

The Racialization of Motive:
Understanding the Framing of East Asian Crime in Video Games
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Abstract

To gain a comprehensive understanding as to how East Asian crime is framed in video games, the origin stories of three video game protagonists were examined. To accomplish this, a coding scheme was utilized to draw themes on protagonist motive, which was then compared to Liu's Asian paradigm theory (Liu, 2016). By doing so, it demonstrated the homogenization of motive in relation to East Asian culture and emphasized honour as a racially explicit motive. These findings are discussed concerning accurate cultural framing and the development of the racialized other.

Why Study Video Games?

In the 21st century, video games have assumed the forefront of narrative. Video games can both captivate and indulge their audience through hours of immersive, digital storytelling. Because of this, video games have continued to develop and have become increasingly powerful within a consumer society. What was once a Gameboy™ boasting a grey and green screen heralded for its playability has morphed into fantasy worlds like no other. With these technological advances, gamers find themselves in virtual spaces, yielding historical weapons and interacting with ancient civilizations. Individuals are granted the ability to plug in and log on to these new awaiting worlds regardless of time, space, or ability.

Due to such developments, the world of video games has expanded to include a variety of gamers from different origins, all which seek representation within the medium. When critically assessing the accuracy of representation in video games, it becomes clear that some traits are attached to members of racialized groups more than non-racialized groups. In addition, there is rarely a well-rounded understanding of why a character does or does not do something. Nevertheless, players can assume the identity of a character that is distant from their own lives while partaking in narratives that are unrepresentative of ethnic realities (Shiu, 2006). As a result, the depicted culture becomes increasingly distant and recognized through a specific lens, or frame. Arguably, video games perform as an active site of framing. According to Robert M. Entman (1993), framing can occur through both the addition of inaccurate information and the omission of relevant information (p. 54). Knowing this, it becomes clear as to how inaccurate framing can hold negative implications for the framed population. Hence, by allowing video game developers to misrepresent ethnicity and culture continually, the development of the “Other” continues. With such developments, it becomes apparent that these narratives must be

viewed critically as to what they intend to represent and considered in relation to whom they affect.

Furthermore, when studying cultural artifacts such as video games, we must be critical in determining whether developers are conscious of the tropes and rhetoric they attach to certain ethnicities and cultures, or whether pre-established stereotypes fuel their content. Generally, when analyzing video games, criminality is tied to some racialized groups more than others. Knowing this, I questioned how East Asian crime is framed in video games. To gain a more comprehensive understanding as to how criminality is utilized in East Asian video game narratives, I conducted a qualitative research study. In doing so, I used purposive sampling to investigate the origin stories of three East Asian protagonists to determine how criminality is being represented. Moreover, if and how this motive played a role in a character's criminality.

Representation – The Current Conditions

As mentioned, framing can occur through the addition or omission of information, both which create salient representations of racialized cultures (Entman, 1993). Because of this, it is essential to understand how media partakes in the representation of culture through narrative and racialization. As Herbert J. Gans (2017) argues, racialization acts as a process, which occurs either formally or informally and can encompass a variety of cultural aspects being racialized (p. 343). Thus, when discussing the implications of video game narratives, it becomes apparent that many aspects of culture can become viewed in relation to difference. These differences include instances of crime, where racialized characters are often seen as “more criminal” than their white counterparts.

Research on representation in video games is not new. Many scholars have attempted to provide analysis on the origins and implications of racialized representations in contemporary

society, and openly acknowledge the lack of racial diversity in current research (e.g., Brooks & Hébert, 2006., Shih, 2008., Zhang, 2010). Although, debate exists regarding which aspects of representation should be of primary concern. For instance, some scholars argue that more attention should be given to understanding how individuals engage with their identity within the medium (Shaw, 2011), whereas others suggest that the lack of diversity is much more profound and rooted in post-colonial societal normalities and therefore encompasses a more substantial issue (Mukerjee & Hammar, 2018). Because of these inconsistencies in research, the study of video games continues to emerge as a field and will continue to progress with changing technology and social climates.

Additionally, when embarking on studies of representation, it is imperative to understand which depictions of culture are accurate or not. For this study, understanding criminological differences between the East and West was paramount. As literature suggests, there are noticeable differences in criminality between different cultural regions. Specifically, it has been noted that the difference in social structure of East Asian countries directly affects the crime rate (Thorton & Endo, 1992). Such differences are typically viewed as a binary in which the East is associated with collective values, and the West more individualistic. This contrast is accounted for in Asian paradigm theory as a difference in both the types of crimes committed, and the way societies deal with crime (Liu, 2016, pp. 211-217). According to Liu (2016), East Asian cultures value harmony, collectivism, and honour; whereas the Western paradigm emphasizes success and individual rights (p. 213). Because of this, it is expected that protagonists of different ethnicities will have varying displays of criminality and motive.

