

Cultural Narratives in Game Design

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ABSTRACT

Game studies scholars have focused on many aspects of culture in digital games [16] [20] [26] and related areas in game production [4] [23]. This study, however, focuses on culture from a game designer's perspective and on the cultural narrative game designers communicate through their designs. This study will examine 1) The ways in which game designers reflect on the concept of culture 2) The choices game designer's make in designing a game and 3) The ways in which game designers reflect on how culture may inform game design. This work extends beyond game studies, as it is applicable to the design of other interactive technologies like websites and mobile applications and informs cultural studies in the design of technology products.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 Social and Behavioral Sciences: Sociology D.3.3

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Game design; values in design; cultural probes; culture; cultural studies; ethnography; visual methods.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2008, Sony delayed the release of its game Little Big Planet (LBP), a puzzle platform digital game, when a forum post by a Muslim user alerted the company to two passages from the Qur'an in the licensed music track [18]. Sony pulled the game from retail stores where it had already been distributed, postponed the worldwide release of the game, and immediately issued a statement apologizing for any offense. Unfortunately, the three-week delay of the game resulted in loss of revenue for Sony and retailers.

Despite this close call, LBP was hailed as one of the most innovative games in 2008 and went on to win many game development awards. However, LBP's experience highlights the industry's challenge with managing game content, an ongoing obstacle for a transnational industry composed of numerous networks actors. Players involved in game production beyond the development team or studio, include manufacturers, platforms, publishers, outsourced developers, localization experts and marketing [7]. In addition, the industry faces many tensions and

dependencies including the tension between sustainability and creativity [20]. For example, production costs in cultural industries such as digital games are high and thus the goal is often to maximize an audience for global sales as such decisions about game content are at times based on the sustainability rather than creativity [7].

The focus of this research is to explore how these tensions and dependencies inform aspects of culture in game development; specifically game design. My claim is that game developers as significant players in the industry can be a good place to begin the exploration of culture. As the creators of content game designers can impact the vision of the game, the play experience and image in local contexts. Thus, my study aims to understand where game designers stand on the concept of culture and how these perceptions, if at all, inform design choices in the games they create.

2. THEORETICAL FRAME

In this section I discuss several matters central to the study including the theoretical framework and literatures that situate the study.

2.1 What is culture...again?

It is the standard in all literatures about culture to point to the difficulties of a universal definition [27] [30] [31]. Culture can be considered from a variety of viewpoints and schools of thought, each with their respective cultural theories. There are also numerous opinions on the dimensions of culture including the levels at which culture exists [27], the boundaries of culture and where culture is located [29].

Some social scientists view culture as an adaptive system that includes the social and the cultural [8]. Through this lens, culture can be a system of behavior patterns that inform how human beings relate to their environment. The sociocultural system can also be explored in space and over time [2].

Other scholars perceive culture as a system of ideas that occur in cognitive processes [14] [15]. Some view these processes as systems of knowledge [19], others as universal symbolic systems that arise out of structures of the mind, such as those present in myths and customs; and yet others see these processes as a system of shared symbols and meanings that result from the social act [21].

2.2 Framework

Literatures on design focus on the description of culture as cognitive process [30] [31]. As a result, a variety of design disciplines (i.e. engineering design; industrial design and interaction design) incorporate Hofstede's theory of culture [15] as their theoretical framework. Hofstede's five dimensions of culture define culture as a bound, constituted and organized concept.

This study, however, departs from these studies by also including a nonrepresentational theoretical framework [1] (in addition to

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cognitive perspectives) to design studies. Such a framework explores culture as an unbounded concept in which entities—thoughts, organizations, events—are loosely brought together and reorganized through thought and action [29].

2.3 Bodies of Literature

This study draws from three bodies of literature: game studies, cultural studies, and self-reflective interaction design practices. The study focuses on games indirectly by drawing insight from the game design process. Certain game studies scholars provide a foundation for an exploration of design including ethics in game design [12] [25], formal elements of rules and play [5] [17], and narratives in games [1].

