

Old and New Forms Conference: New Forms Festival 2004  
Canadian Content in Video Games  
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*This paper investigates the culture being reflected in video games being produced in Canada as Canada is one of the world's leading producers of video games. It examines the how Canadian culture is represented in current new media artistic output against the culture, or lack of culture, being represented in video games currently being produced. With the shift of television viewers away from culture-regulated television and onto "culture neutral" video games, is our culture being eroded or expanding to fill a new culture shared with others across borders in virtual space? Canada is one of the most active in internet use, do virtual online gaming cultures form based on physical locale and shared real-world culture? Should we attempt to find our "national identity" in video games, or does culture travel differently through interactive media? Can we measure the impact of the transmission of culture through video games in Canada? In short, an in-depth examination of the impact of the transmission and direction of our national culture through the video games we produce and consume as cultural product.*

*Canadian content, CanCon, video games, Canadian culture, Electronic Arts Canada, Radical Entertainment, Ubisoft Montréal, BioWare, h0z3r*

### **Introduction**

Canada is one of the world's top producers and consumers of video games. The Canadian video game market (which includes hardware, software and peripherals), generated revenues of \$746 million (all dollar figures in CAD) in 2003 a growth of 13% over 2002[ACNielsen Feb 2004]. Canada is home to the largest and most successful video game studios in Burnaby, BC at over 900 employees, which is set to double its size by [Wahl 2003]. The number one title purchased by Canadians for the first quarter of 2004 was the Canadian produced Electronic Arts *NHL 2004* for the PS2, closely followed by another Canadian title: EA's *Need for Speed Underground* for the PS2 in third place [ACNielsen May 2004].

Other top Canadian video game players include UbiSoft Montréal, known its *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* game which swept the 2004 Academy of Arts and Science Awards (the video game equivalent of cinema's Academy Awards), winning 9 awards in total. BioWare's Edmonton studio produced *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* for the Xbox which currently ranks at number 19 in the best games of all-time by GameRankings.com and became the fastest selling Xbox game in history [BioWare].

For online play, Canada is also well-prepared as one of the most internet-savvy countries in the world, ranking second in the world behind the US by the Conference Board of Canada[Conference Board of Canada 2004]. It is well prepared for the rapidly growing online console gaming market with 80% of Canadian Xbox owners having broadband access[Abel 2002] and Canada representing 25% of the total online PS2 market.[Abel 2002]

But what are we producing and consuming as Canadians when take a step back and view our video games as a cultural product? How does our prominence as video game producers reflect who we are to the rest of the world? Do our roles as interactive cultural producers have a distinct "Canadian" feel in a culturally deregulated industry, or are we culturally lost in a post-modern hyper-connected world consciousness?

### Canadian culture questions

How does one define what Canadian culture is in the emerging field of video games? Following the user-friendly metaphor of Canada being a cultural “mosaic”, in which one retains their own culture despite being part of a larger whole, one can simply follow that Canadian content is content which Canadians produce. This follows many of the guidelines also set for music, television and other cultural outlets. What type of cultural output is Canada currently producing within the video game market and can it be considered distinct from our neighbours to the south and the rest of the world?

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### Canadian video game titles

If one examines the titles produced by the Canadian video game studios in Table 1, one can see that Electronic Arts Canada primarily produces the EA Sports brand of games which generate a quarter of EA World's total revenue [Wahl 2003] and dominates the global video game sports market. It is likely that EA's sports line was so strong that it indirectly lead Goliath competitor Microsoft to layoff 76 employees from its Xbox Sports division. Other sports related titles developed by EA Canada under the EA Big brand include the snowboarding game *SSX* and *Def Jam Wrestling*. The Canadian-owned Radical Entertainment in Vancouver is best known for franchise-based games such as the *Hulk*, the *Simpson's Hit and Run* series but first began growing as a company making hockey games beginning with *NHL Powerplay '96*. Ubisoft Montréal is a strong producer of franchise-based titles such as the *Splinter Cell* and *Rainbow Six* series which are based on best-selling military action-thriller based on books by Tom Clancy. Its *Prince of Persia* series has grown to a popularity surpassing the original franchise and hopes are high for its development of the next game in the best-selling *Myst* franchise. BioWare is well known for its popular game utilizing the Star Wars franchise as well as its role-playing games such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*.

| <b>Company</b>   | EA Canada   | BioWare  | Ubisoft Montréal   | Radical Entertainment   |
|------------------|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Location</b>  | Burnaby & Vancouver, BC   | Edmonton, AB   | Montréal, PQ   | Vancouver, BC   |
| <b>Employees</b> | 900 + 170   | 180  | 600  | 200   |
| <b>Games</b>     | <i>NBA Live</i><br><i>Def Jam Wrestling</i><br><i>Need for Speed</i><br><i>FIFA Soccer &amp; UEFA Euro</i><br><i>SSX 3 &amp; Tricky</i><br><i>MVP Baseball</i><br><i>Sled Storm</i> | <i>Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic</i><br><i>Jade Empire</i><br><i>Neverwinter Nights</i><br><i>Baldur's Gate</i> | <i>Myst IV</i><br><i>Prince of Persia 1 &amp; 2</i><br><i>Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell &amp; Rainbow Six 3</i><br><i>Batman</i><br><i>Tarzan</i> | <i>Simpson's Road Rage &amp; Simpson's Hit and Run</i><br><i>Dark Summit</i><br><i>Powerplay</i><br><i>Hulk</i> |

Table 1: Survey of Canadian Video Game Developers

### Canadian Hockey

What kinds of correlations can we derive from the games produced by our Canadian studios? Definitely sports is a strong point of similarity, with Hockey being a common thread. Not only did EA Canada and Radical Entertainment get their start by making Hockey games, but other Canadian companies such as NextLevel Games in Vancouver and Strategy First in Montréal also got their

start by making video games of our national sport. EA Canada's *NHL* holds three of the top five ranked hockey games of all time on GameRankings.com. With the popularity of sports games, entire virtual sports seasons are even being broadcast on cable television by stations such as G4techTV. In an interview with Canadian video game television show Game Nation, the director of Sony Computer Entertainment Canada, Ian Jackson, stated: "Hockey tends to do very well in this marketplace." [Abel 2002] In another interview with Game Nation, Xbox Canada's marketing manager Ryan Mugford similarly stated: "... traditionally hockey games have done well in Canada." [Abel 2002] Definitely a large part of Canada's national identity is tied to hockey and this is no exception in the video game world.

