Roleplaying video games: a platform for accessing cultural heritage?

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Abstract

Video games are one of the largest cultural industries in the world and an important part of life for billions of people. This medium offers much more than just entertainment and that is especially true for the field of cultural heritage, although there has not been sufficient research of video games from this perspective. This work sets out to explore the medium of roleplaying video games from the point of view of their players as a key to access and understand cultural heritage, looking into the forms cultural heritage plays in video games, the advantages of engaging with cultural heritage in this way and offering an outlook into its implications regarding its significance for the field of cultural heritage. The core of this thesis is formed by an analysis of a topical survey created by the author that has been completed by 564 players, followed by a discussion of results and other written sources. Using the results of the survey this thesis concludes that roleplaying video games are a valuable asset for cultural heritage. It is an improved (interactive, immersive, captivating) storytelling medium with a great potential for benefiting its users' cultural knowledge and skills, as well as conserving, sustaining, and sharing the value of cultural heritage, and the field should acknowledge it as such and take advantage of it.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to the memory of Billy Nuttall (1996-2021), a dear friend whose support and excitement for this topic were endless, taken away by the pandemic long before his time.

Contents

Introduction

Background

Video games are a part of life for more than 2.7 billion people worldwide,[1] which makes them one of the largest cultural industries yet and therefore indubitably an impactful one in various spheres, such as technological development, entertainment, education, psychology and, very importantly, culture and cultural heritage. With such an amount of people who engage with games, it is clear that they are of value and worth researcher attention, even though until recently video games have been generally seen at the best as merely a trivial pastime or at worst even as a potentially harmful activity,[2] when perceived to pose a risk of addiction or encouraging violence.

However, over the past couple of decades, the view on video games has been changing, with more and more researchers approaching the topic and exploring its extensive potential for many fields (such as is most notably seen in the Role-playing game studies book[3] which offers over 10 different disciplinary perspectives on the topic). One of these is the field of cultural heritage, where video games seem to be establishing their place for numerous reasons[4] – they are proving to be a viable medium with innovative possibilities for addressing cultural, social and historical issues, revitalising heritage and making it more accessible, immersive, relatable and engaging for younger generations. Museums and other cultural institutions have also started searching for solutions on how to include video games into their collections and how to exhibit and preserve them. Closer research of the potential and significance of video games for cultural heritage and their core features is necessary to understand this medium and the benefits and possibilities it offers in the area of mediating cultural heritage to players and supporting its evolution.

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[1] WePC. 2020. "Video Game Industry Statistics in 2020." WePC, Accessed 19 November 2020. https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/
[2] Eklund, Lina, Björn Sjöblom, and Patrick Prax. 2019. "Lost in Translation: Video Games Becoming Cultural Heritage?". Cultural Sociology 13 (4): 445. Doi:10.1177/1749975519852501.
[3] Zagal, José Pablo and Sebastian Deterding. *Role-Playing Game Studies*: Transmedia Foundations, edited by Zagal, José P., Sebastian Deterding. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2018. Doi:10.4324/9781315637532.
[4] Zeiler, Xenia, and Suzie Thomas. 2020. "The relevance of researching video games and cultural heritage". International Journal Of Heritage Studies 27 (3): 265-267. Doi:10.1080/13527258.2020.1762705.

So far, researchers have been focusing on video games *as* heritage (common in the previously mentioned museum field), finding reasons for and ways of their preservation and exhibition, only slowly moving from preservation of the tangible (hardware and software) to stressing the preservation of the intangible (context of playing, player communities, etc.). The overall problem, to the solution of which this thesis will try to contribute, is thus that a lot of research still remains to be done on the intangible heritage and cultural values of video games, so these might be affirmed and generally accepted as a worthy part of our culture. As video games are still a relatively new topic within the field of cultural heritage, it is useful to try to expand our understanding of the medium (not merely as a museum object of hardware and software) as a valid part of our cultural heritage and explore the potential benefits it offers to the players and our field and the ways in which it might be seen to be a natural step in the evolution of culture.

