been devoted to applying video game technology to the development of virtual heritage tools. One noteworthy form of game is the role-playing game (RPG). RPGs seek to immerse the player in a character within a specific imaginary world, usually based to some degree on reality. RPGs can transmit cultural heritage, but the breadth and depth of engagement with culture depend on the game’s focus. This paper argues games involving heritage can be divided into four categories depending on their focus towards entertainment or non-entertainment, and emphasis on mass market or small market appeal. Each category has different advantages and disadvantages from the heritage perspective. Several RPGs and RPG-like games are examined across the four categories to illustrate their different approaches to accuracy, detail, and accessibility.

Keywords: video games, virtual heritage, role-playing games, digital technology, edutainment
Introduction

Virtual heritage, defined as the practice of creating virtual landscapes imbued with heritage content and presented with digital media (Tan and Rahaman 2009: 144), has emerged as a significant area of research and practical application within the greater landscape of heritage studies (Tan and Rahaman 2009: 144-146). Within this field, considerable attention has been devoted to the benefits of applying video game technology to cultural heritage, particularly in relation to archaeological reconstruction (Anderson et al. 2009), but also teaching languages and communicating other aspects of intangible heritage such as local customs (Johnson 2010), history (Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2007: 119-130), and cultural knowledge (Leavy 2014).

Depending on who develops a video game, cultural heritage can either be a core objective of the game or merely background material used to enhance the product. Equally, games may be designed to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, or focus on a particular small audience, perhaps allowing greater accuracy while sacrificing popular appeal.

Based on these considerations, this paper presents a map of four different approaches to cultural heritage in games:

1. Commercial games
2. Serious games
3. Culture-centric games
4. Player-developed modifications (mods)

These categories can be applied to all game genres. However, the examples explored here are drawn mainly from the role-playing game (RPG) genre. Therefore, the paper first discusses the nature of the RPG and its general applicability as a carrier of heritage. Subsequently, the four basic approaches to cultural heritage in games are summarised. Finally, each approach is examined individually with reference to particular games.

The role-playing game

RPGs as a game genre pre-date the video game, arising out of older traditions including tabletop gaming, live-action role-playing, and Renaissance fairs (Barton 2008: 13-24). In the RPG, the player character, or avatar, is a dynamic entity, often created by the player, and developing under the player’s control. Players improve and customize their
avatars by managing their appearance and skills, as well as by obtaining and equipping progressively better items (Barton 2008: 3-11; Hitchens and Drachen 2008).

To draw the player into the game, it is vital for an RPG to immerse the player in character and place. To achieve immersion, a cohesive imaginary world must be built, a process hinging on the three characteristics of inventiveness, consistency, and a sense of completeness (Wolf 2012: 29-64). Champion (2006: 67-89) approaches world-building from the perspective of presence, a concept introduced from the study of virtual reality. He breaks presence down into three separate concepts, these being environmental presence, cultural presence, and social presence (Champion 2007). The closer RPGs come to creating a sense of being in a “real” place, with “real” people and a “real” culture, the greater the immersion. RPG makers, therefore, devote considerable attention to culture (Monken 2010; Johnson 2013: 31-40). Current RPGs still generally fall short of Champion’s benchmarks for achieving strong presence (Champion 2007; Majewski 2014). Nonetheless, there is a definite correlation between strong RPG worlds and strong exploration of culture.

While deep cultural information is desirable in commercial RPGs, cultural accuracy is not intrinsically valuable. Developers frequently resort to popular culture stereotypes, distorted but readily recognizable to audiences, and thus more accessible (Sołtysiak 2014). Conversely, effective transmission of cultural heritage relies not only on strong cultural content but also on the appeal of the game. A game that explores culture in depth and with accuracy while failing to meet audience expectations will not ultimately be successful. This tension between accuracy and popularity leads cultural heritage scholars and practitioners to explore avenues alternative to commercial games, including so-called serious games as well as other, hybridised approaches.

**Categorising approaches to cultural heritage in games**

Broadly, four categories of games can be distinguished, emphasising either cultural content or entertainment value, and appealing to mass markets or small markets. Figure 1 depicts a map of these four approaches.
Of the four categories, only commercial games and serious games can be considered as completely distinct and independent categories, the former focusing entirely on entertainment for a mass market, the latter on cultural education for a small market. The remaining two categories should be considered as hybrid and dependent. Thus, culture-centric games are serious games that adapt features from commercial games to improve accessibility for the mass market; alternatively, they are commercial games based on the notion that concentrating on cultural heritage in both game content and game marketing will improve sales. Game mods, meanwhile, are simply additional materials, produced by players, which can be plugged into a particular (usually commercial) game. They exist in the context of that game and are driven by the interests of the game’s community. These four categories are now reviewed, with a particular focus on RPGs dealing with historical and endangered cultures.

