

Cardboard Asia: representation, cultural literacy and infrastructure in the analogue game industry

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ABSTRACT

Board games are an under examined and important niche creative industry that frequently represent Asian themes, histories, people and places, most often by Western game designers and artists. The industry's infrastructure is largely based in Asia and yet it is most often produced for and consumed by Western audiences. In this paper, we suggest there is potential for Asian board game designers and artists to assist the rapidly growing global audience of analogue game experiences to become what Leong and Woods (2017:4) describe as being 'Asian literate', that is, to be able "to critique ideological norms that define the ways in which Asia is represented and spoken about".

Keywords

Analogue, board game, representation, Orientalism, industry, cultural literacy

INTRODUCTION

The analogue game industry, which includes board games, role-playing games, collectable card games, and other material objects, is a growing niche games sector worth approximately \$US 9 billion in global sales (Graham 2016). The digital environment is the primary channel through which the success of the analogue industry has been reinvigorated, particularly in terms of influencing patterns of manufacturing, distribution, review and marketing. The massive success of crowd-funding board games, through sites like Kickstarter, for example, has dramatically altered the dynamics of the analogue industry (Hutchins 2017). No longer exclusively bound to the distribution chains of physical retail outlets, analogue games have changed radically in terms of the types of games being made, their depth and complexity, as well as the involvement of their audiences directly through design, feedback, prototyping, playtesting and promotion.

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The digital environment has also been an important space for identifying ongoing social and cultural issues in the board game industry and its communities. Typically, in their 30s, the average board game player is equally likely to be female as male (Cross 2017), but women are frequently exposed to sexual harassment while making, playing and selling board games (Romano 2016). The board game industry has also inherited the issues of cultural representation that have troubled other media industries, in particular, the problems associated with Orientalism and the production of representations and knowledge of Asia constructed by the culture, ideology and politics from a Western point of view (Wirman 2016: 299).

The problem of Orientalism in the board game industry was highlighted by board game critic, Quintin Smith in the 2016 ‘Shut UP and Sit Down’ video review of Istanbul by game designer Rüdiger Dorn, which draws attention to the publisher’s problematic assumptions about the role of women in the Ottoman empire (Smith 2016). A similar ‘Shut Up and Sit Down’ article commenting on the concerning elements of cultural appropriation in the Fantasy Flight Games collectable card game, Legend of the Five Rings, criticised the game’s design which encouraged players to chant “Utz! Banzai!” at the start of a game, and which featured elements of “whitewashing” in its character and box-art design (Smith 2017).

Orientalism is extensive in the board game industry, particularly with Asian themed games, as game designers and artists position the orient as an exotic and magical source material. Edward Said (1978), drawing on Foucault’s notion of discourse, argued that Orientalism is a dominant pattern in the way that the West, particularly European culture, was able to produce and manage the Orient politically, socially, ideologically and imaginatively. Said deploys two terms to differentiate between the “unconscious” positive orientalism, which is “latent” and the “manifest” orientalism that consists of “the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth” (Said 1978: 206). In his critique of Said’s Orientalism, Ziauddin Sardar argues that Said “posits a new binary duality, ‘secular world’ and religious world -- echoing Salman Rushdie’s construction of ‘the light of secularism’ versus the ‘darkness of religion.’” He criticizes Said for not allowing Islam’s worldview, history, and “enlightened scholars”, to speak for themselves (Sardar 1999: 75-75). Writer Calvin Wong Tze Loon tweets a similar critique of the board game industry that heavily represents Asian history, often recast in a fantasy mode, while failing to carry out accurate research leading to assumptions, stereotypes and misrepresentations (Loon 2018). Games like Rising Sun are made possible by crowdfunding (its publisher received \$US4.2 million in backer funding) but relying on crowd-sourced information led to the inclusion of a ‘Japanese’ mythical figure that was actually a Wikipedia prank based on the identity of a New Zealand man, Kotahi-Manawa Bradford (Towle, 2018, Hauldren, 2018). Loon (2017) critiques the global games industry for failing to recognise Asia beyond its capacity to serve as a neocolonial Other, drawing attention to the way Asian, particularly East-Asian, themed games by European and American designers tend to be popular, while game designers from Asia are often forced to design non-Asian themed games in order to appeal to a Western audience even though the majority of the board game manufacturing infrastructure is located in China.

Begy (2015) has argued that the materiality of board games operates in terms of “objectifications” that can communicate cultural memory not only through their visual and aesthetic dimensions but also in terms of their rules, which we argue can inform the way a culture thinks about its past, present and future. In this paper, we suggest there is potential for Asian themes and mechanics developed (or at least co-developed) by Asian designers and artists, to assist the rapidly growing global audience of board game players

to become what Leong and Woods (2017: 4) describe as ‘Asian literate’, that is, to be able “to critique ideological norms that define the ways in which Asia is represented and spoken about”.

BIO

Dr Christopher Moore is a senior lecturer in Digital Communication and Media at the University of Wollongong, Australia. His research in Game Studies has examined the affective dimensions of screenshots and virtual items in First Person Shooter Games and the expression of gamer persona. He is a co-editor of the journal of Persona Studies.

Richard Hall is an analogue game designer, artist, writer and podcaster. He has recently begun his PhD candidature at the University of Wollongong and is a tutor in digital communication and media studies.

Angus Baillie is a PhD student from the University of Wollongong. A graduate in Communications and Media Studies, his PhD thesis uses an autoethnographic approach to examine Japanese Role-Playing Games. Angus’ writing on video games has appeared online in various publications, including SBS Australia.

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