

Representing 'Asian-ness' in Video Games

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Introduction

In 2001, the US-based organisation Children Now commissioned a study on violence, gender and race in the top-selling video games for the seven different game systems. The study (Children Now, 2001) found that non-white characters were overwhelmingly portrayed in stereotypical roles. For example, seven out of ten Asian characters were portrayed as fighters. Jeffery Ow (2000) provides a trenchant critique of such evident video gaming trends in his essay, 'The Revenge of the Yellowfaced Cyborg Terminator'. For Ow, such limited and stereotyped characterisations replicate problematic "master narratives based on racism and colonialism" (p. 54). His polemic highlights the urgency of developing a critical methodology for analysing the representational politics of Asian tropes in contemporary video games.

This paper¹ examines the use of Asian-specific tropes and characterisation in two video games, *Final Fantasy X-2* and *True Crime: Streets of LA*. Despite the fact that these games have been developed by Japanese and North American companies respectively, I do not

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however wish to present the two games as simply standing in for perceived differences between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ game development contexts. Such a broader comparative analysis is beyond the scope of this paper; and to my knowledge, no programmatic scholarly research has to date been conducted on the differing cultural contexts of video game production, circulation and consumption. This scenario is rendered even more complex with conventional Japanese game development practices for international markets. Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) includes video games in his discussion of “culturally odourless” Japanese cultural products that either disguise or disavow the specificities of their cultural origin in order to maximise global marketing potential. Indeed, Mario, the famous video game character from the Nintendo Corporation’s long-standing and successful *Super Mario* series, is ostensibly an Italian plumber. Other internationally successful franchises that do not use explicit Japanese or Asian imagery include *The Legend of Zelda*, *Metroid*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil*. At any rate, some recent Japanese games such as *Final Fantasy X*, *Final Fantasy X-2*, *Project Zero*, *Forbidden Siren* and *Onimusha 3* are emblematic of an emergent confidence in visualising and marketing ‘Asian-ness’ to an international audience. It is also worth pointing out that there is a corresponding increase in the number of European and North American produced games that feature Asian central characters or Asian-inspired themes. Examples of such games include *True Crime*, *Ninja Gaiden*, and the forthcoming *Jade Empire*. Some questions, however, need to be raised: how are Asian tropes being represented in this seeming international new wave of video games; and what types of contemporary Asian identities and identifications are being mobilised in these games?

An Analysis of Asian-Specific Tropes in Video Games

True Crime (Luxoflux, 2003) features a video gaming first: a diasporic Chinese protagonist in a naturalistic contemporary setting. In this cross-platform (PlayStation 2, X-Box, GameCube and PC) title, gamers assume the role of Nick Kang, a Chinese-American cop, who attempts to unravel the mystery of his father’s disappearance, while going about his daily job of ridding the City of Angels of Chinese triads and Russian gangs. Given the questionable orientation of the latter premise in this third-person action-adventure game, it could be asserted that Luxoflux, the North American developers, proved to be canny in their choice of the main character. This selectivity also extends to the choice of the two main supporting characters. Kang’s work partner is the Hispanic reformed ex-gangster Rosie Velasquez, and the Chief of Detectives to whom Kang reports is African-American Wanda Parks. This ensemble of characters seems calculated to parlay possible accusations of ethnic profiling, or

of unduly targeting particular stereotypical ethnic crime groups. The game appears to endorse the view that this is fine as long as the ethnic policing is facilitated by other ethnics. The problematic sub-text of ethnic or diasporic community self-surveillance and self-disciplining within the multicultural nation-state nevertheless remains. In other words, you guys take care of your own, please.

The game uses a distinct West Coast hip hop soundtrack, featuring music by well-known African-American performers such as Snoop Dogg, WestSide Connection, Ice-T and Coolio, to name but a few. Thus, Kang's activities on the streets of Los Angeles are complemented with a pulsating and identifiable urban sound-scape. In fact, as a hidden bonus upon completion of the game, gamers are provided with the option to play through the game again as Snoop Dogg who assumes the leading role. This seeming inter-changeability again poses questions about the ethics inherent in the representational politics of the game. The act of foregrounding minority representation and visibility in an American setting may be potentially productive or empowering, particularly in North American game development contexts that rarely feature African-Americans or Asian-Americans as central characters. Nevertheless, I would contend that the game appears too self-consciously resolute in its audio and visual presentation of a sense of perceived difference. That is to say, it pro-actively cultivates a sense of relative cultural 'otherness' to the point of deleterious effect, especially when considered in relation to the overall storyline. In sum, it constantly reminds the gamer that this is the 'other' side of Los Angeles.

Much of the plot is anchored in gritty urban realism – at least by conventional video gaming standards anyway – until the second half of the game when it completely degenerates into battles with demons and a dragon supposedly lurking below the streets of Chinatown in Los Angeles. Even worse, these baddies are at the service of arch-villain Ancient Wu. While fantasy elements are in and of themselves not too much of a contentious issue in gaming contexts, the positioning of such elements in *True Crime* is problematic in their coding of 'Asian-ness' as that which has to be ultimately exorcised by the diasporic subject. In much the same fashion, the game leads Kang to a final confrontation with General Kim, thereby purging Los Angeles and by extension Kang himself of the perceived enemy within. Such narrative closure offers limited scope for diasporic subjectivity apart from domestication and assimilation to perceived dominant and normative ideals.

The coding of 'Asian-ness' in *True Crime* is problematic, and arguably functions in reductionist terms. By contrast, 'Asian-ness' serves as a crucial point of identification in *Final Fantasy X-2*. This game self-consciously references elements of traditional Asian cultures as a collective marker of cultural alterity and local or regional distinctiveness, to construct an alternative sense of Asian modernity.

