

Decoding Cultural Affinity in Video Games: An Examination of Narrative Expression, Visual Aesthetics, and Interactive Design in The Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

Academic discourse and studies have investigated the interplay between video games and cultural heritage, concerning how cultural values link digital transformations with traditional narratives in the form of a convergent structure [1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6]. According to Champion [1], Borowiecki and Prieto-Rodriguez [6], video gaming is a contemporary digital medium that amplifies the expression of storytelling and allows users to serve as both drama performers and audience members. In addition, video games reflect the cultural aspects of society through visual aesthetics, where architectural features, the cutting-edge culture of video game casts, and iconographic landscapes depict the elements of contemporary art [7]. Game theory is a theoretical framework that helps study the cooperation and conflict among diverse agents identified as players representing different cultural aspects [8; 9; 10]. Conversely, Warmelinks' [11] online game interactivity theory will aid in addressing how different designs and interactivity aspects of players, games, and the computer reflect cultural affinity in video games [12; 13; 14]. This article conducts a theory- and investigator-triangulation survey of cultural affinity in video games by addressing the polysemous aspects with regard to theoretical discourse. The article will also focus on the question of whether, in the view of international system-theoretical discourse in the social engineering context, contextual factors that may be falsified abductively are present, thereby leading to negative connotations. Lastly, the article will explain the product-specific status of the video game industry and the video game product as captured in both academic discourse and practise.

Keywords: Games, Cultural Affinity, Video Games, Serious Games, Narrative Expression, Visual Aesthetics, Interactive Design, Digital Era, Cultural Heritage, Contemporary Art, System-theoretical Discourse, Iconographic Landscapes, Game Theory, Transmedia, Social Engineering, Game Studies.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Video games have become a vital hub of cultural and social participation because they portray different cultural identities as players adopt specific fictional characters [15; 16; 17; 18; 19]. To better comprehend the cultural affinity of video games, this article applies knowledge of game theory and Warmelink's [11] and Friedel's [12] online game interactivity theories. First, game theory suggests that players are in competition (non-cooperative) and act independently,

reflecting individualism, and every player devises their strategy to accumulate more benefits [8; 15; 20; 21; 22]. Conversely, the game theory also holds that players sometimes form cooperative groups to enhance their performance in competitive coalition games, thereby depicting the collectivist cultural implications [8; 23; 24; 25; 26; 27]. During game play, players can exploit various cooperation opportunities by deciding whether to cooperate or oppose in the sense of the Community-of-Practise (CoP) Approach [28; 29; 30; 31; 32; 33]. In this context, Perc et al. [34] emphasise that game theory allows investigators to develop models that integrate learning and social interactions to contribute to cultural evolution and exchange [35; 36; 37; 38; 39; 40].

Second, Friedl's [12] online game interactivity theory (OGIT) suggests that online multiplayer games incorporate cultural aspects in their various design characteristics and interactivity or interactive issues [41; 42; 43; 44]. The OGIT addresses cultural affinity through interactivity on various levels, including player-game, player-player, and player-computer interactions, thus increasing the understanding of interactive cultural issues integrated into the video game [12; 45; 46; 47; 48]. In OGIT, the player-game interactions help to explain the overall (cultural) dimensions between the game and players [12; 45; 46; 47; 48]. These player-game interactions influence the player to recognise the cultural environment visually and derive meaningful experiences after manipulating this environment through different individual choices, even when encountering the same challenge in a video game [49; 50; 51].

Third, Bandura's [52] social learning theory (SLT) indicates that learning transpires via digital media, like video games, where observation informs players' behaviour. In the SLT context, players interact with the environment, in this case, the cultural aspects of video games, and acquire new behaviours through observing and imitating another character [52; 53; 54; 55; 56]. Therefore, SLT will be applied in this article to provide a comprehensive understanding of how various experiences with cultural aspects and appropriation of video game products are captured in academic discourse and practise [52; 56; 57; 58].

