The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim and its Audience as a World-Building Benchmark for Indigenous Virtual Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

The preservation of Indigenous Australian cultural heritage (CH) is a challenge acknowledged by communities, scholars, and policymakers. Research indicates video games are strong tools for heritage, but existing culture-oriented serious games are unsuccessful as cultural worlds. Commercial open-world role-playing games (RPGs) like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) immerse players in complex virtual worlds populated by fictional societies and cultures. The engagement of commercial game players in informal learning and production in the context of online passionate affinity spaces (PAS) indicates players become invested in the cultural content depicted in games. While commercial RPGs do not typically transmit real cultural heritage, culture-oriented serious games can be enhanced by importing features from commercial RPGs. This thesis poses the question: how can open-world RPGs like *Skyrim* contribute to the transmission of Aboriginal heritage?

To respond to this question, three studies were conducted. Immersive autoethnography was employed to investigate world-building tools, methods, and strategies employed in *Skyrim*. An online survey explored *Skyrim* player motivations and modus operandi in PAS engagement, as encyclopaedists who collate game lore on the Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, and as modders, who produce patches and modifications for *Skyrim*. Finally, qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 experts from heritage, virtual heritage, and video games to explore the requirements of Indigenous Australian CH. The three studies were synthesised to develop a set of guidelines and recommendations for the content and development procedures of RPGs for indigenous CH.

*Skyrim*’s world-building was found to use a wide range of tools and practices possible to incorporate individually or together to enhance heritage-oriented serious games. The survey of *Skyrim*’s PAS communities showed the game’s world-building methods inspire players to learn and apply a range of knowledge and skills motivated by interest in the game world. Expert interviews identified focal points for game-based depiction of indigenous cultures, including a focus on values and relationships rather than individual cultural features. The importance of natural heritage and desirability to develop greater environmental dynamics in virtual worlds was noted.

The thesis concludes RPG virtual worlds can immerse players in a new culture within a unified environmental, social and cultural context, making them holistic frameworks appropriate for the depiction of indigenous culture.

**Keywords:** virtual heritage, cultural heritage, Aboriginal culture, indigenous culture, role-playing games, world-building, game fandom, passionate affinity spaces, participatory culture, The Elder Scrolls, Skyrim.
Declaration

This thesis is submitted to Bond University in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

This thesis represents my own original work towards this research degree and contains no material that has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at this University or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made.

Jakub Majewski

Ethics declaration

The research associated with this thesis received ethics approval from the Bond University Human Research Ethics Committee. Ethics application numbers: 0000015713 and 0000015949.
Acknowledgements

It is a truism a thesis is not simply written by its author. Like any “individual” work, a thesis is ultimately the product of an entire support network. Nor is it limited to the four years of actual work; in a very real sense, it is the culmination of decades of preparation.

It would be impossible to properly acknowledge even just those who directly contributed to this thesis. I must limit myself to the most prominent and most representative.

The list naturally must begin with God. This research weaved together so many different threads of my life and my interests into a single fabric in a way nothing short of wondrous. The conspiracy of circumstances that led me to shift away from my PhD plans to the games industry, only to have that PhD foisted on me in a completely different shape a decade later is remarkable. Such “coincidences” don’t grow on trees, so I can only hope I have fulfilled to the best of my abilities the task that, evidently, had been assigned to me from the very top.

My parents and siblings guided and supported me all the way. My father, Miroslaw Majewski, himself an accomplished scholar, has two PhDs among his children and their spouses, and two hopefuls in the pipeline, including this one. That speaks volumes.

My wife Karolina and our children, Marianna and Rozalia, endured the most disruptive four years imaginable, even if it was also an exotic holiday in beautiful Australia. It saddens me to admit much of this time must have felt like an introduction to widowhood and orphanage, and my gratitude for their support is also an apology for the accrued debt of time and attention. Gratitude for support also extends to the Catholic communities who helped our family settle in Australia and provided us with friendship and pastoral care throughout: St. Brigid’s parish (Nerang), St. Gregory’s Latin Mass Community (Brisbane), and the Gold Coast Polish community.