Final Fantasy X-2 (Square Enix, 2003) is an innovative role-playing game (RPG). These games traditionally have a strong quest-based narrative, where the gamer controls the actions and decisions of either a customisable single character, or more often, a team of up to eight different characters in turn-based RPGs. Despite its early incarnations in Euro-American contexts, the RPG is today arguably considered the definitive example of Japanese video games. The *Final Fantasy* series is one of most critically acclaimed and commercially successful Japanese RPGs in international markets. *Final Fantasy XII* is currently in production, while the on-line based *Final Fantasy XI* is scheduled for Australian release later in 2004. Each game in the series features completely different characters, settings and storylines. In general terms, the only common link is a turn-based battle system that is refined and tweaked in each new release. *Final Fantasy X-2* is the first direct sequel in the series. The best-selling *Final Fantasy X*, released in Australia in 2002, was notable for its re-definition of conventional paradigms for fantasy RPGs, especially in terms of its rich infusion of Asian-inspired imagery and themes. For the first time in the history of the series, the lead characters are noticeably Asiatic or Eurasian in appearance (and in the case of Wakka, in speech and intonation as well). The visual design of *Final Fantasy X* references traditional Okinawan dress, architecture, dance, music and customs (Chen, 2004, p. 90). This is most strikingly evident in the portrayal of the islander cultures populating the game-world of Spira. Elements from traditional Thai and other Asian cultures, especially in terms of dress and architectural design, are also incorporated into the game-world to connote a generic sense of 'Asian-ness'. At the same time, however, it would be fair to say that the game does not construct 'Asian-ness' purely in terms of an imagined past or as a yearning for pre-modern social life. The ending of the game is suggestive of a new order in the game-world of Spira where the institutionalised traditional religion, Yevon, is necessarily displaced. The narrative privileges a progressivist outlook instead that acknowledges the continued place and role of customary ways within the context of a new machine age. The game thereby offers what is deemed to be a pragmatic template for Asian modernity.

Final Fantasy X-2 draws on these core themes and, in point of fact, uses many of the same game-world settings. As a direct sequel, this PlayStation 2 exclusive title provides the game developers, Square Enix, with the opportunity to imagine life after saving the world. Spira is

now thrown into disarray with the rise of warring factions: the Machine Faction, New Yevon (the neo-religious faction), and the Youth League (the idealist future-oriented faction). As before, Yuna, the main female protagonist, works towards uniting these factions and thus save the world once again. The message is unambiguous: there has to be a negotiated consensus among these divergent ideological positions. The overall ambience of the game, however, is a noticeably more playful and whimsical than its predecessor. For example, *Final Fantasy X-2* references contemporary Japanese pop cultural paradigms, such as J-pop. Yuna sings and dances in this game. The memorable opening scene features a song and dance number that draws on contemporary East Asian pop concert conventions in terms of musical style, choreography and stage design. In a sly reference to international pop music idioms, Yuna stages a major concert at a crucial point in the narrative to rally the people of Spira in her own ‘Yunapalooza’. Pre-modernity, modernity and contemporaneity seemingly coalesce in this game-world to underscore the themes pertaining to difference, mutuality and coexistence. Such stylised elements arguably function to construct an alter/native sense of contemporary Asian cultural identities – in traditional as well as contemporary terms, and in local/regional as well as global terms.

Conclusion: Some Future Considerations for Researching Video Games

Final Fantasy X-2 and *True Crime* mobilise Asian identities and Asian identification with varying degrees of success. The two games foreground both the problematic and potentially productive or empowering aspects of ‘Asian-ness’ as a cultural essentialist configuration. My discussion in this paper has functioned to illustrate some possibilities for a critical interpretive methodology that is based on narrative and visual analysis. At the same time, however, I am aware of the need for sociological knowledge of situated audiences or ‘readers’ to temper the rhetorical excesses of exclusive close textual or discursive analysis that has characterised much cultural studies in general (see, for example, Long, 1997). This is especially so in any analysis of transnational cultural products such as video games. Following Leo Ching (1995, p. 283), I am mindful of the ways in which “symbolic meanings are increasingly commodified, dehistoricized, and depoliticized as they are transferred across national boundaries”. Yet, at the same time, “we must also insist on the contingent *local* [original emphasis] articulations in which foreign cultural commodities and their potential multiple meanings are taken up by the people who consume them”. Thus, this paper only aspires to go as far as an attempt to articulate some preliminary possibilities for analysing video games. Further research needs to be conducted, for instance, in terms of the reception of video games by situated audiences in differing cultural contexts.

Despite almost a thirty-year history, video games are only recently becoming the focus for interdisciplinary and international academic study. *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Wolf and Perron (2003), is the first critical anthology dedicated to the analysis of gaming cultures. Apart from consistent references to the global cultural significance of Japanese video games and in-depth case studies that include *Final Fantasy IX*, there is nonetheless scant focus in the anthology on Japanese contextual specificities. I would argue that to discuss ‘embodied experiences’, ‘corporealised pleasures’ or ‘postmodern identity patterns’, for instance, without a critical attentiveness to the cultural contexts of production, circulation and reception, invariably risks theorising video games as a transcendental free-floating signifier. This is therefore a timely moment in the developmental stages of video game studies to articulate the need to continue developing a critical interpretive methodology based on contextual studies, narrative and visual analysis, and situated audiences. If anything, this paper demonstrates the necessity and urgency of developing precisely such a critical paradigm for analysing Asian video games as well as the use of Asian-specific tropes in video games.

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