Defining “East Asian”

For this research project, I have used the term East Asian to refer to individuals from China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Partially, this distinction is used due to East Asia encompassing a multitude of cultures and ethnicities while inhabiting a sizeable geographical space (Miller, 2008, pp. 9-11). Because the term East Asian is often used to generalize the geographical region, I will be emphasizing the term in relation to the cultural sphere. The East Asian cultural sphere denotes countries that share similar cultural values, such as those listed in Liu’s Asian paradigm theory. Furthermore, Liu (2016) stresses that although differences do occur between East Asian societies, they are minimal in comparison to the West (p.210). Therefore, I recognize there is controversy surrounding the terminology of East Asia and do not wish to exclude any group purposefully.

Methods

Before selecting the protagonist’s origin stories, I selected the video games I intended on using for this research study. To access video game lists, I used Steam¹, a popular online gaming platform. With Steam, I was able to browse video game collections by popular tags. For this research project, I explored the tag listed as “crime”. From here, Steam responded with a comprehensive list of video games the algorithm sorted as “crime”. The first nine games included *Grand Theft Auto: V*², *PAYDAY2*, *Thief Simulator*, *Yakuza 0*, *911 Operator*, *Yakuza Kiwami*, *Poly Bridge*, *Sleeping Dogs*, and *Sherlock Holmes: The Devils Daughter*. Using these results, purposive sampling was utilized based on the following criteria: the game featured a protagonist, and the protagonist is East Asian. By using these criteria, I was able to rule out simulation-based video games (such as *Thief Simulator* and *911 Operator*) and control for

protagonist ethnicity. Thus, purposive sampling led to the selection of three video games for further analysis: *Sleeping Dogs*, *Yakuza 0* and *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars*.

As mentioned, to gain a comprehensive understanding of criminal motive I used protagonist origin stories. In doing so, it allowed me to obtain and use readily available transcriptions on the chosen protagonists³. In an attempt to locate accurate origin stories, I exhausted video game developer websites. Unfortunately, they did not provide enough information that I believed was necessary to conduct a contextual analysis. Thus, I used a basic search engine to locate the protagonist origin stories. In doing so, I provided the characters name in combination with the phrase “origin story”. Although this led me to several fan-curated websites, for consistencies purposes I limited the results to a site that held the highest amount of engagement and active hits. Therefore, the site that was used for transcripts was *Fandom*⁴, a popular fan-curated website.

The examination of data was performed through a contextual analysis. The contextual analysis consisted of a coding scheme in which aspects of origin stories that directly related to motive were highlighted. Thus, I focused on aspects of the origin story that caused the protagonist to act or engage in criminal behaviour. After finding the chosen characters origin stories, I began a contextual analysis based on their provided transcripts and coded for aspects of their origin stories that directly related to the reason they initially engaged in criminal behaviour. This included notions of morals, vigilantism, family honour, and incentive. Furthermore, I excluded motive that emerged through organic character development. By doing so, it helped to provide a focus on what led the protagonist to engage in criminal behaviour initially.

The Protagonists

The first character analyzed was Wei Shen from *Sleeping Dogs*. *Sleeping Dogs* is an action-adventure video game developed by United Front Games in Vancouver, Canada. Throughout the game, we follow Wei Shen, a Chinese-American ex-police officer as he navigates contemporary Hong Kong. As his narrative continues, we learn that Shen holds a natural gift for policing and melee combat. Ultimately, this leads him to the use of non-traditional police tactics. Eventually, his behaviour causes him to be transferred to the Hong Kong Police Force (Wei Shen, 2019, para. 4). According to Shen's Fandom page, his inherent abilities make him the perfect candidate for an undercover operation, in which Shen is ordered to infiltrate the Sun On Yee, a known Triad organization (Wei Shen, 2019, para. 4). Arguably, Shen's primary motive throughout his story-line is to avenge Mimi Shen.