A second set of texts relevant to this study draw from cultural studies. Some texts provide framing on the geography of culture in digital games including business and production culture [20] [23], the culture of gender [16] and the cultures of play [9] [26]. Cultural geography literatures that support the understanding of cultural space and place also help to frame the study [1] [29].

A final body of literature that situates this study is the works by scholars from sociology of science and technology (STS)—those who study how technologies are shaped by human action—and information ethics (IE), which claim technologies include the ethical frameworks of those who design them [6] [11]. I include in this group of studies, value design work and practices, i.e., practices from game studies such as Values at Play (VAP) [10], and interaction design such as cross-cultural design [30] [31].

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question, “In what ways do published game designers reflect on the concept of culture and how do these reflections inform design choices in their games?” will examine 1) The ways in which game designers reflect on the concept of culture, 2) The choices game designers make in designing a game, and 3) The ways in which game designers reflect on how culture may inform game design.

4. DESIGN APPROACH

As the term “culture” is heavily debated in many fields, making it difficult to define [21] [30] [31], inquiring about such a topic requires a multi-faceted approach. This study is closest to ethnographic inquiry and modified by several perspectives. As a qualitative inquiry, it draws on interpretive constructivist perspective to better understand and describe game designers’ views of culture. Also informing this study are postmodern art perspectives that playfully stimulate game designers’ cultural reflection [20].

4.1 Methods

To answer the question “In what ways do published game designers reflect on the concept of culture and how do these reflections inform design choices in their game,” I draw from various approaches including reflective interaction design [13], cognitive mapping studies [19] and visual anthropology [3] [24]. The use of tools, methods, and approaches from a variety of

approaches thus supports a better understanding of what culture is, how it is symbolized, how it is narrated, and how it is constructed for participants.

The proposed method for this study is an interactive cultural probing exercise [13]. Participants are asked to use digital probes to answer three questions about culture: “What is culture?” “Where is culture?” and “Who is culture?”. Next, participants are invited to participate in a digital cognitive mapping exercise in which they are asked to organize personal images about culture; this is followed by a discussion of a game and their game design choices for that game. As the final question in the interview protocol, participants are asked, “In what ways, if at all, did the exercises help you think about the relationship between culture and game design?”

4.2 Participants and recruitment

A snowball sampling method was employed. Four participants were recruited for the pilot through my personal Conference Associate network at the Game Developer’s Conference. After conducting the pilot study, it became apparent that the numerous data sources (images, field notes, diaries, collages and interviews) added complexity to the study. Such an analysis implied a change in the design to either 1) limit the number of participants and retain the multiple data sources or 2) retain the number of participants and decrease the number of source data points. As a result I chose to limit the number of participants to ten.

4.3 Analysis

All images created and produced will be coded using interpretive methods for visual data [3] [24] Written materials by participants will be analyzed using narrative analysis. After this, I will elicit the salient story in each of the types of data, visual and written.

5. PILOT FINDINGS

Interviews are ongoing. For the small sample size thus far, narrative themes of openness to cultural self-reflection have emerged. Responses suggest that the cultural design probes and cognitive maps can be effective tools for cultural reflection. Participants also expressed enjoying the research exercises and have not reported concerns about disclosing information. Through the narratives challenges were expressed. Despite game designer’s willingness to include differing perspectives, current economic and organizational systems influence game designer’s ability to implement their perspectives in game design.

6. EXPECTED OUTCOME

In the next six months, I expect to gain a better understanding of how game developers’ perceive culture. Narrative analysis will reveal the cultural stories that appear to “live within” game designers, and how these narratives may or may not exist in their creations. From game developers’ active participation, I expect to contribute to scholarship through highlighting the processes that can shape game designers’ perspectives and how these my indirectly shape the phenomenal field of game production. Ultimately, insight into this construction can assist in understanding how game content and play experiences are created.

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