This new font of culture is also an exciting topic when concerning sustainability, a concept more important in the present era of climate crisis than ever before. Video games, being one of the most used communication and entertainment media, offer a powerful platform to inform players about environmental sustainability and inspire them towards having a good impact. Video game companies, often powerful investors, have also started thinking about how to not only become carbon neutral, but also how to become beneficial to the planet. The newest publication within this area by 30 leading video game companies in collaboration with the UN, is the 2019 assessment titled "Playing for the Planet"[5] dealing with how video games can, with everyone and everything around them, help support the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However environmental sustainability is not the only one that video games may have positive impacts on, they also play an important role in supporting the sustainability of culture. This is, on one hand a feature inherent in playing games, as this activity has in itself been an important part of our (human) culture for thousands of years. Yet the significance of video games goes way past simple game mechanics and joy of playing, thanks to modern technology and passionate developers, games are now able to provide us access to cultural heritage of any kind, from almost anywhere and even from the point of view of someone else. Real world cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible can be virtually conserved and in video games, it can also be vividly experienced, accessed in a way that lets players interact with cultures, learn

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[5] Patterson, Trista, and Sam Barratt. 2019. Playing for the Planet – How video games can deliver for people and the environment. Arendal: UN Environment/GRID-Arendal.

about them, build a connection to them, enrich their own cultural identity, and communicate with other people.

Games mediate cultural heritage to the player (and allow the player to engage and in some ways form it as well), among others, via countless game mechanics, of which the most persistent and traditional one is roleplaying. The aim of this thesis is exploratory – to research the mechanic of roleplaying in games (from the point of view of their users), the reasons, ways and impacts of its use and explore it via a review of topical literature and, most importantly, a player survey specially created for this thesis (with answers from 564 respondents-gamers).

The research questions this thesis seeks to answer are:

1. What makes roleplaying games a suitable/valuable medium for players to access and understand cultural heritage in video games?
2. In what forms does cultural heritage appear in video games and what is its role there?
3. What are the implications of roleplaying video games and players engaging with them for the field of cultural heritage and sustainability?

Limitations of the work

As the scope of a master's thesis is greatly limited, the aim of this work has to match it and attempt to only set out to archive goals that are possible within it. This thesis will strive to support and describe the stance, values and potential of video games in the field of cultural heritage by researching their users' view on the subject. I begin with a review of the most relevant currently accessible sources written about these topics and their discussion. Theory found out from this review will then be followed using a survey developed for the thesis research. The survey targets players of video games and consists of both multiple choice and open-ended questions. The dataset collected via this survey is considerably vast, since 564 respondents have participated in it, however what may be considered a slight limitation (or perhaps just something to take into the account) here is that due to the platforms the survey was accessible through and its language (English), majority of the respondents come from Europe or USA, which means a Western perspective is admittedly rather predominant in the results.

Another thing that should be mentioned when discussing the limitations of this research is the potential presence of bias which touches on the overall reliability of the study. The core part of this paper lies in analysing personal responses/expressed views of video game players. Video game players are, of course, just the ones to approach when researching this topic since they have a unique expertise in it. However, we need to realize that these people voluntarily devote their time to play games and engage with the culture around them (for various reasons which are discussed later) and hence might be expected to be inclined towards answering positively, in benefit of video games rather than criticizing them. The same applies for the author of this work, who is likewise a video game player and therefore might not be as critical of the medium as non-players would be. This thesis places the gamer point of view at the centre and even with such a large data set collected, the results and their generalisability need to be approached accordingly.

It is to be noted that this is the author's first experience with creating and analysing a survey of this scale and they have been learning new things throughout the whole process, which made the entire experience both challenging and greatly valuable. One subject that has proved difficult was creating survey questions that would not be in any way leading the respondents towards a certain answer – this was admittedly the case for several of the survey questions, which is noted in their analyses below. This is definitely something that researchers should keep in mind and try to steer clear of when creating questionnaires.

Definitions and perspective

Before diving deeper into the topic of how cultural heritage can be accessed via taking advantage of the roleplaying mechanic in the medium of video games, it is important to point out, define and describe the development and interwovenness of a couple of concepts that this thesis draws from and the understanding of which is key for fully grasping the potential of their combination. The terms in question include roleplaying, cultural heritage, video games (RPGs) and cultural sustainability. All the terms will be positioned within the perspective of the thesis, which will be elaborated on next.

Thesis perspective

The perspective and starting standpoint of this work is such that video games are a relatively new, extensively impactful medium (with engagement scope greater than any other, as mentioned before) and a part of modern culture and its sustainability that is only in the recent years starting to be cautiously accepted as a serious one and its potential is being explored. Cultural heritage of all kinds (from storytelling, mythology, art, architecture to religion, tradition, history, etc., from real or imagined worlds) is almost omnipresent in video games, which is one of the most significant values of them – playing almost always means engaging with culture. This engagement appears to be at its strongest and has the most potential when the mechanic of roleplaying is employed in a game, since roleplaying as a method (if implemented well) improves immersion, relatability, learning, focus, understanding and interest of the player. This connection perceived by the author of this thesis is the reason for combining these concepts and researching them together to find out whether such a connection is truthful and relevant and what are its impacts and implications in the field of cultural heritage, its sustainability and diversity.

