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MYTHOPOIESIS AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION IN VIDEOGAMES

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Abstract:

As videogames become more and more popular, their ability to generate and communicate mythologies (mythopoiesis) appears clearer. *Pokémon*, *The Legend of Zelda*, and *Halo* are just a few of the specific transmedial storyworlds created through (relatively few) years of reiteration. At the same time, recent examples of massively diffused products also picture remediations of heritage, folk tales, architecture, and other cultural elements, reaching users of any background. Franchises like *Assassin's Creed*, *God of War*, or *Final Fantasy* take large inspiration from various cultural heritages. By doing so, video-ludic remediations add to previously shared imaginary some peculiar interactive (ergodic) features: since video games have specific features that imply interaction by (and with) the user, the remediated cultural elements acquire properties that were not present in any previous representation. The interest of this study is to enlighten how it is possible for blockbuster videogames to build over previous archetypes and imaginaries, creating common knowledge about certain cultural objects, myths, and figures, among players on a global scale. The main focus of this research will be Japanese cultural heritage representation in recent popular videogames such as *Nioh*, *Ghost of Tsushima*, and *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. In a comparative analysis of these products, the study will try to underline the common elements of blockbuster remediations, while exploring the emerging interactive (ergodic) features that the mentioned videogames add to previously shared imaginary of portrayed cultural elements. Any emerging evidence will then serve to build a tentative framework or method to remediate and represent any given cultural element in future videogame projects that aim to properly communicate heritage on a large scale such as the global digital game market.

Keywords: cultural heritage, digital games, game studies, mythology, representation, communication

1. Introduction

Videogames have nowadays become products of mass consumption. Such massive diffusion creates the right conditions to study them as a worldwide cultural process, a phenomenon that involves and permeates contemporary society in many ways.

From a Sociology of Culture perspective, videogames can be considered as processes of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1996) and representation (Salen & Zimmermann, 2004) able to reflect the cultural values of their authors, while incorporating a very specific set of own values (Barr, Noble, & Biddle, 2007). These elements combined make videogames multi-cultural objects, that can be understood by people from different backgrounds and, at the same time, massively convey images, cultural elements, and messages of any kind.

It has also been observed (Bogost, 2007) how videogames influence players' cognitive processes to some extent, through the repetition of behaviours or patterns and through audiovisual communication (Squire, 2006). Studies on the effects of videogames on players are numerous, and the results point to both positive and negative effects (Ceccherelli, 2012). In both cases, however, it is now generally accepted that there is an influence of video games on players. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that every medium necessarily has positive and negative aspects, stimulating abilities and behaviours (De Kerckhove, 1991) that can also be contradictory: when you use a medium, something is lost and something is gained, and a lot depends on the particularity of the people involved.

Such potential, alongside a massive diffusion, raises legitimate questions on how videogames concur in forging a shared cultural imagination on a global scale; we aim to investigate that process with specific attention to folk heritage, mythology, and related cultural elements.

2. Mythopoiesis in videogames

Collective imagination can be defined as a symbolically and socially shared configuration of meaning (Ragone, 2016), constituted on a cycle of constant reformulation of collective memory. This definition assumes that collective identity consists of a pattern of behaviour, values, and

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relationships based on the sharing of a set of narratives and metaphors, or "fictions of humanity" (Le Goff, 1979), learned and processed through primary (family and living environment), secondary (educational, religious, labour, political institutions, etc.) and tertiary (mainly consumption and media) experience (Morin, 1962). Through remediation and reiteration of stories, figures, places, characters, and structures from collective memory, collective imagination is continuously reconfigured.

Remediation has been defined by Bolter and Grusin (1996) as “the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another”. Cultural elements are constantly reformed in remediative processes: from oral tradition to visual arts, or from cinema to digital games.

Mythopoiesis, as the process in which mythologies are forged, follows the same pattern: countless narratives repeated and re-enacted concur in the creation of recognizable images (the Greek Pantheon, the Star Trek narrative universe, Lovecraftian stories, etc.). In a recent work, Ortoleva (2019) separates high-intensity myths from low-intensity myths. The former are those that date back to more archaic historical periods and are more closely connected to sacred and religious/metaphysical dimensions (Greek myths, Middle Eastern myths, Nordic myths, etc.). The latter, on the other hand, have appeared more recently, in the last two centuries or so, and have characteristics that place them in human time and practices. They depend very much on the medium through which they are told, and are internalized through continuous exposure to these stories, in politics, advertising, literature, cinema, television, comics. Also in videogames, of course, where such mythopoetic ability is reflected allowing the renovation of already existing mythologies (Fig. 1), while creating new ones (the Pokémon world, The Legend of Zelda shared multiverse, etc.).

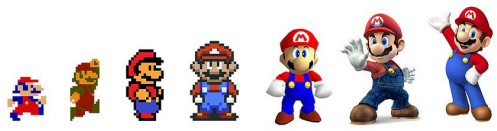

Figure 1: The recognizable character of Super Mario as reiterated in multiple instalments during the years.

Every remediation of myths, figures, or other cultural elements contributes to a transformation in the collective imagination, adding from time to time some features to the previously existing idea (Fauconnier & Turner, 2010). The result of this process, in blockbuster and entertainment videogames, is certainly conditioned by the necessities of a global market. Nevertheless, every remediation of massively diffused games becomes part of a wider panorama of collective knowledge, between extremely vast and diverse social groups.

