The Racialization of Motive: Understanding the Framing of East Asian Crime in Video Games
Amber Pfliiger, MacEwan University

Introduction

Why Study Video Games?
In the 21st century video games have taken over the forefront of narrative. The ability of video games to both captivate and indulge their audience through hours of immersive, digital story telling performed at a consistent rate has enthralled the masses. That is, as technology continues to advance, video games will become increasingly powerful within consumer society.

Video Games and Representation
Due to such developments, the world of video games has expanded to include a variety of gamers from different origins, all which seek representation. 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. As well, 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. Therefore, this study aimed to understand how East Asian criminal motive is represented in video games (Liu, 2016; Thornton & Endo, 1992).

Video Game Selection Procedures
To access video game lists, we used Steam, 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 considered “crime”. The video games included Grand Theft Auto: V, PAYDAY 2, Thief Simulator, Yakuza 0, 911 Operator, Yakuza Kiwami, Poly Bridge, Sleeping Dogs, and Sherlock Holmes: The Devil’s Daughter. Using these results, purposive sampling was utilized based on the following criteria: the games were narrated 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.

Main Contextual Findings
- Both Wei Shen (Sleeping Dogs) and Kazuma Kiryu (Yakuza 0) presented honour-based motives as a reason for their criminality. This was coded through references to “maintaining face” or recognized through reference to family honour (Liu, 2016, Zhang, 2014).
- This reference to familial ties consistent with the principle of collectivism referred to an Asian paradigm theory (Liu, 2016, p. 213).
- Furthermore, it is argued that Shen’s motive was intertwined with an intention 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).
- Huang Lee (GTA: Chinatown Wars), the only character that is playable in a Western space presented themes of individualism, materialism, and capitalist gain as motive for his criminality.
- 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 was similar to that of the Western paradigm.
- Each character is also found to be associated with formal, organized gangs (Triads & Yakuza).

Methods

Emphasis on Character Origin & Motive
Using a “crime” search, I obtained to readily available information. 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 search engine to locate the protagonist origin(s). I found various sources to provide the character’s name in combination with the phrase “origin story”. Although this led me to several fan-curated websites, for consistency purposes I limited the results to a single entry, Fandom. After finding the chosen character, I read the source(s). I provided 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 incentives.

Eventually, Shen’s sister died from a drug overdose and later her mother committed suicide as a result. During his underassignment for the SFPD, Shen participated in gunning down Charles ‘Two-Hat’ Chiu, and later tortured and executed drug-dealer Wang Mai. On June 10th for supplying Shen with false stories, I began a contextual analysis. However, it was widely believed that Shen did commit the murder and infiltrated the gang as revenge for his sister.

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 have more collective-based motives when compared to individualistic-based cultures (Liu, 2016; Thornton & Endo). 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.

Moreover, when analyzing the racialization of character motives, 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, the influence of honour in relation to the reason these protagonists partake in criminal behaviour. This is, the emphasis on honour as a crime 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.

Findings & Analysis

References & Acknowledgements


Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Kalyani Thainurajah for being my faculty mentor throughout this research process. I would also like to thank the MacEwan University Sociology Department for providing the resources needed to complete this project.