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

Amber Pfliger, MacEwan University

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; Thorton & Endo, 1992).

Sleeping Dogs, Cover, 2019 Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleeping_Dogs_(video_game)

Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars, Cover, 2019 Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Theft_Auto:_Chinatown_Wars

Yakuza 0, Cover, 2019 Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yakuza_0

Methods

Video Game Selection Procedures

To access video game lists, I 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 sorted as "crime". The first nine games *included Grand Theft Auto: V , 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***.

Emphasis on Character Origin & Motive

Using character origin stories allowed me to obtain 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 stories. In doing so, I provided 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 site, *Fandom*. 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.

Findings & Analysis

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 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).
- 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 would be similar to that of the Western paradigm.
- Each character is **also found to be associated with formal, organized gangs** (Triads & Yakuza).

> Eventually, Shen's sister died from a drug overdose and later their mother committed suicide as a result. During his undercover assignment for the SFPD, Shen participated in gunning down Charles 'Two Hat' Chin, and later tortured and executed drug dealer Ming Ming Trin on June 2010 for supplying Mimi with a fatal dose of heroin. Although a confidential
>
> however, it was widely believed that Shen did commit the murder and infiltrated the gang as revenge for his sister.

> By the time Kiryu was 27 years old, he had managed to significantly climb the ranks of the Family. The dragon tattoo on his back earned him the nickname "The Dragon of Dojima" (堂島の龍 Dōjima no Ryū). Kiryu had planned on starting his own subsidiary group within the Family, but those plans were thwarted when he took the blame for the murder of the Dojima Family Patriarch, Sohei Dojima, to protect Nishiki, and was imprisoned for ten years. Shortly before his release from prison, he received a letter from Kazama, prompting him to return to Kamurocho.
>
> murder. However, Kiryu learns that the man had died from a gunshot wound, and not from the simple beating that Kiryu had given him. This motivates Kiryu to attempt to prove his innocence, rather than simply taking the blame and spending time in prison, as was demanded by his superiors.

> *"I buy ALL my friends. Makes life easier."*
> —Huang Lee

> A spoiled rich kid from Hong Kong, Huang owes his status as a Triad member to his father, a Triad boss from China. After the murder of his father, his uncle, Wu "Kenny" Lee calls Huang to Liberty City to help deliver a family 'heirloom', the Yu Jian Sword, to secure his family's claim to the leadership of the Triad gangs. However, what was supposed to be a weekend of table service and strippers turns into a dangerous adventure after arriving at Francis International Airport only to be hijacked, robbed of his sword, and left for dead. Huang dug deep into the rotten core of Liberty City - and deep within himself - to avenge his father's murder and reclaim his family's honor.

-Wei Shen, Fandom, 2019 (top), Kazuma Kiryu, Fandom, 2019 (middle), Huang Lee, Fandom, 2019 (bottom)

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.

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.

References & Acknowledgements

Liu, J. (2016). Asian paradigm theory and access to justice. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 32* (3), 205-224. DOI: 10.1177/1043986216656681

Shiu, A.S. (2006). What yellowface hides: Video games, whiteness, and the American racial order. *The Journal of Popular Culture, 39* (1), 109-125. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2006.00206

Thornton, R.Y., Endo, K. (1992). Preventing crime in American and Japan: A comparative study. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe

Vowell, P.R., May, D.C. (2000). Another look at classic strain theory: Poverty status, perceived blocked opportunity, and gang membership as predictors of adolescent violent behaviour. *Sociological Inquiry, 70* (1), 42-60. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-682X.2000.tb00895.x

Acknowledgements