Within Shen's origin story, we find that his eldest sister, Mimi Shen, actively participates in Triad activity. Ultimately, her behaviour leads to the development of a severe drug addiction. As well, Mimi's activity within the gang pushes her to become increasingly involved with Ming Ming Trin, a drug dealer from the Triads. It is Ming Ming Trin who sells Mimi the drugs that cause her fatal overdose (Wei Shen, 2019, para. 5). This event acts as an inciting incident which propels Shen to delve deeper undercover to infiltrate the Sun On Yee. In doing so, Shen is able to seek out Ming Ming Trin, and restore honour to his late sisters' life. Because of this, Shen is forced to use his unconventional skills and become further entrenched in a crime burdened lifestyle.

The second character analyzed was Kazuma Kiryu from the *Yakuza* series. *Yakuza 0* is an action-adventure role-playing game developed by Sega in association with Syn Sophia, located in Tokyo Japan. Unlike Wei Shen, Kazuma Kiryu's story is much more dramatic, as it begins with him residing in an orphanage after losing his parents. During his early childhood, Kiryu is

adopted by the orphanage owner and becomes affiliated with the Dojima Family; a high-ranking family in the Tojo Clan which is associated with organized criminal activity (Kazuma Kiryu, n.d.).

As Kiryu enters his early twenties he begins working as a debt collector to serve the Dojima Family. According to his Fandom page, one Christmas Eve night, a man is murdered following a physical altercation with Kiryu over an outstanding debt (Kazuma Kiryu, 2019, para. 6). Following the orders of his Dojima superiors, Kiryu takes the blame for the crime as he was the last to have seen the murdered man alive. Consequently, Kiryu ends up spending time in prison where he eventually learns that the man had died as the result of a gunshot wound, rather than his actions (Kazuma Kiryu, 2019, para. 6). As a result, Kazuma Kiryu is motivated to prove his innocence while restoring the tarnished honour of his family bloodline (Kazuma Kiryu, 2019, para. 7).

Lastly, the third character analyzed was Huang Lee from *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars*; a game derived from the popular *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series. *GTA: Chinatown Wars* was developed by Rockstar Leeds and Rockstar North; both studios are respectively located in Great Britain. Through this installment of the franchise, we follow Huang Lee, a Chinese gang member who is known for inheriting both his Triad status and fortune from his late father (Huang Lee, 2019, para. 1). Unlike Shen and Kiryu, Lee's origin story is not as diverse or imaginative. Rather, Lee has recently come to America to deliver a family heirloom (Huang Lee, 2019, para. 1). While doing so, Lee intends to broaden his Triad activity and participate in the 'American dream'.

In this case, Lee's motive is fueled by greed and materialism rather than family values. Although, as Lee's Fandom page states, as his character develops, more emphasis is placed on

the importance of honour in Lee's life (Huang Lee, 2019, para. 1). In comparison to the above two origin stories, Huang Lee is the only character that lacks a detailed, exhaustive origin. Based on previous knowledge, I imagine this is due to the game emphasizing its sandbox features⁵. Specifically, the player is encouraged to make the character their own and diverge from the primary storyline. Therefore, I imagine the lack of origin story was a conscious choice of developers in hopes of allowing the player to transplant themselves into the virtual world.

Findings and Analysis

In *Sleeping Dogs*, Wei Shen's origin story notes "it was widely believed that Shen did commit the murder and infiltrated the gang as revenge for his sister." (Wei Shen, 2019, para. 5). This suggests the primary aspect of Shen's origin story that led him to partake in gang activity was in relation to his family. This reference to familial ties consistent with the principle of collectivism referred to on Asian paradigm theory (Liu, 2016, p. 213). Furthermore, it is arguable that Shen's motive was intertwined with an objective to restore harmony to his current life and reserve the "face value" of his family. According to Liu (2016), "face" or "face value" is synonymous with the theme of honour (p. 215). The concept of maintaining "face" is also recognized within Shen's origin story as it is noted that Shen's sister died from a drug overdose, which led their mother to commit suicide (Wei Shen, 2019, para. 1). This implies that Shen's mother committed suicide because of her daughters' actions. Arguably, Mimi's death at the hands of drug abuse is dishonourable in nature and thus can be difficult to recover from, which again suggests that a level of "face" was lost and had to be restored.

Furthermore, the importance of "face" is also integrated throughout other aspects of the video game. For instance, a "face" point system is used to determine the players level of unlockable items, and with increased "face" points players can unlock a variety of expensive

suits, accessories and character interactions (Zhang, 2014, p. 33). Therefore, it is arguable that Wei Shen of *Sleeping Dogs* relies quite heavily on not only securing honour on behalf of his family but as well maintaining a good “face value” while doing so, even while committing criminal acts. Interestingly, it is noted that Shen is Chinese-American and had spent most of his young and adult life in San Francisco. Knowing this, it becomes difficult to determine whether his criminal motive is an accurate reflection of his cultural upbringing or has merely been used as a default by developers to drive home the premise that indeed, Wei Shen is a Chinese character.

