

The Long-Term Cultural Development of the Game Industry: A Perspective on Player Identity Construction

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Abstract. During the last few years, academics have started to take an interest in the cultural sustainability of the gaming industry. Although the role of player identities in preserving game culture is not a properly studied aspect, despite the previous research focus using an economic, technological, and market viewpoint, the player identity construction is under-isolated results of the research. This essay will use Hallow Knight and its spinoff SilkSong as examples to examine the cultural shifts of the gaming industry in the long-term from the perspective of player-building. By examining game design, game mechanics, community practices and live-streaming culture, this paper can demonstrate how players are influenced by the work of game developers into developing the emotional attachment to the game, a sense of belonging and community, as well as a cultural identity. The findings indicate that stable player identities provide significant potential in terms of spurring the growth of the game culture in the long term by increasing the sense of engagement, as well as community cohesion and participatory practices among players. On these findings, the paper will offer the gaming industry several strategies such as the immersive narrative design, community co-creation mechanisms and how to operate with long-term culture so as to achieve sustainability.

Keywords: Player Identity, Game Culture, Participatory Culture, Community Building

1. Introduction

In the digital age, video games have developed from an entertainment to an essential cultural product and industry and, therefore, the social and cultural life is strongly influenced. Besides being a source of massive financial gains, the game industry has been used as an export of culture as well as a tool of identity formation. Games are an up-and-coming form of culture that combines art, narrative, and experience and have gained hundreds of millions of users globally. Studies have discovered that interactions among the communities in games tend to develop intricate social networks; 67 percent of players across the world have created new social ties due to games, and 60 percent identified a strong sense of community affiliation in the games [1]. It means that games are not a technological product only, but a socio-cultural space as well. At the same time, the long-term formation of the culture of the game has acquired a new connotation: how to sustain the dynamism and impact of the game culture in a highly competitive market environment and encourage a positive relationship and symbiosis between the game industry and player culture.

In this respect, the identity building of players has emerged as one of the issues. The concept of player identity identifies the emotional sense and identification of players with the game characters, the game world, game groups, and even the game company when participating in the games. It is about the players who project themselves onto the spaces of the virtual characters and consider the game world to be their cultural space, as well as about a community that exists between the players and other players. The identity theory was introduced by Tajfel et al. in the sphere of media and communication, with the focus on the fact that by adhering to a specific group, people obtain a sense of identity and safety. The Henry Jenkins concept of participatory culture, on the other hand, holds the view that the contemporary media world is usually marked by viewers moving away to become content receivers and the co-creation communities, like game fan communities [1]. It is on this basis that this research will analyze how the game industry is capable of fueling a sense of identity among players using design and operation concepts through the angle of player identity creation, consequently heralding sustainable development and value additions of the game culture. The investigations presented in this paper are based on the example of an independent game, Hollow Knight, designed by Team Cherry and its extension Silksong and focus on how the game works and presents the world and its narration, how the authors of that game shape a player identity through character shaping, difficulty level division, and other ways of community functioning. The value of the research is to discover the process of interaction between players and game culture using the particular cases, and to offer the game industry the universally applicable identity-building methods to facilitate long-term cultural development and creativity of the game industry.

It is mentioned in Social Identity Theory that as people engage in a group activity, they end up identifying themselves with the group, thus achieving psychological identification and feeling safe. This feeling of belonging becomes most apparent in the game community, and the shared goals and interactions create a game group identity amongst players. Indicatively, some studies have discovered that as long as players involve themselves in group activities like game guilds and teams, their participation behavior is complemented by an apparent sense of belonging as well as group identity [1].

Overall, these dimensions reveal that the identity of players is not a fixed value, but rather a changing one that occurs due to the interaction between the personal experience, game heat, and social engagement. In order to expound on the practicality of this identity construction construct, there is a need to bring up the theoretical frameworks that will connect identity formation with media involvement and cultural production. The subsequent case studies also have analysis tools in the frameworks.

