Culture
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Abstract

"Culture" is a central concept for video game studies that can be applied to provide understanding of what games mean for their players and what their place in a society is. As a concept, it is complex and sometimes employed in contradictory ways. Calling video games "culture" may imply that they deserve merit due to their artistic value, but when "game cultures" are approached in an anthropological frame, they denote an encompassing view into the customs, norms, and way of life of particular game player groups. These kinds of social and cultural formations have also been called "subcultures".

High and Low: Culture as Distinction

"Culture" is a complex concept with multiple different uses and meanings. The main senses that dictionaries deal with relate to "arts and culture" on the one hand, and "customs, norms and ideas" on the other. Both of these uses have their origins in the etymological root in the Latin *cultura*, meaning "growing", "cultivation". Culture is not something we are born with, but rather something that we learn and adopt from our environment as we grow up. When "video game culture" is considered, all these basic dimensions of the concept are relevant. The discussions and research surrounding the game culture and cultures of gaming involve both appreciation of games as cultural phenomena, or art, as well as the surrounding cultural norms and players' practices. While the first approach is primarily related to aesthetics and the humanities, and the latter mostly to the social sciences, they are today combined and mixed together in other various approaches to "culture".

One key dimension that separates the different approaches to culture is the degree to which they are normative, or perceive culture as a question of certain standards. The classic Latin conception of culture as cultivation is related to an extensive tradition of educational discussion, where adoption of culture is something that needs to be taught and upheld. For a long time, this meant studying and learning the *Bible*, or the classic works of Antiquity, and one could claim that many discussions of "high culture" have a certain built-in conservative tendency. For example, the 19th century poet and literary critic Matthew Arnold recommended culture "as a pursuit of our total perfection" and defined it as "the best which has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold, 1896, p. viii). Adopting this approach to video game culture, we should not automatically consider just any game as "culture", but rather only those works which rise above the rest and set lasting standards. It is even possible to set the cultural standards so high and tight, that video games are completely excluded from within them.

As contemporary and popular cultural forms, video games have been involved in heated debates similar to those that have focused also on cinema, comic books, and for example rock music, linked to a long tradition of "moral panics" (Cohen, 1972; Starker, 1989). Even novels as entertaining works of fiction were initially suspect in the eyes of educators and moral authorities (Vogrinčič, 2008). Commercially-produced popular culture has long been accused of having of negative influences, and thereby not fulfilling the sophisticated criteria required from "true culture". Such debates have also gained political undertones, and so-called "mass culture" has been condemned by both the political Right as well as the Left.

The Frankfurt School is a good example of this approach to culture. The School consisted of neo-Marxist German thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin, who were critical both of the Soviet-style socialism as well as of the "technological rationalism" governing capitalism and Western civilization in general (see Marcuse, 1991). Their critique of popular culture as "mass culture" focused on the inherent power relationships in its production and consumption. The consumer of mass-produced culture, such as video games, supposedly becomes automatically subjected to their built-in logic of capitalism. Later, cultural studies movement has continued the critique, while also taking into account the potentials of consumers to resist the passive indoctrination and adopt more active attitudes. The debate about the cultural value of video games has consequently gained new tones: games can be "good" or "bad" both in terms of their artistic value, as well as due to the positive or negative political or ideological influence that they supposedly have upon their players.

In their book *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (2003), Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter present a critique and analysis of video game culture from a perspective informed by political economy and cultural studies. They discuss the optimistic claims of the early commentators of digital technology and video game culture such as Nicholas Negroponte and Douglas Rushkoff, and reject their most extreme assertions about the revolutionary, liberating, and activating potentials of new media. While there is an important cultural shift taking place from spectators to players in media culture, Kline and his co-authors want to point towards the hidden power-relations and structural limitations built into contemporary video game culture. A player of a first-person-shooter, for example, is not completely free to choose their own path and actions, but is rather framed in a very particular kind of position, having only certain pre-programmed objects and activities available to her. The authors assert that the culture of video games is produced and consumed within a large complex of feedback loops where technology, marketing, and culture mix and interact with each other (2003, p. 50-59). The involved dynamics and processes remain largely hidden from an individual game player, and the authors claim that it is actually in the best interests of video game industry to "make sure that the player does not reflect on these forces" (2003, p. 19). On the other hand, the game industry is an important part of "global culture industry", which is a system that is increasingly focused on production of symbols and "cultural difference" rather than traditional commodities. Scott Lash and Celia Lury (2008, p. 5) have noted that in this era of virtualization and globalization, cultural entities have also a tendency to "spin out of the control of their makers".