Unlike *Sleeping Dogs*, *Yakuza 0* is a small part in a larger, interwoven story-line. However, like Wei Shen the motive of honour is apparent when analyzing Kazuma Kiryu’s origin story. Initially, the theme of honour is recognized as we learn he is falsely imprisoned for a murder he had been coerced into confessing to (Kazuma Kiryu, 2019, para. 6). Because of this, Kiryu spends time in prison and when released, seeks to prove his innocence and restore the tarnished honour of his family’s bloodline (Kazuma Kiryu, 2019, para. 6). Again, the notion of honour is recognized in relation to “face value” when investigating Kiryu’s relationship to his family and aids in explaining why he allowed himself to take the blame for a crime he did not commit.

This is similar to Wei Shen’s origin story as there is a suggestion of honour in relation to “face value” or “maintaining face”. That is, Kiryu wishes to prove he did not kill the man that night, and that his involvement was staged. Therefore, he is motivated to prove his innocence to his father. Additionally, Kiryu’s origin story notes he owes much of his current life to his adoptive father due to being orphaned at a young age. Again, this indebtedness suggests that Kiryu wishes to restore harmony in the relationship he has with his adoptive father and suggests the motive that leads to his criminality is honour based. In consideration of Kiryu’s Japanese

heritage, it would not be uncommon for him to value honour, collectivism, and harmony.

However, whether such characteristics are severe enough to propel Kiryu into violent crime is questionable.

When analyzing Huang Lee's origin story, its difference is quite clear. Firstly, unlike the other two protagonist stories being referenced, Huang Lee's takes place in a fictional American landscape called "Liberty City" (Huang Lee, 2019, para 1). While in Liberty City, it is noted that "...what was supposed to be a weekend of table service and strippers turns into a dangerous adventure..." (Huang Lee, 2019, para. 2). Arguably, this is where Lee's intentions in Liberty city can be viewed as capitalist in nature. This also suggests that unlike Wei Shen and Kazuma Kiryu, Lee was initially driven by personal interests, which aligns with the Western paradigm described in Liu (2016) Asian paradigm theory. According to Liu (2016), the Western Paradigm emphasizes "individual liberty" and the individualistic nature of criminal behaviour (p. 213). As mentioned, Huang Lee is the only character whose story is located within the West, and therefore it can be argued that his criminal motive would be similar to that of the Western paradigm. Additionally, Lee's motive can be viewed as social, in that his objective was to help his family secure a high rank in the Triads (Huang Lee, 2019, para.2). Interestingly, Huang Lee's Fandom page is the only one that explicitly uses the term honour in its writings. Never the less, the term is used as a reference to demonstrate character development and suggests that his actions eventually became intertwined with the motive of honour.

Overall, there are many similarities amongst Wei Shen, Kazuma Kiryu, and Huang Lee. Primarily, each character is of East Asian ethnicity and foreign-born. Thus, it is not unexpected that their origin stories would feature motives that are related to East Asian culture. Furthermore, each character was noted to be involved with an organized gang, such as the Triads or Yakuza.

However, as mentioned Huang Lee motive previously diverges from that of Wei Shen and Kazuma Kiryu, as his origin story does not indicate he is being motivated by honour, harmony or collectivism. I suggest that perhaps developers were attempting to make his character more like the others found within the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise, in that they player driven characters that re-enact similar felony storylines across a multitude of video games; or that his motive was created in recognition of his playable space – The West. However, this does not negate the fact that there is still an attempt to racialize Huang Lee’s character by referring inauthentically to honour as motive.

Discussion

Although this study examines a small area of media, it yields interesting results. Initially, this research project demonstrates that motive can be viewed in relation to cultural attributes. That is, members of honour-based cultures may have dissimilar criminal motive when compared to individualistic-based cultures (Liu, 2016; Thornton & Endo 1992). Considering this difference, it is not unexpected that Japanese-born Kazuma Kiryu would reflect honour-based values in his criminality. However, the influence of culture becomes questionable in Wei Shen’s criminal motive, as it was noted he moved to America at a very young age, suggesting he has had mixed cultural influence (Wei Shen, 2019, para. 2). As well, this does not account for the lack of honour in Huang Lee’s origin story. The removal of honour from Lee’s origin story suggests that being raised in Hong Kong did not affect his understanding of criminal motive, and perhaps honour-based motive is tied to ethnicity.