CULTURAL AFFINITY IN VIDEO GAMES

Exploring Cultural Affinity in Video Gaming: Shared Origins, Affinity Spaces, and Cooperative Competition

Cultural affinity describes a situation where individuals feel more connected to, are attracted to, and associate with media that portrays, showcases, or aligns with consumer culture [59; 61; 62; 63; 64; 65]. The cultural affinity between the game and the player indicates that both have a shared cultural origin; players usually realise and orient towards shared sociocultural practises and endeavours as they continue playing video games [56; 62; 63]. Wu's [65] investigation of the cultural affinity in the Minecraft video game revealed that game designs and artefacts shared in affinity spaces concentrate on new themes, opinions, and add-ons to the game. Borrowing from game theory's non-cooperative cooperative competition arguments, players interacting in affinity spaces by criticising the cultural artefacts produced by others and generating their own artefacts is a vital aspect of video games like Minecraft [8; 52; 56; 65]. In another recent investigative study on video game affinity spaces, Beutelspacher and Henkel [66] found that players use information sources outside the video game and need to manage communication with others and deal with various amounts of data. Beutelspacher and Henkel's [66] findings are congruent with the game theoretical discourse of cooperative players who participate in cultural affinity spaces as they interact with other players [29; 56; 65; 67; 68]. In

this regard, players identify with video games' affinity spaces, which are characterised by shared cultural resources and provide communicative and interactive features that foster cultural participation [56; 65; 66; 67].

The Dark Side of Cultural Affinity in Video Games: Negative Connotations and the Consequences of Violent Exposure

Cultural affinity in video games can be abductively falsified, leading to negative connotations. Borowiecki and Prieto-Rodriguez [2] noted that cultural participation in video games can be influenced by the cultural activity depicted in the game. For instance, players interested in culture may not participate in cultural activity in video games due to different constraints [2; 56; 68; 69; 70; 71; 72]. In this cultural affinity, spaces are associated with negative connotations associated with individualistic culture and video game exposure [74; 75]. These negative connotations result in a reduced cultural affinity between the player and the video game, as evidenced by the increasing consumption and learning of new, sometimes violent, behaviours that have increased mass shootings instigated by adolescent and young adult players [73; 74]. From the game theory perspective, these negative connotations reflect the non-cooperative competition that results in decreased cultural affinity due to excessive use of or exposure to violent video games [2; 74]. Furthermore, Greitemeyer et al.'s [75] findings that violent video exposure increases interpersonal-affective deficits imply that cultural aspects could be falsified to align with the individualistic (or nonconforming) culture portrayed in video games [74; 77; 78]. Therefore, such adverse behaviour and other negative connotations are pronounced depending on the player's duration and frequency of exposure to video games [79; 80; 81]. Instead of increasing cultural affinity, these connotations result in cultural appropriation or adoption of new cultural ideas and practises [56; 69; 70; 71; 72; 82; 83; 84; 85].

Video Game Affinity Spaces: Fostering Inclusivity and Cultural Heritage Through Player-Game Interactions and Roleplaying Mechanisms

On the contrary, Weststar and Legault [86] found that video gaming affinity spaces are characterised by practises and value systems that reinforce exclusivity or inclusivity (collectivism). From the OGIT perspective, cultural aspects and features in video game designs foster interactivity like relationship-building in interest-driven affinity spaces that support inclusivity or collective practise [12; 87]. Based on the OGIT's player-game interaction perspective, one can argue that cultural affinity involves the player visually recognising and associating with the cultural environment depicted in specific video games [87; 88; 89; 90; 91]. Romero et al. [92] note that video games usually leverage cultural affinity spaces by mediating cultural aspects for the players and facilitating the players' interactions and, sometimes, the formation of cultural heritage through various game mechanics, primarily via roleplaying [93; 94; 95]. Furthermore, player-game interactions reinforce cultural affinity spaces through roleplaying in video games because players get exposed to cultural heritage reflected in immersive, interactive, and captivating storytelling [94; 95; 97; 98]. As a result, player-game interactions tend to benefit the players by improving their cultural skills and knowledge through their participation in video games' affinity spaces. These player-game interactions are fueled by a multi-step flow of information in multiplayer video games' affinity spaces, where players communicate and interact [99; 100; 101; 102]. The multi-step communication assists players in establishing cultural affinity in video games to coordinate and enhance information sharing among users [29; 56; 103; 104].