One of the most well-known social theories of culture has been presented by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984), Bourdieu shows how the ability to differentiate between "good" and "bad" in everyday life as well as in arts and aesthetics is related to the surrounding social and cultural frame or "field". His key concept, "cultural capital" highlights the important role such knowledge and cultural know-how has in people's lives. Bourdieu uses the example of knowing the names of film directors (ibid., p. 27) as a form of cultural capital. Mia Consalvo has extended and applied Bourdieu's theory to game studies and introduced the concept of "gaming capital". She argues that being a member of game culture goes beyond knowing how to play games:

> It's being knowledgeable about game releases and secrets, and passing that information to others. It's having opinions about which game magazines are better and the best sites for walkthroughs on the Internet (2007, p. 18.).

It is at this intersection of games and player activities where the aesthetic tradition of studying "the best which has been thought and said" starts to intermingle with the more value neutral approach of studying cultural practices, which has a notable intellectual tradition of its own.

The Cultural Anthropology of Gaming

The scientific study of human societies and how daily life and social relations are organized in different parts of the world originated in the nineteenth century, as the study of classic Greek and Roman civilizations and their culture turned into study of all kinds of civilizations. The birth of social and cultural anthropology was also related to the history of colonialism and its associated cultural contacts and conflicts. It gradually became obvious that there was not only one way of organizing life, and that Western culture was only one among many.

The early pioneers of cultural anthropology were attempting to describe cultures as well as to explain cultural change. A famous early anthropological definition of culture was published by Edward Burnett Tylor in his work *Primitive Culture*:

> Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (1871, p. 1).

Tylor was a believer in cultural evolution: the primitive people were for him like children, capable of learning and developing more advanced culture. In contrast to some of his contemporaries, Tylor considered that the people of other "primitive" or "savage" cultures were nevertheless as intelligent as Western people. (p. 62.) Tylor suggested that as gameplay often imitated "serious life", it was possible to learn from the history of culture by studying its games (p. 65-75). The anthropological interest in games later produced some major works, such as Stewart Culin's *Games of the North American Indians* ([1907] 1992a & [1907] 1992b), which catalogues various gaming practices and associated toys and playthings, while organizing the diversity of Native American games into two broad categories, games of chance and games of skill.

Most contemporary approaches to cultural anthropology have moved towards more dynamic perceptions of culture: rather than ready-made systems of thought that

somehow exist in people's heads, culture should be seen as intersubjective domain of experience that takes shape in social relations (Boellstorff, 2006, p. 31). For game studies, cultural anthropology has been most influential through its promotion of participant observation as a research method. While it has occasionally been possible to publish academic research about video games and game players without the researcher having any first-hand experience of having played games himself, contemporary ethnographic approaches to games and play have changed that by now.

One of the first published ethnographies of video game play is David Sudnow's book *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983). Entirely focused on a single, early video game – *Breakout* by Atari (1976) –Sudnow describes his personal obsession to master the game. A piano teacher who also had a Ph.D. in sociology, his account is a detailed, insider description of how a person who learns a new skill feels and thinks. However, Sudnow's quest is a solitary one; even while his book opens with an account of how he first met the world of video games when he entered a video game arcade to pick up his teenage son, the social sphere and practices of young people who were the "typical" video game players at the time are mostly left out of the book. Sudnow approaches *Breakout* and Atari 2600 home console as a musical instrument, and the culture of game play is described as an individual journey towards virtuosity.