In the academic world, by far the most important were my primary supervisor, Jeff Brand, and the three secondary supervisors, James Birt, Steve Webb, and Penny de Byl, whose valuable contributions were cut short with her departure from Bond. Scott Knight, who had once supervised my Master’s thesis, this time was a comrade-in-arms. Donna Henson provided important advice at a critical point in the project. But I also want to mention a lecturer who very nearly failed me during the first semester of my Bachelor’s degree eighteen years ago: Anne Cullen. High school had given me the impression I could write well. Anne quickly and sharply dispelled that illusion, confronting me with the harsh reality of academic writing. Though Anne only taught me in that one introductory subject, I do believe she is the one who taught me the most important lessons of university life.
I must also thank my fellow PhD candidates at Bond who shared advice, work samples, and moral support: Jan Jervis, Jeff Decker, Deb Smith, Pat Blannin, Nik Vasilevski, Laura Mcgillivray, Scott Blakemore, Ashley Stark, Nosa Esiet, and (again) Scott Knight. I hope I’ve done all I could to reciprocate.

The work of a PhD candidate also benefits in many ways from the entire faculty, everyone from the Dean and the academic staff, all the way to the security guards and cleaners; these last two groups I’ve had remarkably extensive contact with... given they only appear late in the night! Rather than trying to name everyone, I will identify five people who, subjectively, felt most crucial in this regard: Raoul Mortley, the Dean, whose support for my candidature opened many doors along the way; Damian Cox, who oversees all HDR students as the Associate Dean for research; Mandei Saranah, who has far too much work on her hands, keeping all the HDR students going through numerous formalities; Jason Murray from the Nyombil Centre who provided connections to the Aboriginal community; and finally, Diane Hughes, without whom the entire faculty would grind to a halt. It’s all about the Earl Grey, Di!

I must also acknowledge some people whom I’ve never actually had contact with, yet who spent an inordinate amount of time with me during this project, inspiring me and keeping me going in those small hours of the morning when surrender to sleep is so inviting: Mark Knopfler, Andrzej Sikorowski, Neil Finn, and – of course! – Jeremy Soule.

The list of thanks begun with God, the source of all that is good, so let it end with the root of all evil: money. To say Bond University has been generous with its scholarship programme would be a massive understatement. There is literally, absolutely no way this thesis could have come into existence without the financial support both from the Office of Research Services and the Faculty of Society and Design. It is not for me to judge if, in their eyes, the investment paid off – I can but hope so!

Dedication

I did not include the Aboriginal people of Australia in the acknowledgements, either as a group nor as individuals, though I owe much to many. It’s not that their support made the thesis possible, though it did; rather, they were the whole point of it. I have remained enchanted with the Australian Aboriginal culture and the resilience of its people ever since my first encounter, nearly two decades ago. It is with the hope my work will in some small way contribute to the future of Aboriginal culture, that I humbly dedicate this thesis to the Aboriginal people.
List of publications

Over the course of this project, several related works were presented or published by the author. Below is a list of the papers, conference presentations, and non-academic public presentations that emerged either as extracts from the thesis or as offshoots exploring lateral but related topics.


Majewski, J. (2016, November). *Games and culture: what have they got to offer to one another?* Public presentation at the Exploring Worlds of Thought and Play IGDA webinar. Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8AqNOjWTpI


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<td><strong>Advanced Dungeons &amp; Dragons</strong></td>
<td>AD&amp;D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artificial intelligence</td>
<td>AI</td>
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<td>Authorised heritage discourse</td>
<td>AHD</td>
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<td>Assassin’s Creed</td>
<td>AC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer role-playing game</td>
<td>cRPG</td>
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<td>Cook Inlet Tribal Council</td>
<td>CITC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
<td>COAG</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural heritage</td>
<td>CH</td>
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<td>Digital versatile disc</td>
<td>DVD</td>
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<td>Did not participate</td>
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<td>Downloadable content</td>
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<td>Dungeon master</td>
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<td><em>The Elder Scrolls</em></td>
<td>TES</td>
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<td><em>The Elder Scrolls Construction Set / Creation Kit</em></td>
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<td>GG</td>
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<td>The Imperial Library</td>
<td>TIL</td>
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<td>Intangible cultural heritage</td>
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<td>Intellectual property</td>
<td>IP</td>
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<td>International Council on Monuments and Sites</td>
<td>ICOMOS</td>
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<td>Journal session</td>
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<td>Live action role-playing game</td>
<td>LARP</td>
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<td>Massively multiplayer online game</td>
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<td><em>Mount &amp; Blade: With Fire and Sword</em></td>
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<td>Non-player character</td>
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<td>Passionate affinity space</td>
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<td>RPG</td>
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<td><em>Suvarnabhumi Mahayuth</em></td>
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<td>United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland</td>
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<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
<td>UNESCO</td>
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<td>United States of America</td>
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<td>User interface</td>
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