Cultural heritage

UNESCO, the most widely recognized authority in this field, recognizes several different categories of cultural heritage. These are tangible heritage (concerning material objects of any kind, from paintings to shipwrecks or buildings), intangible heritage and digital heritage.

Intangible heritage, as seen by UNESCO, "[…] includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts."[6] Within the same definition, reflected also in the UNESCO-ICOMOS Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, it is noted that intangible cultural heritage (ICH) strengthens cultural diversity, intercultural tolerance and dialogue, and four main features of ICH are

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[6] "UNESCO - What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?". 2021. Ich.Unesco.Org. https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003.

outlined – it is traditional, contemporary and living; inclusive; representative and community-based.[7]

Laurajane Smith in her book Uses of Heritage also investigates this topic, trying to switch the focus from the tangible to the intangible, "exploring the idea of heritage not so much as a 'thing', but as a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present." A cultural heritage researcher, Rodney Harrison, also sees cultural heritage rather as a process and stresses the importance of it being constantly engaged with and live, stating that:

"Heritage is not a passive process of simply preserving things from the past that remain, but an active process of assembling a series of objects, places and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present, associated with a particular set of values that we wish to take with us into the future."[8]

Digital heritage, the youngest of the categories, is outlined by UNESCO as consisting of "unique resources of human knowledge and expression"[9], it is described as multidisciplinary, providing digital access to various content from cultural to administrative, from texts to software. This heritage is also recognized as valuable to humankind and ever-growing.[10]

Cultural heritage is a concept of great complexity and variation, which needs to be kept in mind when working with it. For the purposes of this work, the definition of cultural heritage is a connection of the previously mentioned definitions. Video games themselves are difficult to place in only one of the three outlined categories, since they touch all of them to some extent – there is often tangible material heritage surrounding them (discs where games are stored, packaging, hardware needed to play, merchandise, cosplay, etc.), they are digital (and therefore susceptible to technical obsolescence/reliant on specific technology to be accessed) and intangible cultural heritage is present in and around their content (cultural inspirations, stories, languages, etc.).

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[7] (UNESCO 2021).
[8] Harrison, Rodney. 2013. Heritage: Critical Approaches. Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge.
[9] UNESCO. 2009. "Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage". In. Paris.
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000179529.page=2.
[10] (UNESCO 2009).

Cultural heritage adds layers of meaning into our lives, it is a connection we feel with the people of the past and future, it helps us find our place in the society and the world, build our unique identity, feel presence of community, create value. It is what transforms objects from mere material to meaningful symbols and games from simple entertainment to complex learning experiences.

Roleplaying

Roleplaying can be simply defined as assuming the role of someone other than one's own self, yet there is more to this concept that that. Roleplaying, the history of which is a far-reaching one, has always been a part of the human culture, present in entertainment, but also in religious practice, education or even psychology, it has taken many forms in the past and is still used in the present.

As the Role-Playing Game Studies book tells us, roleplaying is natural for humans, and it is a part of life for all of us. The very simplest form of roleplaying can be observed in the play of children, who take it up naturally, without needing any definitions or rulesets, playing make-believe that they are princesses, doctors, monsters, animals, or any other characters from the real or imagined world, sometimes using toys that are given a role of just about anything imaginable as well. However, roleplaying is not exclusive to children in any way, as adults engage in it in countless ways. We might take part in roleplay while for example immersing ourselves into stories, taking part in drills or traditional rituals, using roleplay as a psychological method, or when assuming our various social roles.[11]

Roleplaying also, perhaps most obviously, occurs in the setting of theatre, one of the most popular classical forms of culture and entertainment, the origins of which go as far as the Ancient Greece.[12] In theatre, actors take on roles of various characters and play out a story or a scene using a script or improvising. Plays can take many forms, have various content, and

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[11] Zagal, José Pablo and Sebastian Deterding. *Role-Playing Game Studies*: Transmedia Foundations, edited by Zagal, José P., Sebastian Deterding. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2018. Doi:10.4324/9781315637532.
[12] Gascoigne, Bamber. 2021. "HISTORY OF THEATRE". Historyworld.Net. http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?ParagraphID=cui.