The research of digital play as a social and cultural phenomenon has been lagging behind the rapidly evolving field of games and player behaviors. It was the evolution of online, multiplayer games that particularly stimulated the research when it became clear that new forms and conventions of social interaction were in the process of being created. Scholars with a background in the humanities and in the field of computer-mediated communication research were among the first to explore the customs and habits of online communities from an anthropological perspective. For example, the early, influential undergraduate thesis of Elizabeth M. Reid titled "Electropolis" (1991) described some of the innovative practices of textual, synchronous communication that users of the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) system had developed. Based on her participant observation, Reid claimed that among its users, IRC was perceived as a playground for free experimentation with different forms of communication and self-representation. She said that "users of IRC do not shape themselves according to or in conformity with the conventions of social contexts external to the medium, but learn to 'play' their 'cultural game' with them" (Reid, 1991). Somewhat similarly, Amy Bruckman's early studies into text-based, online multiplayer games, such as MUDs and MOOs, provided descriptions and interpretations about the online game worlds and their player cultures, relying both on own experience as well as of earlier social and cultural theories. Inspired by the work of Sherry Turkle (1984), Bruckman (1992) used a combination of participant observation and interviews to detect conversational practices, social hierarchies and forms of participatory culture evolving in these shared online environments.

As the popularity of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) has grown, ethnographic studies based on participant observation in such virtual worlds have also expanded into a significant area of game studies. The lives and cultures of players inhabiting such virtual game worlds as *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive, 1999) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) have been analysed in many

articles and dedicated volumes. For instance, T. L. Taylor's book *Play Between Worlds* (2006) explores the online game culture through her own experiences as an experienced *EverQuest* player. In her study, she pays special attention to the ways game and non-game spaces, online and offline lives mix and interact, as well as to the practices of "power gamers", who appear to play in a manner which makes it very similar to "work". Much of such discussions involve appreciation of multiple frames of signification that game players are capable of inhabiting simultaneously, and of the sometimes conflicting values and norms that govern their multi-layered lives.

American sociologist Erving Goffman has identified game-like characteristics in everyday social life, suggesting that the multi-layered realities that online gamers inhabit may not be fundamentally that different from the regular situation in social life. Goffman (1956; 1974) suggests that our perceptions of social reality are organised in various frames, and that people are concerned of what kind of impressions their words and actions gain while interacting with others in different contexts. In the field of game studies, such approach is particularly relevant when role-playing games (RPGs) are being analyzed. One of the most detailed participant-observer studies in this area is Gary Alan Fine's work *Shared Fantasy* (1983), where he depicts the gaming culture of American *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D – created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, 1974) table-top role-players at the end of 1970s. In addition to making important theoretical contribution by differentiating between interactions that take place in "real life" (off-game) as opposed to "player frame" (in-game) or "character frame" (in-character), Fine's work is also informative in exposing, for example, the male chauvinism that was a major part of this particular, wargaming-based culture of fantasy role-playing.

As norms, player practices, and ways of speaking vary between games and player groups, the field of game cultures is very diverse when one takes a closer look. Not all D&D fantasy gamers are male chauvinists, and at the opposite end of fantasy gaming, the contemporary Nordic live action role-play (larp) culture, for example, is indeed very different from the early war-gaming style of table-top role-play –and the cultures created in MMORPGs like *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* are again different from both of those. One concept that is useful in making sense of such distinctions is "subculture".

Subcultures and Gaming

Already in his seminal essay *Homo Ludens* ([1938] 1955), Johan Huizinga paid attention to the ways in which play and games stimulate the growth of particular kinds of communities. Huizinga notes that play "promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" (p. 13). In Huizinga's analysis, there is something special in the intensity of play, the experience of sharing the exceptional situation is likely to promote sense of togetherness among players that leads to creation of various "play-communities" (p. 12).