2. Core concept definition and theoretical basis

2.1. Player identity

"Player identity" is the core concept of this paper, and its connotation can be understood from multiple levels. Generally speaking, player identity includes: identification with the game character, that is, the sense of immersion and emotional investment that players experience when playing a role in the game; identification with the game world, that is, the player's identification with the game settings, story background and values; and identification with the player group or community, that is, the sense of belonging and identity that players gain as community members.

2.2. Identity theory and participatory culture

Participatory culture underscores the fact that the contemporary game culture is usually more than a mere content-consuming activity, with the players engaged in the creation and spreading of content. This transference in the gaming industry implies that players do not just consume the game story, but possibly engage in the game world re-creation, with MODs or fan-created content, game commentary. One study conducted by Wuhan University demonstrates that online games dismantle obstacles between the offline and online worlds, text and social communication. Players also work to construct the game discourse by engaging in lots of entertaining and social storytelling and also construct interactive meaning in the rules that game designers have established, enriching the meaning and cultural connotation of the game [2]. This demonstrates that the role of the players in the game culture has been transformed from a passive audience to a co-creative subject, and their participation is a kind of identity construction. Using the theories provided above, player identity construction may be viewed as the process by which the players establish psychological and emotional relationships with the game content, characters, and groups with the help of the immersive experiences, sense of personal investment, and communication within the community. This sense of identity not only promotes the loyalty and participation of players in the game but it also contributes to the self-continuation and innovation of game culture. It is of significant importance to the sustainable development of the game industry. Perspectives of identity theory and perspectives of participatory culture theory will be applied in this research to examine the identity of how players generate identity and how this is connected with the establishment of game culture.

3. Case study

It is based on the concepts and theories discussed above that this section considers the applicability of the construction of the player identity framework to particular cases. Using the case of Hollow Knight and Silksong, the paper will analyze how design decisions and practices guided by the community can lead to long-term cultural sustainability by creating the identity of the player.

3.1. Game features of Hollow Knight and Silksong

Hollow Knight and Silksong have game features that will be examined here.

Both Hollow Knight and its follow-up, Silksong, made by Team Cherry, are action-adventure 2D side-scrolling games in the Metroidvania style [3]. They both have gorgeous hand-drawn world maps on which the players are able to control the anthropomorphic insect characters to roam and battle in a huge kingdom of the underground world. The style of narrative of both games is the use of fragmented narrative by slowly reconstructing the past and mysteries of the game world by using patchwork clues, including details about the environment, dialogue with non-player characters, and log texts obtained. Whenever players are exploring, they will always find things hidden in the story, like a backstory of insects infested with plague or a dismantled civilization. The metaphorical and symbolic story lets players plunge into a world of puzzle-solving and build their own meaning of the game world autonomously [4]. Fragmented narratives make the players inquisitive and with the desire to learn more, unlike linear plots, which make them predict the upcoming events and thus are more immersive.

Regarding the gameplay mechanics, the Hollow Knight series is focused on extremely free exploration and difficult battles. As the players play on, they are given a chance to unlock different skills, including high jump, dash, and special attacks, thus providing them with new opportunities.

The game is highly connected and allows exploration due to the standard form of world map layout [3]. The game follows a hardcore style of difficulty settings. Ordinary enemies as well as the boss battles are tough. The feeling of achievement following the defeat of strong opponents and the fact that the character develops also constitute one of the major sources of player stickiness. Team Cherry has been fastidious in its combat rhythm and design of the enemy, which lets the players have a sense of personality.

3.2. Design and operation strategies of Team Cherry as the makers

According to the identity theory and the theoretical framework of the participatory culture, a player identity-building strategy adopted by Team Cherry can be seen as a set of strategies that are interconnected, and not independent design decisions. These plans engage throughout the narrative design, gameplay, community interaction, and participatory visibility, which have a cumulative level of long-term emotional bonds, social and cultural belonging among the players. Through a systematic approach of crafting game experiences with player interactions, Team Cherry turns an actor into a consumer of the moment or a cultural participant with a long-term perspective.

3.2.1. Narrative and character-centered identity strategy

In Hollow Knight and SilkSong, identity building is based on the strategy of narrative design. Team Cherry does not actually follow a linear, exhaustive narrative structure but has its own version of a fragmented form of narrative in which the player is left to rebuild the history and significance of the game through exploration. The lack of dialogue, symbolic architecture, and environmental narratives makes players engage with the game world on both cognitive and emotional levels.