Additionally, inherent differences may be the result of developer diversity. That is, how the development and production teams associated with these games varied in geographical and cultural origin. For instance, *Sleeping Dogs* was developed in Canada whereas *GTA: Chinatown*

Wars was produced in Great Britain. Knowing this, it becomes clear that they are not entrenched in East Asian culture and therefore could unknowingly be misrepresenting it. In comparison to *Yakuza 0*, which was developed in Japan and primarily for an East Asian audience, there is a conscious understanding of cultural narratives. Initially, the *Yakuza* series featured a wealth of culturally relevant material. In fact, so much cultural material that when developers orchestrated the worldwide release of *Yakuza 3*, they removed content in hopes of making the video game more easily digestible to Western audiences (Norris, 2014, p.79). This suggests that there are certain aspects of Japanese culture that are not easily explained through video game narrative and can be misunderstood. Furthermore, this implies that the developers of the *Yakuza* franchise are actively participating in the framing of Japanese culture.

Moreover, when analyzing the racialization of character motive, it is important to note that although these motives do align with the Asian paradigm theory (Liu, 2016), they are not expressed in their entirety. Specifically, it is never explained as to *why* honour exists within East Asian culture, or why honour is an important cultural aspect. Furthermore, honour is recognized in relation to the reason these protagonists partake in criminal behaviour. That is, the emphasis placed on honour as a criminal motive distracts from the real reasons as to why individuals join gangs or engage in crime. Generally, individuals who join gangs such as the Yakuza or Triads are not likely to be driven by honour, but rather external systemic issues such as poverty (Vowell & May, 2000). Therefore, the primary motive of honour is unrepresentative of the true reasons' individuals engage in criminal activity.

The ability to assume a character's narrative through both imagination and physical action makes the need for accurate representation paramount when adopting the identities of racialized characters. As Shiu (2006) argues, the integrative property of video game narrative can

act as a “racial masquerade,” or “yellowface” (p. 110). In other words, because players can control racialized characters that are not reflective of their ethnicity, misrepresentation can occur and lead players into trusting what they are playing is accurate. Furthermore, when viewing harmony and honour as East Asian specific motives, we must recognize that there is a direct omission of contextual, cultural information. That is, players are not receiving a comprehensive understanding of a culture, but rather a snapshot of information that inevitably hinders the players understanding of East Asian culture in its entirety.

Limitations

Although this study did render noteworthy results, limitations were present. Primarily, the use of origin stories rather than playing the games to completion renders a lack of comprehensive understanding surrounding both character development and the completion of their motive. Additionally, the samples in this study could be increased to include a broader range of samples. By including more samples in the analysis, it would have aided in data collection and could have helped locate trends or motive reoccurrences. Furthermore, the protagonists of the chosen video games were all male, and thus non-representative of gender differences in motive. Unfortunately, this serves as a reminder that the lack of representation in video games spreads to other areas of marginalization, such as in gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

Consequently, as consumers of media, we must remain critical when assessing video game narrative. We must question whether motives (such as honour) accurately reflect East Asian culture or is merely a stereotype used to homogenize and monetize groups of people. Additionally, it should be recognized that although honour is intertwined with East Asian culture, its display within video games simply touches upon a single aspect of a value-system.

That is, these displays do not demonstrate a well-rounded understanding of East Asian culture. Thus, it is essential to consume these narratives with reservation and understand they are merely providing a basis for entertainment and are not always grounded in cultural facts. Going forward, I encourage those who consume their narrative through video games, or any type of media, to be critical and acknowledge the complexities in the framing of the racialized “Other”.

¹ Steam is a digital media distribution platform that allows for both purchase and playing of video games. The account used for access was free and of personal use.

² This option featured a drop-down menu which included: *Grand Theft Auto*, *GTA:2*, *Grand Theft Auto 3*, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars*, *Grand Theft Auto 4*, *Grand Theft Auto: Episodes from Liberty City*, and *Grand Theft Auto: 5*.

³ See attached appendices for transcripts.

⁴ <https://www.fandom.com> is a hosting service targeted towards popular subcultures. Due to the nature of this server information can be edited at user discretion.

⁵ Sandbox games can also refer to open world games. Often, open world games allow the player to freely interact with the environment and can engage with objections freely.

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