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The Trials and Tribulations of Historical Game Development - The Political Economy of Ludic Cultural Memory

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WARGAME project workshop 4: Player Perspectives

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Context

- **Memory studies** – how the past is made in the present
- **Political economy of communication** – the context of production of games
 - Mosco (2009): «the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of [...] communication resources»
 - Parenti (1992) "We are worried about coercion from outside the media, but about coercion from inside the media?"
- **Cultural studies** – hegemony
 - Hall (1997) "but the problem about the mass media is that old movies keep being made"
- What is the relation between production and form?
 - Shaw (2017): " Designs and environments like media representations do not tell us what to think or do, but they do shape what we think with"
 - Molina-Guzmán (2016) "transforming representational regimes means transforming economic, social, and political structures as well"

Follows in the wake of previous game production studies work (e.g. Nieborg (2011), O'Donnell (2014), Johnson (2014), Kerr (2017), Jørgensen (2017), Woodcock (2016), Srauy (2017) Joseph (2018))

Interviewees

- 7 total informants – 2 women, 5 men.
- Denmark, Norway, Canada, US, Portugal, Scotland.
- Between 20 to 40 years of age
- All developers have produced ‘historical games’

- Small-scale indie – 1 student, 2 professional
- Mid-scale indie – 2 CEOs
- Large-scale indie – 1 CEO
- ‘AAA’ – 1 writer

- Much rejection the bigger the scale

Interview guide

- Anonymous, always able to be withdrawn
- Open-ended non-specific questions
- Attempts to draw out reflections with regard to:
 - Creative & economic reasons for their portfolio / prior output
 - Approaches to History, relation to the present and use of historical sources
 - Locating themselves within power hierarchies, society, and international relationships / multiplicity of contexts
 - Opinions on the games market, sustainability given the economic frameworks, industry gatekeeping, and so forth.
- Further contact

Results

Approaches to history

- Internet searches, local libraries, major historical works, scholars attached to the project
 - Implicit acceptance, not much critical reflection on sources
- Choosing to emphasize certain aspects more than the others (A1: ‘which frames and where to put the weight’)
- Materiality -> artifacts, maps, architectural blueprints, crop data, after-action reports
- When collaborating with ‘historians’:
 - Sometimes a marketing term (AAA)
 - if any it is fact-checking
 - Most decisions made by developers
- Smaller teams sometimes rely on communities (also a challenge)

Approaches to History - creative licenses

- D1: "we allowed ourselves a lot of things, we had a few fantasy elements - not a lot, just a few smaller parts put to the side. And we don't follow history that closely." (translated from Danish)
- F1: "I think as far as the kind of like to narrative and texts, we really wanted that to be kind of relevant and correct. As far as being a creative license go, I guess, it was mainly with art assets and stuff. [...] And then the kind of we had license to kind of like change certain things about [location] but also making it kind of recognizable I guess"

Approaches to History - resistances

- Less concern with 'historical accuracy' or chain of events
- Focus on individuals in the margins
- Listen to locals in the present rather than “stuffy historical sources” (G1)
- History less important – “the human condition” is the principle
- A push against hegemonic narratives of history
 - C1: “Absolutely [the game is a push towards the acknowledgement of a European country’s role in the slave trade]. I mean it's at least an attempt to talk about it. To talk about [country X]'s role and really the human costs of what these...these practices, you know, because we talk about it very abstractly, you know, there were 12 million people enslaved [...] And we're trying to get people to empathize with that, to care. That's really the first step. It's to care about the problem, then we're going to do something about it. I mean right now people don't think about it, people don't care, I think. I mean to answer your question directly, it is definitely at least in parts, it's other things of course. But at least in [the game] is an acknowledgment of that past very very much so.”