In terms of the identity theory, the process of interpretation enables the players to redirect their own values and feelings into the game world and its characters, and hence encourages identification with the characters and the world. The narrative knowledge is not unconditionally a passive entitlement anymore since players are reconstructing the fortune of the kingdom and its people and turning it into an individual victory. Past experiments revealed that this narrative activity is capable of increasing immersion and monolithic emotional resonance since players perceive themselves to be explorers and decoders of meaning, instead of spectators [5]. By so doing, storytelling experiences are used as a prominent source of players internalizing and sustaining their identity over the long term.

3.2.2. Skill recognition strategy affection of challenge

Besides engulfing oneself in the narrative, Team Cherry also applies an approach that involves a challenge-based scenario, tying the identity creation to mastery of skills and endurance. The fighting mechanics of Hollow Knight and Silksong are highly detailed and demanding, and composed of specific control, pattern-matching, and drill. Loss is part of what happens often, but it is established as a learning experience and not a punishment and hence players learn to continue.

This design approach is consistent with similar studies that demonstrate that a sense of achievement and competence is a central aspect of video games that players seek to have in order to experience motivation and self-efficacy [6]. The accomplishment of being able to defeat powerful bosses and they can also develop an identity through ability and skill by conquering complex environments. In a player community, this kind of high skill level, at times, results in a status of legitimacy and recognition which in turn places the group identity at a greater level of acclaim.

Team Cherry achieves a sense of challenge and reward through a reasonable practice feedback and balanced difficulty curve, letting a player feel that there is a balance between the difficulty and the reward, thereby creating a team culture where the only people who can pass the test are those willing to invest and work hard, as well as improve the team identity of the player [7]. Thus, the challenge is not only an indicator of the difficulty of the game but also a social process where the players validate that they are a part of a concentrated and competent group of players.

3.2.3. Basic community co-creation and recognition strategy

Team Cherry has an identity-building strategy that has been identified as the key due to its community co-creation approach. The content created by players was not strictly controlled by the development team, although the latter took an open and supportive stance to allow players to engage. They promoted players to share by offering them more activities like localization, the creation of fans, and strategy guides, as well as mod creation, which ensures that the cultural substance of this game is not confined to the main design of the game. This approach serves the aspect of participatory culture, i.e. audience contributes to the culture creation and not only consumes the products of the culture [8]. An example of this concept is the formal addition of the locally made patch of Simplified Chinese localization to the Silksong update. The recognition makes a symbolic move to make the players feel like part of the game world and responsible by formally acknowledging the role of players in creating the game culture, portraying them as creators of the game culture alongside the other creators, namely themselves [4]. Studies indicate that this identification can be a powerful tool to strengthen the sense of belonging to the community and long-term participation because players can feel that their contribution is valuable to the more extensive cultural environment of the game. More significantly, the player-created content was often borrowed and re-borrowed by Team Cherry: in the fourth update of the game, the team added a patch of a simplified Chinese translation created by the player community. Not only did this place the Chinese players in a position where they felt valued and respected, but it also fired up player participation in the localization of the game [9].

3.2.4. Live streaming and participatory visibility strategies

The culture of live streaming also enhances the construction of player identity through availing a channel of participatory visibility. Players' ways of live-streaming their gameplay, speedruns, and commentaries are shared as cultural performances between their personal gaming experiences and those of other users, and on platforms like Twitch and YouTube. The practices not only spread the game content but also enable the players to demonstrate their skills, creativity, and personal identity to the audience.

As scholars have identified, live streaming is also a blend of media involvement, a mix of entertainment, socialization, and identity expression [10]. Using the example of the Hollow Knight, the community of live streamers would encourage sharing knowledge and cultural standards about the game and strengthen the doctrine of similar values: perseverance, skillfulness, and aesthetics. Live streaming helps players to reach identity and visibility within the inner and outer circle of the audience as one of the aspects that facilitates personal and collective recognition and further the influence of the game culture on other platforms and the time frame.

