

Canadian Content in Video Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the culture being reflected in video games produced in Canada, from the perspective of Canada being 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 fastest-growing countries in broadband usage, so do our rapidly expanding virtual online gaming cultures share our real-world culture? Should we attempt to find our "national identity" in video games, or does culture travel differently through interactive media? In short, this paper a preliminary examination of the impact of the transmission and direction of our national culture through the video games we produce and consume as a cultural product.

Keywords

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. In early 2005, there are approximately 300 companies based in the video game industry [22] in Canada. 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 [4]. Canada is home to the largest and most successful video game studio in Burnaby, BC at over 1000 employees, which is soon set to double its size [26]. The second largest studio is UbiSoft's Montréal studio which is similarly set on an aggressive expansion path, fueled by millions of dollars of aid from the Canadian government [18]. 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 [3].

UbiSoft Montréal, with its corporate headquarters in Paris, is likely 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, the largest

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Canadian independent game studio, produced *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* for the Xbox which as of May 2005, ranks at number 15 in the best games of all-time by GameRankings.com and became the fastest selling Xbox game in history at the time it was released.

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 [9]. It is well prepared for the rapidly growing online console gaming market with 80% of Canadian Xbox owners having broadband access and Canada representing 25% of the total online PS2 market [1]. Canada was the world leader in growth of global entertainment and media spending in 2003 where video game purchases jumped 18.7% in a year and internet access spending rose by 11.2%, showing that Canada is poised to be a contender in the online video game market [21]. Additional more concrete statistics on Canada's online gaming presence are difficult to determine as they are commonly combined with statistics from the US. Another difficulty when researching specific statistics about the video game industry is the frequent confidential aspect of the material. A good example is the recent National Game Study whose findings are largely unavailable due to the potential confidential nature of the findings [6]. Hopefully this desire to protect information from the hands of competitors does not stifle research and shared innovation within the video game arena.

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 [26] and dominates the global video game sports market. Other sports related titles developed by EA Canada under the EA Big brand include the snowboarding game *SSX* and *Def Jam Wrestling*. Radical Entertainment in Vancouver, owned by Vivendi-Universal, 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. BioWare is well known for its popular game utilizing the Star Wars franchise, role-playing games such as *Baldur's Gate* and its original title *Jade Empire*.

Table 1.1: Survey of Canadian Video Game Developers (all employee figures for May 2005).

Company	EA Canada	BioWare	Ubisoft Montréal	Radical Entertainment
Location	Burnaby & Vancouver, BC	Edmonton, AB	Montréal, PQ	Vancouver, BC
Employees	1300 + 200	230	1000	200
Games	<i>Def Jam Wrestling</i> <i>FIFA Soccer & UEFA Euro</i> <i>NBA Live</i> <i>Need for Speed Underground</i> <i>Sled Storm</i> <i>SSX 3 & Tricky</i> <i>Triple Play Baseball</i>	<i>Baldur's Gate</i> <i>Jade Empire</i> <i>Neverwinter Knights</i> <i>Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic</i>	<i>Myst IV</i> <i>Prince of Persia 1 & 2</i> <i>Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell & Rainbow Six 3</i> <i>Batman</i> <i>Tarzan</i>	<i>Hulk</i> <i>Powerplay</i> <i>Scarface</i> <i>Simpson's Road Rage & Simpson's Hit and Run</i>

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. NHL 2005 was utilized by television station G4techTV to broadcast an entire virtual season for the lost NHL 2005-2005 season. 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." [1] In another interview with Game Nation, Xbox Canada's marketing manager Ryan Mugford similarly stated: "... traditionally hockey games have done well in Canada." [2] Although Canada is a large consumer of hockey games, Europe is a much larger market and European leagues are added to EA's *NHL* just for this reason. With games such as soccer, rugby, baseball and cricket also being produced in Canada, it shows that Canadians are a versatile bunch capable of creating great sports games to which we have little national association with as well. Definitely a large part of Canada's national identity is tied to hockey which may be the reason that EA Canada's *NHL* games hold three of the top five ranked hockey games of all time on GameRankings.com.

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. This is in stark contrast to Japanese video game development which has a stronger history and a more concentrated ethnic population. 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. In general, it is difficult to determine what cultural products contain "Canadian content" where there are specific cultural identifiers in the product. With video games, it is often difficult to even discover where the games are actually made as they often fall under the hallmark as simply being an EA game or an Ubisoft game. 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? Currently there is a strong argument that games made in Canada have little culturally distinct: "Asked if made in Canada games had any distinctive traits, Canadian developers were usually ruefully nonplussed; a spaceship in a sci-fiction game might be decorated in the colours of the local hockey team; one the dozen or mercenary warriors in a shooter is described as French-Canadian and grunts his few lines in a Quebecois accent; one developer came up with a game involving 'a Mountie and a grizzly bear' but 'it isn't likely to get off the page.'" [13]

In order to make their games appeal to the largest market, specific Canadian cultural identifiers such as word spellings and cities are typically swapped with American (or "global") counterparts in games. This is a market-driven effect which could be addressed by legislation similar to laws already present in television or film, but will this result in games which the small Canadian market will be more likely to buy? With the growing widespread addition of in-game advertising in games, such as Anarchy Online [14], should "broadcast" dynamic content within games fall under the jurisdiction of the CRTC?