break conventions, yet what usually connects them is that they are intended to be shared with an audience, making their impact wider. Apart from providing a cultural experience, theatre has the ability to make the audience feel included in a certain group (for example in religious plays) and plays are also known to be able to help the audience work with many difficult topics. As Gonzalo Frasca has pointed out in his work, one of the examples of this is Theatre of the Oppressed[13], created by the well-known Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal, where the audience can participate in improvised plays aimed to deal with a variety of social issues. The main point of these interactive plays is that the spectator is able to take the place of an oppressed character and try to behave and solve the oppressive situation from the character's point of view. This shows one of the unique features of roleplaying – being able to step into someone else's shoes and imagine a different perspective than our own. Thereby creating a unique way of understanding different values and problems attached to all forms of cultural heritage. Another key feature of roleplaying, which can be experienced even in classic (non-participatory) plays, is the ability to produce empathy, "the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation."[14] The universality of roleplay renders it a great tool for mirroring real life and allowing participants to learn and explore different scenarios and roles in a safe environment.[15]

Finally, various forms of roleplay also had (and in some cases still have) their place in old rituals and belief practice of various cultures. Old Finnish bear rituals can serve as an example here, with plentiful roleplay appearing in them – the hunters often took on roles of forest animals to avoid the wrath of the bear, villagers addressed and treated the killed bear as an honoured guest, often even assigning a young girl to sit next to the bearskin at the feast and play the bear's bride.[16] Other examples of using roleplay in rituals can be found in the traditional cultures of Indigenous Americans or for example the Sámi people.

The storytelling technique of living history/re-enactment, which is often used in museums, is also based on roleplaying. The goal of this technique is to open a window into history for the

[13] Frasca, Gonzalo. 2001. "Videogames of the Oppressed: videogames as a means for critical thinking and debate". Master, Georgia Institute of Technology: 55–73.
[14] "Empathy". 2021. Dictionary.Cambridge.Org. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/empathy.
[15] Zagal, José Pablo and Sebastian Deterding. *Role-Playing Game Studies*: Transmedia Foundations.
[16] Musichina, Magdaléna. 2018. "Symbolika medvěda ve finské lidové slovesnosti". Masarykova univerzita: 12–13.

spectator/visitor. Reenactors portray people from a given time in history. To make the portrayal as authentic as possible, they wear period garments and accessories and adjust their behaviour and speech accordingly. Often, they also demonstrate activities their characters would be originally engaged in, such as various forms of crafting, food preparation, fighting, dancing, etc. Re-enacting, just like roleplaying has a long history, but is still used in the present. Modern re-enacting often involves extensive research of the character one aims to portray and even shares certain features with experimental archaeology. One of the main reasons re-enacting is a popular kind of roleplaying is that it offers high engagement – for both the visitors, who get to interact with the characters and see some aspects of history come to life, and to the actors themselves, who gain first-person experience of what it could have been like to be in the place of their chosen character.

Examples, such as the ones noted above, give us a view on roleplaying as a traditional part of cultural heritage and its natural connection to humanity, showing some of the uses, potential of this method and the features it is valued for – naturalness, immersion, interactivity, building of empathy and meaning, engagement. As the society evolves, so does its culture and the methods used to access it. This however does not necessarily mean that traditional habits disappear as they are rendered obsolete. Some, often the ones that belong with core features of human nature, survive and evolve to fit with the modern world, its values, needs and tempo. This is the case of roleplaying, that has evolved along with humans, from Stone Age cave paintings to the newest console games.

Digital roleplaying games that are played so widely nowadays carry in themselves hundreds of years of development of the roleplaying storytelling technique combined with new technology, which adds into it. In the digital worlds it is possible to create objects, environments and characters without having to rely on the possibilities, resources or even physics of the real world. In a way digital games are offering us experiences that would otherwise be impossible elsewhere. Saying that everything is possible in digital games would be farfetched as that is almost entirely reliant on the current capabilities of technology, yet even if the limitations to imagination are not entirely erased in digital games, they are pushed a great deal further.

Video games, roleplaying video games

Video games – precisely defined as "electronic games in which players control images on a video screen"[17] – have gone a long way in their development, from the very first, simple games like Tennis for two (1958) or Spacewar! (1962) to the newest games played today (2020/2021), such as Ghost of Tsushima or Cyberpunk 77. Video games may be played on a wide range of electronic devices – stationary (most commonly personal computers, arcade machines or consoles), hand-held (such as mobile phones, tablets, gameboys, etc.) or using head-mounted displays (most often for virtual reality games).