Subjective approaches to history

- Perceived neutrality
 - B1: "We position ourselves relatively as neutral as possible regarding the reason for the war. Our goal is to represent how it was to be a soldier in the 1860's [USA] and not politics"
- Exotic and commercial motivations for 'non-hegemonic' histories
 - Standing out in a market
 - Colonialism seen as discovery and exploration
 - Prioritizing "US males between 18-24" as the target audience rather than the national minority group

Mnemonic hegemony

- The games industry is comprised of the same nationalities and identity cross-sections and so has history been written by such groups
- Easier to work with hegemonic narratives of history
 - The ‘Viking era’ was a common occurrence for the different Danish informants
 - Familiarity with these narratives entail their reproduction
 - ‘Exotic’ experiences are left out
- D1: “if we had to make [Game X] now, then I don’t think we would chosen [Game X], because it would be too...it is a bit difficult to sell to audiences in some fashion. [Game Y] is a bit more straight-forward because everyone is interested in [Game Y] in some fashion.”
 - The non-hegemonic stories will be ‘included’ when the developers secure financial stability.
- Working in larger teams (AAA)
 - G1: “Anything you want to do is to be able to work with those people who only have those references, to make them see beyond them [..], so its dangerous, things coming out the same all the time and people having assumptions that things can only be done one way. [...] its very difficult to do that without becoming an adversary”

Mnemonic hegemony - resistances

- Some informants revealed that they had never heard of the historical periods of their countries
 - C1: "We do not talk about the crimes in our collective past; what is taught is how Portugal was great, a glorious country, because it "found" this or that country before all other Europeans, and because it held the first overseas empire in History. The human cost of those endeavors are kept hush-hush."
 - F1: "I think the general consensus that we had was that people were shocked that Scotland had anything to do with the slave trade because it was never taught, it's kind of something that we presumed was kind of south of the border was involved in and we weren't, just because we had no knowledge of it."
- This drove them to use games to create awareness and action

Relating the past to the present

- Criterion of relevance for players make it more memorable
- Engaging people politically offline
 - C1: “The fact that these issues, you know, including racism and slavery itself is very much alive and well today in all these issues spawned out of the systems of slavery back then. [...] because if you say something happened to this person 200 years ago, it doesn't really matter to you anymore. And what we're trying to say is, we're trying to push it into the present. Sort of trying to say, you know even though this happened in the past, this matters, this matters today. And it matters that you're experiencing it and it will matter after you turn off the console, you know.”
- Reminding people about contemporary values
 - D1: “everyone has an outdated set of values because it takes place thousands of years ago, then we hope that you would start to think about why you think like you do currently and if you had been from the time period thousands of years ago would you then have different values”

Hollywood History

- Not everyone mentioned Hollywood historical films, BUT not something I explicitly asked for
- The ones that came up
 - Used them as aesthetic reference material
 - As inspiration for doing the project
 - Got interested in the period due to them

Gate-keeping

- Publishers & investors demand experience and a portfolio (obviously)
- People in economic power positions & funding were “Anglo-Saxon Nordic [...] So like what you see outputted to the big markets are things that are products that reflect that culture” (C1)
- Money determines what games are made
- Tie-in with larger ‘IPs’ – movie studios banking on the next major Hollywood film

Economical constraints

- The larger the projects, the larger the teams. The larger the teams, "the more likely you are to find people who just not have pre-existing ideas about how things, its about a nest of pre-existing ideas, how things are in history, how things have to be in games, what is going to sell, and there's a cautiousness with having to protect a large budget that makes it harder for people to embrace larger ideas" (G1)
- Low salaries make it difficult to start up own companies and does not attract talent
- Public sector (e.g. schools) not a sustainable market
- Small budgets mean small, quick mechanics contextualized with a brief historical point
- Student projects are unpaid labor

Economical constraints

- Controversial / counter-hegemonic narratives have trouble getting funding
 - “C1: They are more likely to give money to something that they know will work or that they can estimate better that it will work to something that they've never seen before. [...] So ideas that are more on the fringes like; “all right now to make a video game that is not so common”, you know, they'll shrink away from that, that's for sure”
- Creative decisions: D1: “And if a publisher was included, then it would exclusively be about what can we get funding for.”
- The reliance on data means
 - sequels ensure funding
 - Show that there is an audience for the game (cf. audience commodification)
 - Backwards looking and self-referential: ‘What was successful before will be successful again’