**Commercial games**

Commercial games are oriented to entertainment and mass market appeal. Cultural heritage is used here to enhance the believability of the game world. This can apply both to fantastic and realistic virtual worlds. An example of a fantastic world populated with extensive references to a real culture is *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks 2011). Though built on a layer of pre-Christian Scandinavian culture, and depicting a recognisable Scandinavian landscape, *Skyrim* (Figure 2) modifies this culture...
extensively to fit into a fantasy world of dragons and magic. Johnson (2013: 41-59) argues players are well aware of the historical influences in *Skyrim*, and are interested in exploring this aspect of the game. Simultaneously, *Skyrim* has been criticised for resorting to cultural stereotypes (Sołtysiak 2014). Certainly, a game set in a fantasy world has no need for strict cultural accuracy.

While not an RPG, the *Assassin’s Creed* series (Ubisoft 2007-2015) is another noteworthy example. *Assassin’s Creed* is a science-fiction/fantasy story set ostensibly in the real world. The series explores a number of different places and time periods, in each case devoting significant attention to the cultural backdrop. While accuracy is still sacrificed for the sake of the story, Whitaker and colleagues argue for the game’s value as an introduction to culture and history (Whitaker and Glass 2013; Whitaker and Luther 2014; Whitaker and Andress 2015). Nonetheless, as an action game, *Assassin’s Creed* does not empower the player to explore its milieus in any great depth.

Some scholars have argued commercial developers should involve scholars in their work in order to improve the accuracy of commercial games (Johnson 2013: 61-63; Sołtysiak 2014). However, there does not appear to be any intrinsic commercial benefit to drive such an approach, making it unlikely to happen.
Serious games

The challenge of cultural accuracy in commercial titles has led to games designed specifically for accuracy and educational value. So-called serious games prioritise non-entertainment utility (Sawyer 2010) while still aiming to be enjoyable. Serious games are used for many applications ranging from health and work to learning, training and documentation (Sawyer and Smith 2008; Anderson et al. 2009).

*Digital Songlines* is an example of a serious game exploring cultural knowledge. The project was a repository of Aboriginal cultural knowledge; thus, the entertainment value was not as important as designing a culturally appropriate way of exploring Aboriginal cultural and natural heritage. This was achieved by presenting data integrated into the landscape, rather than catalogued in a database foreign to Aboriginal knowledge practices (Leavy 2014: 88-109). An outgrowth of the *Digital Songlines* project is *Virtual Warrane II: Sacred Tracks of the Gadigal* (Immersive Heritage 2012). This project (Figure 3), designed for a museum exhibition about pre-European Aboriginal culture in the Sydney area, best demonstrates the small-market nature of the serious game, as *Virtual Warrane II* was only playable in one museum, and only for the duration of the exhibition.

*Figure 3. Aboriginal heritage in Virtual Warrane II: Sacred Tracks of the Gadigal (source: Immersive Heritage 2012)*
Another noteworthy example is RezWorld (Thornton Media, Inc, unpublished), a game designed to facilitate learning Native American languages, and built using technology previously employed to train US soldiers in Iraqi Arab language and customs (Johnson 2010). In general, a strong tradition of cultural heritage-oriented serious games exists (Anderson et al. 2009), but most efforts seem to focus on small audiences.

**Culture-centric games**

A separate category is commercial titles or serious games designed to imitate commercial titles. Such games either explicitly explore cultural heritage or rely on cultural heritage as a draw factor to the point where this becomes the game’s most notable feature. This category constitutes a tension-filled combination of mass market focus with an emphasis on cultural content. When a commercial game adapts this approach, there is a risk that the narrower focus will limit the audience while budgetary restrictions may not permit greater cultural depth. This is the case in *Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword* (Studio Sich, 2011), which depicts 17th century Eastern Europe (Figure 4), but ultimately is unable to do so in any convincing depth (Majewski 2014: 133-135).