However, each re-functionalization in videogames presupposes a set of characteristics that are not merely audiovisual, unlike in literature or cinema. The specific involvement model of the medium (Calleja, 2011) makes it necessary that represented and remediated cultural elements acquire recognizable interactive properties. Take, for example, the figure of the vampire as remediated from Bram Stoker’s Dracula onwards: the knowledge, for videogame players, that such creatures are weak to garlic or daily light, allows them to face the medium’s typical problem-solving process with varying degrees of effectiveness. These typical elements of the character in the collective imagination have, over the course of many representations, taken on the dimension of stereotype. If writers and scriptwriters work on stereotypes to play with the expectations of readers and spectators, in video games these characteristics can also be pre-interpreted as interactive elements.

It is possible to define this specificity as ergodic characterization (Vandewalle & Malliet, 2020): an audiovisual representation equipped with recognizable interactive properties that contribute to a re-modulation of the collective imagination through reiterated remediations. The definition is currently under development and based on the concept of ergodic literature, as a form of literature where a nontrivial effort is required to traverse the text (Aarseth, 1997). In this kind of literature, the reader is called upon to play an active role in the unfolding of the story. Pre-digital examples are the literary experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Queneau's Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes, and Cortázar's Rayuela; but also the gamebooks of the 1980s; up to the cybertextual experiments and electronic literature of the 1990s and 2000s, such as Danielewski's House of Leaves or Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). Obviously, with video games, the potential for action for the reader/player expands considerably.

Through these mythopoetic dynamics, videogames contribute to the creation of an always growing cultural imagination of mythology, altering its collective perception while adding the medium’s peculiar features to already existing configurations of meaning. This implies that knowledge and diffusion of any given heritage becomes a mass process in which remediated and represented cultural objects are constantly modified. An Ifrit is no longer a figure of Arabian mythology: it is part of a larger pantheon of figures that belong to videogames’ collective imagination. A Yuki-Onna (Fig. 2) is not anymore a myth known just by Japanese folks or scholars, it is a recognizable element in a given game due to its ice-related features.

Figure 2: A Yuki-Onna as portrayed in *Nioh* (Team Ninja Studio, 2017).

There are the premises for an articulated study of this phenomenon, of its impact and consequences. In particular, it would be interesting to underline a *modus*

operandi of how it actually works, and a design framework that could be applied to any given cultural object (mythological figure, architecture, etc.); a process of conscious ergodic remediation that could lay the foundations for more accurate communication of cultural heritage on a global scale.

3. Case studies

The connection between classical antiquity, cultural heritage, and videogames is a field that recently has seen a growing interest in scholars (Christesen, & Machado, 2010; Rollinger, 2020). However, it has been noted that studies of antiquity in videogames approached the topic from a limited number of perspectives so far. The interest of scholars mostly revolves around the accuracy of historical and cultural representation, the way historical processes are simulated, and the learning potential of games applied to teaching.

This project is still at a very early stage. So far, it has focused on the analysis of existing media and literature, making a comparison between a few possible case studies. The next step of our study will focus on the reasons why cultural heritage, with a focus on mythology, is represented as it is in blockbuster and diffused videogames. It will also try to underline the most common methods used in the process of remediation, and see how much cultural backgrounds influence game designers in their choices. Lastly, it would be interesting to see if - given a peculiar cultural heritage - it is possible to replicate the effects of already successful products in communicating and remediating myths, figures, and places.

To do so we will use a storyworld approach (Paprocki, 2020), where cultural heritages are seen as flexible transmedial constellations of narratives about gods, myths, and places. Hopefully, this will help us in observing how cultural objects are being represented and re-funcionalized in modern videogames, and consequently how these elements are perceived by the users.

This study also aims to examine the potential of popular videogames in communicating and representing cultural heritage, with a focus on ancient mythological figures (creatures, gods, etc.). Building over the "ergodic characterization methodological framework" currently under development by Vandewalle & Malliet (2020), the research will observe how certain aspects of Japanese cultural heritage have been represented and remediated in recent times. In order to do so, a brief list of case studies of the most diffused and distributed games will be taken into account: the *Nioh* saga (Team Ninja Studio, 2017; 2020), *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware, 2019), and *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020) will be the primary focuses of observation.

4. Discussion

These products depict Japanese cultural heritage in very different ways, but all show certain common (ergodic) elements. Historical figures such as Oda Nobunaga and Hattori Hanzo, or mythological creatures like the already mentioned Yuki-Onna and the legendary Yamata no Orochi (Fig. 3) acquire some recognizable interactive (ergodic) features that allow the player to properly interact with them. For example, Hattori Hanzo i usually portrayed as a legendary swordsmith, hence aquiring a specific role in any digital environment in which he appears. With regards to mythological figures, as mentioned, the interactive propertires (and the ability to recognize them by the player) are crucial to overcome the problem-solving structure of videogames: so, the legendary serpent Yamata no Orochi perfectly fits the role of "final boss" in Ninja Studio's *Nioh* (2017), by having also certain features that the player already should know, or could know from previous remediations (the many heads of the serpent must be all cut to defeat it).

Figure 3: The serpent Yamata no Orochi as portrayed in *Nioh* (Team Ninja Studio, 2017).

We will also investigate the influence of local cultural heritage in videogames deveolped by Japanese studios (Team Ninja Studio, FromSoftware) and compare the representation of cultural elements with games set in Japan, yet made by multi-cultural teams (suchas Sucker Punch Productions).

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