Strategic Framing in Video Games: A Double-Edged Sword for Cultural Affinity, Perception, and Behaviour

On the contrary, strategic framing in video games with regard to the trias of polity, policy, and politics entails designers making specific considerations to influence how players understand or perceive diverse issues, including culture [105; 106; 107]. For instance, a previous study revealed that video games' strategic framing has adverse consequences for democracy, implying that video games expose players to new cultural frames while distracting them from the substance of the storyline or game [108]. As a result, Aalberg et al.'s [108] findings indicate that some strategic frames in game designs undermine cultural affinity by impeding players from accessing substantive knowledge and sabotaging their political information and engagement. Conversely, strategic framing in video games reinforces cultural affinity through visual elements in the video game scenes that allow the player to learn cultural aspects through player-game interactions [109; 110]. Of concern, Kumpel and Haas' [111] study revealed that strategic framing in video games affects players' perceptions, implying that the framing effect can provide players with opportunities for improving social competence, mental fitness, and problem-solving skills. However, Kumpel and Haas [111] stressed that the framing effect might undermine cultural affinity through video games influencing players to adopt new behaviours like social exclusion, worrisome leisure activity, and increased aggressive behaviour [108; 109; 110].

Cultural Appropriation in Video Games: The Fine Line between Representation and Stereotyping

Cultural appropriation describes a culture absorbing aspects and elements of another culture and using these cultural aspects and ideas for personal interests or outside their original context [56; 108; 109]. Cultural appropriation in video games and the media industry could propagate false information, making it challenging to differentiate between these fictional and real-life cultural elements. For instance, media and video games that portray black men as hypermasculine and aggressive may lead to cultural appropriation when players think that these depictions of black men are authentic both in media and the real world [112; 113]. In this context, the false information in fiction video games and media may shape players' feelings, thoughts, and behaviours [112; 113]. Therefore, the cultural appropriation of elements of minority cultures usually results in stereotypes and widens the gaps between minority and majority cultures [114; 115; 116]. Furthermore, Laamarti et al. [117] criticise media and video games for visualising cultural heritage, real-life objects, and places in a manner programmed to justify the games' functions in virtual spaces. For example, in the Assassin's Creed franchise, depictions of historical fidelity, such as minarets designed to reflect Damascus and Jerusalem, do not replicate the originals [118; 119]. Instead, designers heavily relied on Egyptian minarets for architectural designs in the game and applied calligraphy from North-West Africa's Maghreb region for game decorations [117; 118; 119]. Adopting elements from another culture results in cultural appropriation in the media industry [120; 121; 122].

Video Games and Fashion: A New Frontier for Cultural Appropriation and Self-Expression

Similarly, cultural appropriation in video games affects the fashion industry precisely because gaming has emerged as a tool for self-expression [123; 124; 125; 126]. Research indicates that the gaming industry has modified the consumer landscape and challenged the norms in the fashion industry, prompting luxury retailers such as Louis Vuitton to attempt to entice players

by casting avatars in games like Final Fantasy [123; 124; 125; 126]. As recognisable fashion brands enter the gaming space, cultural appropriation occurs through players being lured into developing attachments with the new fashion designs [123; 127; 128; 129; 130; 131]. In this regard, Scarabelli [123] reports that video games and fashion crossovers have influenced societal expectations concerning status and trends, precisely when luxury labelling or stereotyping is involved. Fleming et al. [132] emphasised that playing video games leads to cultural appropriation as gamers consume daily social-cultural values and fashion trends. This cultural appropriation leads to the formation of new identities as young people and adults wear fashions learned during video gaming, usually through participatory culture.

Hollywoodisation in Video Games: Fashion, Cultural Appropriation, and the Formation of Postmodern Identity

Hollywoodisation is a considerable crossover between video games and the fashion industry, resulting in cultural appropriation [133; 134; 135; 136; 137]. Most video games produced in European and North American studios propagate Western consumerism by attempting to conform virtual spaces and characters to the values and practises of Western and European cultures [133; 134; 135; 138]. For instance, in the Assassin's Creed franchise, Levant inhabitants do not depict the dialects and dress of the Levant community in the real world but reflect Western gestures and fashions [138]. Similarly, in the survivor-horror video game Dead by Daylight, gamers wear fabulous outfits like Hawaiian shirts, glitzy sequin gowns, and grungy streetwear attire, makeup, and hair that customise the character, thus allowing the player to have space for expression and immersion into the game and develop a new sense of fashion through cultural appropriation [139].