*Figure 4. Polish-Lithuanian heritage in Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword (source: author)*
Academics or heritage-oriented organisations may also use this approach to reach a wider audience. An example is World of Temasek (Magma Studios 2011), a multiplayer online role-playing game depicting 14th century Singapore (Figure 5). Temasek was partially funded by the National Heritage Board of Singapore (Lim 2012) and developed in cooperation with academics (Wu and Jones 2010: 32) for use in classrooms, and for general audiences. Though Temasek incorporates quests and dialogues for heritage purposes (Wu & Jones 2010), its cultural depth remains limited, while its commercially-inspired form still failed to capture a significant audience outside of the classroom. Overall, the inherent tension between cultural themes and mass appeal results in problems with culture, appeal, or both.

Figure 5. South-East Asian heritage in World of Temasek (source: Magma Studios 2011)

Game mods

The final category, game mods, demands a few words on the context and manner in which game content can be modified (modded) by its users. Different games facilitate modification to varying degrees, from the incorporation of new scenarios, characters and spaces, to deep alterations of game rules. When a game warrants such interest, players collaborate in what Gee (2013: 133-139) describes as the passionate affinity
space (PAS). The PAS is usually an online space such as a discussion forum, where diverse individuals gather to explore and build upon a common interest. The PAS serves both to provide information and expertise to its visitors from other individuals, and as an outlet for their productive efforts. A PAS can thus lead to the development of an online repository of game-related knowledge, or to the creation of new game content in the form of mods. Modding is also possible within an organised environment, and culture-centric mods have been developed by school and university students as coursework (Champion 2012: 115-146) or after-school activities (Squire 2011: 150-161).

Player-developed mods thus emerge out of the players’ interests. When players create culture-oriented mods, they do not necessarily do so not specifically to transmit culture, but rather because they enjoy the process of modding. Nonetheless, the players are exploring an area of interest, and their small market focus enables them to devote considerable attention to cultural details. This attention to detail can be seen in small mods designed to improve the cultural content already present in the original game, as in the case of Csatádi’s Visual and Historical Mod (Csatádi, 2011-2015) for Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword.

Mods are still awkward carriers of cultural heritage. They are constrained by a lack of funding and the need to fit within the framework of a particular game not necessarily optimal to that particular culture. This is evident in culture-oriented mods developed for the RPG Mount & Blade: Warband (Taleworlds Entertainment 2010), including Brytenwalda (Brytenwalda Team, 2011) and Suvarnabhumi Mahayuth (Rasiya Team 2012). Brytenwalda (Figure 6) is set in the cultural melting pot of 7th century Britain, while the latter (Figure 7) examines 16th century South-East Asia.
In both cases, limited funding can be discerned in the adaptation of existing graphical assets, such as where Scandinavian-inspired architecture from Warband is re-textured in Suvarnabhumi Mahayuth to approximate Thai architecture, a clear problem for accuracy. Equally, in both cases the original game’s focus on small-scale battles and feudal relations limits the range of cultural aspects the mods can address.
Created within a game community, the target market of mods is limited, consisting of the often-small subset of players interested in both the original game and the subject tackled by the mod. However, in some cases, the game’s publishers empower modders to officially publish the mod as a separate product, expanding its reach. A recent example is *Mount & Blade: Warband – Viking Conquest* 2015), developed by the Brytenwalda team (Savage 2014).

**Conclusion**

Using games to preserve and popularize cultural heritage is at once promising and daunting. Each of the presented approaches carries with it specific limitations and benefits. A culturally shallow or misleading, but entertaining commercial game, may serve to bring public attention to a particular culture. Meanwhile, culture-centric hybrids or serious games, have been used in education or in museums, but can suffer from limited appeal when brought directly to the public.

Of the four approaches presented, the author would point to modding as a noteworthy option for further exploration. Heritage scholars can potentially collaborate with modders, harnessing their technical prowess to develop mods that enhance the cultural content of an existing commercial game, or use new content to explore a
different cultural setting within the framework of the original game. Such possibilities are currently virtually unexamined.

However, all four approaches have their unique uses and capabilities, and none should be neglected. What is clear is that the utility of video games in general and RPGs in particular for cultural heritage is no longer a potential possibility. In fact, games are already used for heritage in interesting and diverse ways, as well as making use of heritage for their own purposes.

Jakub Majewski has more than a decade’s experience of working in the video games industry in a range of roles. In 2014, he began a PhD at Bond University, Gold Coast, Australia researching the application of role-playing video games for individual education and the transmission of cultural knowledge.

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