4. Conclusion regarding the sustainable game culture development

Resting on the above case studies, it is possible to draw an extract of identity-building strategies that apply to the whole game industry based on the experiences of Hollow Knight and SilkSong. The implications of these are primarily to provide how games can make cultural sustainability long-term through the experience of immersion, participation of the players and community stability.

4.1. Immersive narrative design

Focus on immersion stories and cultural representation. The developers are encouraged to explore the storyline and the worldview of the game, relying on disjointed stories, multiple endings or the use of cultural symbols to make players more interested in the game and experience an immersive sense of interpreting the world. E.g., games that imitate the elements of traditional culture to a great extent may be the so-called soft carriers of that culture, making players less unaware of said culture. By providing players with room to discover the plot on their own, they are able to internalize the worldview and values used to play the game.

4.2. Community co-creation mechanism

Promote community co-creation and engagement. The players not only consume the games but are also cultural creators. Not only should the potential of user-generated content (UGC) be employed by the developers to make the surroundings of the game inclusive of the community, but also it has been demonstrated that open community spaces, including official forums, social media communities, and fan practices, may even increase player engagement, readiness to share, and collaborative skills. As an example, the Cherry team engaged players in the process of localization and mod creation, which in addition to adding more content to the game, also emotionally made the players closer to the game. The video game industry must promote participation of the players in the translation, level creation and fan projects, and reward their efforts using official methods, so that players are made to feel like they are involved and part of the official work.

4.3. Long-term cultural operation model

Maintaining long-term community connections. The lifecycle of a game is closely related to community activity. In the case study, the Cherry team maintained community activity by continuously releasing free expansion packs and patches, and by responding to player feedback promptly through online discussions. Game companies should plan post-release lifecycle management, including regular updates, events, and the release of cross-media expansion content, to maintain the cohesion of the player community. Research shows that players' trust and sense of belonging to the community can enhance their long-term engagement and loyalty. Therefore, continuously operating the community and cultivating community leaders, such as active forum administrators and contracted streamers, helps build a stable sense of player identity. Furthermore, in-game social mechanisms, such as guild systems, leaderboards, and achievement sharing, can strengthen connections between players, allowing them to see their place and role within the community.

Furthermore, the developers are to strike a balance between the needs of the individual and the collective identity. The values assigned to identity among different players differ; some put their focus on character immersion, others on skill recognition, and others on a feeling of belonging to the community. These various requirements ought to be taken into account by developers when it comes

to character development, difficulty design and community activities. An example is the availability of various forms of games, including single-player story mode, multiplayer co-op mode, and fair competitive mode, that would please the fans of immersive stories and those players who want to belong to a team by competing and cooperating. The Cherry team plays a rich storyline, rapid challenges, and statistical multiplayer modes, all of which are considered to be key to its success, as it addresses both players who enjoy reading a story and those who need to compete and socialize. The gaming industry must realize that identity is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon; it can be covered by offering rich and open-ended experiences in the game industry only.

5. Conclusion

According to the idea of player identity building, the given work examines the process of interaction of players and game culture using the example of the Hollow Knight series, which proved the necessity of detailed interaction, character progression, and co-creation in the community as the conditions of the sustainable evolution of the game industry culture. The identity of a player is the emotional investment that players place in games and also the reason behind the self-sustainability of the game culture. By focusing on world-building, extremely difficult gameplay, and offering an open-door policy to the player community, Team Cherry was able to activate the notion of strong personal attachment and shared desire to create with the game culture and players, respectively, which led to the self-development of both the game culture and its players. Thus, identity of a player must be seen as an essential resource in the future of the game industry, and a robust identity system must be established with the help of the approach of the immersive narrative, fostering co-creation of players, and the functioning of the community over time. In the future, as the technologies develop, and the metaverse as a concept grows, player identity forms will be more varied, which include the following: virtual identities and cross-industry cultural identity. The trend that the game companies must focus on is to research the requirements of the players and push the limits of interaction to ensure that the game culture develops in the long-term sense, through innovation and a community ecosystem.

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