Public funding initiatives

- Scandinavian public funding is highly insufficient for sustainable game development (echoing Jørgensen (2017))
- EU funding likewise gives you little to work with
- Usually just prototypes or proofs of concept
- Initiatives are not directed at post-launch support and maintenance/upkeep.
 - A1: "no matter how great a game you develop, then it will die"
- Institutional structures not conducive to quality output, decisionmakers unfamiliar with games
- Student projects only vision for their historical project is to apply for grants / funding

Norwegian / Danish industry outlooks

- A very weak link between commercial and educational historical games
- In the case of Norway, it is simply a very small industry. (echoing Jørgensen, 2017)
- There is simply not a lot of investors interested in funding historical games in Denmark and Norway.
 - E1: "The [Norwegian games] industry should be a lot more cynical [...] and think about how can I make the most profit of the games that we're making."

Development & technical constraints

- Division between game design and historical research (e.g. whiteboxing)
 - F1: "all the historical stuff and whatnot didn't really get implemented much later on into the final stages"
- Technical & user aspects get prioritized more on smaller teams
 - F1: "I was just trying to put in fixes and taking it to conferences. We haven't really had the chance to kind of have a grip or focus on [critical perspectives on history] but problems we encountered was I guess that people didn't really seem to understand the [game mechanics]"
 - C1: "And the very nature of [games] makes it difficult to do something highly polished and commercially viable."
- Larger teams meant more resistance / less agency.
- Access to software and hardware + compatibility issues make it difficult to be widely played
- G1: "you need to reach out and make contacts, and I'm sure as a researcher yourself, these things take time, and you're always juggling with the need to immediately sell."

Games as special

- Several developers found games to be ‘special / unique’.
- Genre-specific specialities: ‘Interactivity’, ‘simulation’, reactivity, roleplaying, counterhistory, player agency, ‘games are good at asking questions and getting answers’, ‘fun and history’
- Marketing not only visually, but also mechanically.
- Games’ nature means only parts of history can be represented, but does so uniquely and can serve as a gateway

The Limits of Play

- Game concepts dealing with sensitive issues are frowned upon when pitched to others
- The mechanics of games are ripe for public controversies –cf Chapman & Linderoth (2015)

Controversies & public opinion

- Many were resistant and oppositional to public opinions about their games
- 'Political correctness' & 'self-censorship'
- Referral back to history as a defense
- Some would have liked more 'outrage' so it would have lead to more sales

Regional / national / international dynamics

- Outside perspectives without participation by the ones depicted allowed devs to claim 'neutrality'.
- Historical topics are received differently in each country -> challenge
- Very few informants thought about involvement of those depicted, the rest did not consider it crucial
- Lack of time & communication for smaller developers make it difficult to allocate resources to co-operation & ethnography
- Market logic towards those depicted (international focus rather than regional markets)
- A common trend: lack of understanding of why their historical games are considered problematic by those represented

Platform capitalism (minor)

- Problem of channel and distribution (App store, Steam, Kickstarter)
- Platform holders extract money from developers and consumers (cf. Joseph 2017 & 2018)

Drawbacks

- Direct questions
- Non-generalizable data
- ~1 hour long interviews in isolation
- Take them at their word
- Interviews approached as marketing?

Summing up

- Economic framework & its intruding insistence in all its forms (precarity, audience commodification, sales as target, ROI, etc.)
- Individual & collective contestations over hegemonic history (Hall (1981): "the double movement of containment and resistance")
- Contemporary public initiatives in *relatively* egalitarian societies are insufficient
- Lack of engagement with issues of history and power
- Lack of awareness about international relations / cross-cultural issues
- The technical nature of game development makes anything non-hegemonic challenging and costly

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