Furthermore, Clarke and Miller [140] report that this game-fashion crossover influences players to learn alternative fashion styles and develop new identities that align with or reflect the characteristics of the postmodern self [141]. Therefore, this adoption of Western culture and dressing reveals designers' efforts to appropriate and modify various cultural heritage elements to align with personal interests [138; 139; 140; 141].

Hollywoodisation and Westernisation are product-specific statuses of the video game industry discussed in academic discourse [142; 143; 144; 145]. The graphics in video games virtually immerse players in a new cultural heritage and influence them to acquire new tastes associated with Western and European cultures. Pittman [141] reports that the depictions of working girls and women in male-dominated workstations proliferate the desire to align with feminine fashion trends such as tailored skirt suits. In this regard, the game-fashion crossovers in video games and the game industry serve as tools for transforming or communicating one's identities. Squire [146] agrees with this academic literature by arguing that video games permit gamers to explore various cultural elements and environments and make decisions that can lead to aligning with different cultural representations in video games. Academic discourse indicates that game designers integrate cultural artefacts in a video game to influence the players to discover and acquire these representations [147; 148; 149]. However, Söngü [147] criticises cultural appropriation by reasoning that players' exploration of cultural artefacts in video games is limited by the designers' perspectives and use of aesthetics and the delivery of the specific game.

Cultural Appropriation in Video Games: Ethical Concerns and the Construction of New Identities in Virtual Spaces

Academic literature indicates that cultural appropriation through video game products facilitates "the construction of cultural knowledge that may be offensive to the original culture" [150]. For instance, the representations of Native American cultures through wearing feather headdresses for specific cultural meanings are frequently appropriated by people from other cultures who view these attires as fashion accessories and costumes [150]. Some people may consider this transformation (cultural appropriation) offensive or destructive of the original culture. In this context, the academic discourse raises ethical concerns about video game designers taking social responsibility by striving to comprehend how video games foster cultural interpretations [150; 151; 152]. Moreover, Brock and Johnson [153] emphasise that video game players (or consumers) align with representations of cultural elements and behaviours because players continuously search for new social and cultural identities. Hence, the customization of video games influences players to consume Western modernity's values, virtues, and norms [154; 155; 156; 157].

Video game products are reflected in practise through gamers' consuming representations of other cultures in the video games and adopting them through cultural appropriation. Applying SLT perspectives, video gamers interact with representations of European and Western cultures and learn new behaviours, fashion trends, and other cultural aspects [52; 56; 138; 141]. In the SLT context, video game consumption influences players to identify with depictions of cultural artefacts that conform to their desires for new cultural and social identities [153]. As players get immersed in new cultures and fashion trends in the virtual gaming space, they become imaginative about the new characters and identities that influence them to transform themselves by reflecting the learned behaviours, styles, and ideas [158]. Hernández-Pérez and Rodríguez [160] argue that video games' virtual spaces are now transforming game products like fashion into social activities or cultures that link people beyond the expression of class. However, Kuhn and Thon [163] note that video game products are reflected in practise as adaptations of rebellion, authoritarian power, and other nonconforming behaviours [164; 165; 166; 167; 168].

CONCLUSION

Video games' cultural affinity spaces make individual players feel more or less connected to the portrayals of cultural elements and artifacts in video games depending on whether these depictions align with players' search for new cultural and social identities. As players interact in the games' affinity spaces, they utilize information from outside sources, share it with other players, and learn new norms and behaviors through cultural participation. However, falsifying cultural affinity can lead to negative connotations during player-game interactions, as reflected through new, nonconforming behavior among young adult players. Cultural appropriation influences players to get immersed in the game and storyline and learn other cultures, values, and behaviors [56]. Cultural appropriation in video games, media, and the fashion industry creates stereotypes and allows players to adopt depictions of cultural elements that are not replicas of the originals. Although players learn the dressing attire and fashion trends of other cultures as depicted in video games, the players do not always understand the meanings of these cultural elements in practice.

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