2015

Approaches to cultural heritage in role-playing games

Jakub Majewski
Bond University, Jakub_Majewski@bond.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/fsd_papers
Part of the Sociology of Culture Commons, and the Technology and Innovation Commons

Recommended Citation

This Conference Presentation is brought to you by the Faculty of Society and Design at ePublications@bond. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty of Society and Design Publications by an authorized administrator of ePublications@bond. For more information, please contact Bond University’s Repository Coordinator.
Approaches to cultural heritage in role-playing games

Jakub Majewski
Bond University
Faculty of Society & Design
Bond University QLD 4229
0459 686 094
jmajewski@bond.edu.au

ABSTRACT
Role-playing games (RPGs) seek to immerse the player in a character and within a specific imaginary world, usually based to some degree on reality, the non-fictional world we inhabit. RPGs are thus potentially capable of transmitting real cultural knowledge as cultural heritage tools. This paper interrogates a number of RPGs and RPG-like games to examine how they transmit real cultural knowledge and the relevance of accuracy to the transmission process. It is argued games involving cultural 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.

Keywords
Role-playing games, cultural heritage, culture, serious games, modding, imaginary worlds, world-building.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Role-playing games (RPGs) place a significant emphasis on the development of the player character or avatar. Players improve and customize their avatars by managing their appearance, quantifiable character skills and by obtaining and using progressively better items (Barton, 2008; Hitchens & Drachen, 2008). It is thus vital for an RPG to immerse the player in a character, and a significant body of research has examined the complexity of player-avatar relationships (Hjorth, 2011). Characters do not exist in a vacuum, and character immersion is strongly connected to immersion within a specific imaginary world. This is achieved by world-building, a process described by Wolf (2012) as hinging on the three characteristics of inventiveness, consistency, and a sense of completeness.

Given the importance of imaginary world-building for immersion in RPGs, they devote considerable attention to culture (Monken, 2010; Johnson, 2013). This attention makes RPGs potentially effective tools for cultural heritage purposes alongside other virtual heritage applications. However, RPGs do not always serve well the virtual heritage concept of cultural and social presence (Champion, 2007). While it is reasonable to argue that world-building will demand steady improvements to presence-building over time, not all RPGs that explore culture rely on presence to the same degree, and indeed not all RPGs require substantial cultural content.

Furthermore, cultural accuracy is not intrinsically valuable in games development, and developers frequently resort to popular culture stereotypes, distorted but readily
recognizable to audiences (Soltyšiak, 2014). Simultaneously, effective cultural transmission 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.

Broadly, four categories of games can be distinguished with differing approaches towards the emphasis on cultural content versus entertainment value, and the emphasis on mass market or small market appeal. These four categories are serious games, commercial games, culture-centric commercial-like games, and player-produced game mods. Representatives of these four categories are reviewed here, focusing on RPGs dealing with historical and endangered cultures.

Serious games prioritise non-entertainment utility (Sawyer, 2010). They also tend to be designed for specific narrow markets, eschewing mass market appeal in order to achieve this objective. For example, *Virtual Warrane II: Sacred Tracks of the Gadigal* (Immersive Heritage, 2012) was designed for a museum exhibition about pre-European Aboriginal culture in the Sydney area. Another example is *RezWorld* (Thornton Media, Inc, unpublished), designed to facilitate learning Native American languages. In general, a strong tradition of cultural heritage-oriented serious games exists (Anderson, et al., 2009).

Commercial games are oriented to entertainment and mass market appeal. Such games use real culture to build a convincing backdrop for the game. One example is *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011). Though built on a layer of early medieval Scandinavian culture, *Skyrim* modifies this culture extensively to fit into a fantasy world of dragons and magic. Although not strictly an RPG, the *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007-2015) series provides another example. Set in the real world, this series places more emphasis on accurate cultural backdrops, but still sacrifices accuracy for the sake of a science-fiction/fantasy story.

A separate category are 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. Two examples are *World of Temasek* (Magma Studios, 2011), exploring 14th century Singapore in the context of a massively multiplayer online game, and *Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword* (Studio Sich, 2011), which depicts 17th century Eastern Europe. In both cases, the inherent tension between cultural themes and mass appeal results in problems with culture, appeal, or both.

Player-developed mods are awkward carriers of cultural heritage, 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. Produced by players, mods tend to emphasize entertainment value, but their small market focus paradoxically enables them to devote considerable attention to cultural details. Examples of culture-oriented mods are *Suvarnabhumi Mahayuth* (Rasiya Team, 2012) and *Brytenwalda* (Brytenwalda Team, 2011) for the game *Mount & Blade: Warband* (Taleworlds Entertainment, 2010). The former examines 16th century South-East Asia, while *Brytenwalda* is set in the melting pot of 7th century Britain.
Using games to preserve and popularize cultural heritage is at once promising and risky. For professionals working in this area, it is crucial to examine the different approaches available and learn from the benefits and limitations of each option in order to optimize their own approach.

**BIO**

Jakub Majewski is currently pursuing PhD research at Bond University, with a focus on open-world RPGs as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge. As an adjunct at Bond, he has taught about interactive experience design, and game culture. Prior to returning to the academia, Jakub had spent about a decade in games development in various capacities from level designer to producer and creative director. His professional portfolio includes forty games in multiple genres, and for multiple platforms.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