### **"Great White North"**

One other example of winter sports is the highly successful *SSX* snowboarding games made by EA Canada which hold seven out of the top ten snowboarding games on GameRanking.com. The terrain directly inspired by the neighbouring mountains of Whistler/Blackcomb and includes several Canadian artists on the soundtrack and in game. The main character in can be said to be virtual Canadian Elise Riggs whose nickname is "Bombshell" and is the most popular character as rated by ign.com [Hwang 2003]. Besides *SSX*, Canada's snowy terrain also makes appearances in *Sly Cooper 2*, *Sled Storm* and *D2* among others. Now we can be proud owners of the "Great White North" tag in the virtual world as well.

Admittedly, many of the titles make little to no reference to their Canadian origin. Sony's Ian Jackson elaborates: "Some of the demographics are a little bit different. Geographically and demographically we're a little bit different from the United States, but for all intents and purposes, it's a very similar customer buying PlayStation product." [Abel 2002]

### **French-Canadian video game culture**

With the above conclusions drawn from aggregate examples, what conclusions can we draw from other cultural differences through more direct means, such as language differences and cultural regulations as they impact video games? When Sony's Ian Jackson was questioned by Game Nation about differences marketing to Quebec, his response was: "We're very cognisant of the fact that the majority of the population in the province is French and we've made sure that not just our packaging, but the instructions that go along with the gameplay are both in English and French." [Abel 2002] However, a Sony spokesperson was later forced to apologize and Sony self-censored their Californian-produced *Syphon Filter* game in which a group of terrorists named the Quebec Liberation Front seized control of a Toronto subway station before Quebec officials publicly objected to the culturally sensitive material. The same year, Quebec also began pulling games from video game vendors' shelves which did not comply with the law which requires French throughout the packaging. These cases in addition to UbiSoft Montréal's studio and EA's new Montréal studio demonstrates that French-speaking Canada is part of what makes us a distinct within North American cultural production.

### **Canada fosters video game production**

Has government regulation and "Canadian talent" help foster video game development in Canada? Tax breaks for technological companies which engage in research can apply for substantial rebates (up to 35% of taxes paid for smaller companies) under the government's Scientific Research and Experimental Development Program (SR&ED). The labour laws in British Columbia don't require payment for overtime for high tech workers until they work over twelve hours a day instead of the regular 8.5 hours. Canadian Business magazine has reported that: "The video-game industry has realized that Canada has the talent it needs" and that "staff attrition isn't as high as in the

States.”[Wahl 2003] We have a highly talented pool of potential employees for Canadian video game companies to choose from locally and with schools increasing their training of students in video game programmes, the talent pool continues to grow. Xbox Canada chose to use local talent when forming to do things “the Canadian way” [Abel 2002] and Ubisoft Canada also began a Ubisoft Campus Tour to search for Canadian talent for its Montréal studio. The favourable business climate for video game companies and availability of talented workers has helped Canada become home to the largest video game studio on the globe.

### **Competitive Canadians**

Canadian gamers are populating the virtual game space at a rate which places Canada as one of the top online gaming nations in the world. Xbox Canada's Ryan Mugford describes Canada's online gaming as being even more prevalent than in the States due to combination of high market penetration of Xboxes combined with Canadian's broadband access. Canadian-born Guillaume Patry was crowned the top video game player in the world at the World Cyber Games five years ago. His salary is currently estimated at \$500,000 and he has a team of bodyguards to protect him from his fans.[CBC 2004] Canada placed well in the World Cyber Games 2004, but perhaps more interesting is that many of the Canadian contestants chose to add a “\_ca” suffix to their moniker to distinguish their Canadian origins. Online and in competition, Canadians are a proud bunch, just as much as they might be in “real life.”

### **Conclusion**

Canada is one of the world's leading nations in the production and consumption of video game product and culture and shows no sign of slowing in the near future. Video games themselves are just surfacing as an art form worthy of academic critique. Many universities, colleges and private institutions are now offering courses in video game studies and development, increasing the future talent pool for local video game studios. As technology in video games becomes less important, more subtle notions such as story and culture will increasingly reflect Canada's view of itself to the rest of the world. Canadian-born President of EA's Worldwide Studios, Don Mattrick, goes so far as to state: “In the growing cultural and economic phenomenon of videogames, Canadian content rules the world.”

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### **Biography:**

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Leonard Paul attained his Honours degree in Computer Science at Simon Fraser University in BC, Canada with an Extended Minor in Music concentrating in Electroacoustics. He started in the interactive entertainment industry over ten year ago with over ten published video game titles (including the award-winning *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit 2* for the PS2), with experience in both audio programming and music composition.

He was the composer for the documentary *The Corporation* which won the Documentary Audience Award for World Cinema at Sundance in 2004 and is the highest grossing Canadian documentary in history.

He is a proficient speaker and has done lectures at the Game Developer's Conference in San Jose as well as at the Banff New Media Institute on video game audio and interactive design. He currently teaches video game audio at the Vancouver Film School.