Today's digital game players are not usually wearing special clothes that set them apart, or mark them as members of a special "tribe" or community, but in special events such as gaming conventions one can often see people who are wearing T-shirts with game-related designs, or who are even dressed up as games characters –a practice that the

"cosplay'" (costume play) phenomenon has made increasingly popular (Rahman, Wing-sun & Cheung, 2012). Mostly, the subcultural character of gaming communities does not carry such striking outward visual signs. As such, it is in line with many other contemporary subcultural phenomena that interest researchers.

The early studies of subcultures were focused on youth subcultures who were born in modern, urban contexts, such as "punks", "mods", or "skinheads". The dominant idea was also that a subculture is something that is in opposition to the mainstream of life in a society, so "delinquent" or "deviant" subcultures were prominently featured in studies like the collection of articles published in the seminal *Resistance Through Rituals* anthology (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). Drawing upon the work carried out in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), the authors subscribed to a wide view of culture:

> The 'culture' of a group or class is the peculiar and distinctive 'way of life' of the group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in *mores* and customs, in the uses of objects and material life (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts, 1976, p. 10).

The danger or applying such comprehensive view into culture is that a "subculture", too, can mean almost anything in the organization of social life and cultural expression. It became also soon clear that many interesting subcultural phenomena are not particularly "rebellious" or deviant by character. In their reassessment of subculture studies, Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris (2004, p. 7), for example, point towards how overlooked the domestic sphere was in the early subculture studies, and highlight Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's contribution (1976) which focused on the strong "Teeny Bopper" culture of pre-teenage girls. Bennett and Kahn-Harris note that the researchers of CCCS rarely considered the possibility that the young people might be playing their subcultural roles just for fun, and also discuss how more recent research has addressed the fluidity and playful adoption of various subcultural signals with such concepts as "taste cultures", "neo-tribes", "lifestyles", or "scenes" (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004, p. 8-14). There is nevertheless continuous need to address particular groupings and practices such as those of active science fiction fans or online gamer communities in cultural terms, but taking into consideration the dynamic, actively-constructed character of such phenomena.

The ethnographic studies into digital gaming (sub)cultures are expanding, but still much that is published remains as personal accounts or journalistic surveys into interesting, novel phenomena. For instance, *Dungeons and Dreamers* (2003) by two journalists, Brad King and John Borland, includes a narrative that spans from the early 1970s Lake Geneva war-gamer scene to the stories of Richard Garriott (creator of popular *Ultima* role-playing game series, 1981-2009) and most notably *DOOM* (id Software,1993), the first-person shooter game developed by John Carmack and John Romero. A somewhat similar, but more strongly RPG-genre-focused account is told in *Dungeons and Desktops* (2008) by Matt Barton. The game culture captured in these narratives consists of a mixture of personal histories and anecdotal evidence of game-related developments in technology, the game industry, and the surrounding society. These kinds of works often also try to provide the reader with descriptions of notable games and how players of the time experienced them. The system of thought that governs the norms, practices, and ways of speaking that these groups

of people adopted nevertheless largely remain implied in the narrative descriptions in these books, rather than taken as the subject of in-depth analysis.

More analytical in approach, the scholarly works, by comparison, often deliberately narrow their perspective. The *World of Warcraft* reader, *Digital Culture, Play and Identity* (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008) is a good example of this. The entire reader is dedicated to a single MMORPG, and rather than trying to be comprehensive or all-encompassing in their approach, each author has a particular, interpretative angle that they explore in their chapter. The "culture" of a game like *World of Warcraft* is shown to be torn by hidden internal tensions and conflicts, such as that between the promise of playful fantasy and repetitive, gruelling "grinding", which actually makes the game into a simulation of capitalistic, "corporate ideology" (Rettberg, 2008). Even calling these kinds of virtual worlds "role-playing games" appears questionable, as several studies point out how difficult actual role-play is in a multiplayer setting that is primarily conflict and achievement oriented (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2008; Tronstad, 2008).

Conclusion

The concept of "culture" in relation to digital games, game development, and player practices appears both important and challenging. It directs our attention to the artistic and cultural values, and to the creative expression that games are able to embody and inspire. Culture is also a key term when a more comprehensive or analytical understanding is required about games in their rich, real-world contexts.

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