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. When opening their Vancouver studio, Disney used the fact that many employees would like to improve their quality of life by working a typical 9-5 day to lure employees from other companies where unpaid overtime common [20]. 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.” [26] 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 programs, the talent pool continues to grow. Xbox Canada chose to use local talent when forming to do things “the Canadian way” [2] and Ubisoft Canada also began a 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 two largest video game studios on the globe. Lifestyle and cost of living also help companies based in Vancouver, Toronto and Montréal draw talent internationally, ranking first, fourth and eighth respectively in the world's best cities to live by the Economist Intelligence Unit [10]. Lately, B.C. has become a nexus for video game companies within Canada and is home to 44% of Canada's 300 video game companies compared to Ontario's 24% and Quebec's 20% which similarly mirrors the livability evaluation for Vancouver, Toronto and Montréal respectively [22].

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.” [1] 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.

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 Canada'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 [8]. 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. The practice of adding a flag to one's online portfolio in EA Sports online products can be similarly used to promote rivalries and distinguish Canadians from the rest of the world. Online and in competition, Canadians are a proud bunch, just as much as they might be in “real life.”

Deposit Coin?

With so much positive growth in the Canadian video game business, it is possible that it is simply another “dot-bomb bubble” waiting to burst? Canadian cultural exports were reported to be \$2.2 billion over imports for 2004, which is the largest deficit since 1997 [23], so are we becoming a nation which simply consumes other nation's cultural products? With the continuing trends of manufacturing to outsource to less developed nations [13], is it possible that this will erode Canada's competitive edge globally? With the release of the new consoles requiring significant sized companies for development and studio acquisitions by large corporations, leaving BioWare as the only major independent Canadian developer, are we at risk of being lost within a global marketplace? One of the most interesting areas of recent growth is development of a small 80 person studio in Vancouver by entertainment giant Disney. Disney has historically stayed on the sidelines of interactive game development and this move shows a high level of corporate interest in developing games in Canada [28]. The larger players of EA and UbiSoft are not well diversified companies and pale in comparison in financial size and number employees when compared to giants such as Disney [19] which makes them potentially vulnerable to industry changes. Financially, companies have always been on unsafe ground and with EA stock falling 13% when announcing it had not met projected revenues for Christmas 2004 [16] and UbiSoft under threat of purchase from EA or even interested parties in China [17], the future for even the major players is even uncertain.

Next Gen

Canada is one of the world's leading nations in the production and consumption of video game products and shows no sign of slowing in the near future. However, it has yet to prove itself as a socially informed medium which can convey and challenge subtle notions such as aspects of distinct Canadian culture to any large degree. There seems to be hope now that video games themselves are just surfacing as an art form worthy of academic critique and entering a new generation of production. Many universities, colleges and private institutions are now offering courses in video game studies and development, increasing the future Canadian talent pool. UbiSoft Montréal has gone so far as to create a 1000 person university, with financial help from the Canadian government, with a goal of “creating 1,000 new jobs in Montréal by 2010.” [27]

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 video games, Canadian content rules the world." This is true of Canada's quantity of video game production, but not of the actual Canadian content within the products we export.

Conclusion

Currently, there appears to be little distinction in content for games which are produced in Canada and the a lack of any sort of "national identity" that can be drawn from the content of Canadian video game products. Currently, the inclusion of Canadian content is largely up to the distributors and unless there are significant numbers to warrant specific content, then it will largely be a continued progression towards finding the largest potential market at a reduced cost of production.

With larger title games for console systems requiring well over \$10 million [5] to produce and teams of over 50, it is unlikely that any specific Canadian content will be developed without significant financial help. Programs such as Telefilm Canada's New Media fund is likely the best current source of funding for potential small interactive Canadian content developers, with the expansion of the fund from \$9 million to \$14 million for 2005-2006 [24] is encouraging, but still small when applied to current video game budgets. SR&ED tax credits and additional financial support from organizations such as the National Research Council of Canada [6] to support Canadian technology innovation is likely the best way to allow companies to compete in the global video game market.

With the current generation of game consoles becoming increasingly difficult for smaller companies to develop for and larger companies being largely bounded by the wills of their investors, it is becoming more difficult to create games with cultural specific content for a country as small as Canada when viewed on a global economic scale. Perhaps the hope lies in funding games for smaller hand-held and mobile platforms which require less capital and can address global fringe markets such as Canada. With the growth of academia in gaming and the view of game design as an art-making process, schools and institutions in Canada are beginning to generate their own games. Although these are often not available to the public at large, they hold promise for games which reflect a more distinctly Canadian edge. The new generation of game designers will be challenging and critiquing the works which came before them and hopefully creating a new movement of interactive entertainment which is more worthy of academic critique. With the combination of adequate funding and academic refinement, it is possible that this new generation of Canadian games will show something to the world that is more distinctly Canadian.

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