Numerous genres of video games exist, among the most popular ones are real-time strategy games (RTS, e.g. Age of Empires or StarCraft), multiplayer online battle arena games (MOBA, e.g. League of Legends or Dota 2), sandbox games (e.g. Minecraft, The Sims), shooter games (FPS = first-person shooter and TPS = third-person shooter, e.g. Call of Duty or Doom), platformers (e.g. Super Mario Bros, Ori and The Blind Forest), survival games (e.g. Don't Starve), action-adventure games (e.g. Assassin's Creed, Legend of Zelda), simulators and sport games (e.g. Madden NFL, Forza), puzzle games (e.g. Portal, Minesweeper) and finally, role-playing games. Role-playing games include several varieties from ARPGs (action role-playing games, e.g. Witcher 3) to MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online RPGs, e.g. World of Warcraft, Lineage, The Elder Scrolls Online). Considering the diversity of all game genres, it is important to note that many games overlap genre boundaries, thus fitting into several of them at once or creating a new genre for itself.

Roleplaying games are described to consist of four key aspects – roles, play, games and media culture.[18] Digital role-playing games (both single- and multiplayer) typically offer their players a chance to control one or more fictional characters, whose development the player follows in the course of the game. Depending on the game, the player is often allowed to customize their character's appearance, their race, class/focus, sometimes also their name, origins, personality traits, etc. A common mechanic for character development, or rather advancement, is gathering

[17] Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "video game," accessed October 23, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/video%20game.

[18] Zagal, José Pablo and Sebastian Deterding. *Role-Playing Game Studies*: Transmedia Foundations, edited by Zagal, José P., Sebastian Deterding. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2018. Doi:10.4324/9781315637532.

experience points. For their activity in the game (completing quests, battling, exploring, learning skills, etc.) the characters may gain experience points (XP) which, after a certain amount of them has been reached, allow the characters to level up. Levelling up most often means that the characters become stronger and new skills, locations and experiences become available to them. Simply levelling up however does not always correspond with progressing in the story of the game. Rather than that, this progression can be marked by advancing though a questline – a series of goals/steps/parts of the story that a character needs to complete in order to unlock new ones that follow after them and are often impacted by them. Each phase (a quest) of the questline typically expands the story narrated in the game. Questlines might be apparent (players may open a written quest log, follow directions on the map, etc.) or hidden to not distract from the flow of the game.

The amount of roleplaying that the player is expected/allowed to do differs with each game. Some roleplaying games (majority of them) offer limited roleplay (limited number of impactful choices, playstyles, pre-set character, no recognition for player's customizations in game etc.), yet the player is still in charge of a character different than themselves and experiences the game from their point of view, which means that such games are still seen as RPGs for the purpose of this thesis. This is most often the case with newer games, as extensive roleplaying options may nowadays appear confusing or even discouraging to new players. An example of such an RPG with somewhat limited roleplay is the popular sci-fi game series Mass Effect, where the player controls a partly pre-defined character of Commander Shepard, whose appearance, gender and brief backstory they can customize and whose choices in the game (made by the player) define the character as either good (Paragon) or evil (Renegade), causing their appearance to further change and special dialogue options and quest endings to unlock.

RPGs with extensive roleplay options (mostly older games) offer a wider range of choices the players can make, and which are more impactful. These games share more features with classical tabletop/pen-and-paper RPGs such as Dungeons and Dragons or Pathfinder. They may also offer the players freedom without making them concentrate on a main storyline and leave them to develop their own story for their characters. An example of a game with a more in-depth roleplaying possibilities is the game Neverwinter Nights 2 or Fallout 2 where players are given more options in both character creation and playstyle, allowing for a freer roleplay which is not fully led by the game, but rather by the player.

Real-world heritage vs. Fictional heritage

When writing this thesis, two different categories of cultural heritage (as it appears in video games) arose from the researched material – real-world cultural heritage and fictional heritage. These will be mentioned more in detail later on, but it is perhaps useful to briefly describe them here and present this way of understanding heritage as it is depicted in video games (and other media).

Cultural heritage in video games may take on various forms. Players might encounter real-world heritage depictions in games – accurate representations (within limits and to varying extent but mirroring real-world history/present nonetheless and allowing the player to immerse into the given setting) landscapes, settlements, architecture, art, cultures, people's occupations, behaviour, clothes, etc. – quite as one might encounter for example during a living history museum visit.

However, alternatively and more commonly, real-world heritage may serve as a well of inspiration for game developers (and other creators on whose works games might be based) to draw from while creating their own fictional worlds. Real-world cultural heritage mechanisms are applied to create fictional cultural heritage and give life to fantastical civilisations and enrich the gameplay with believable, breathing cultures.

Who plays video games?

Concerning the scope of impact of video games, it might be useful to look into who plays them. The demographic of video game players is wide. A survey by a marketing company Global Web Index conducted in 2019, found that "over 4 in 10 internet users are gamers, defined as those with an interest in gaming and who play games on any device."[19] Their survey of 120 303 internet users aged 16-64 resulted in a statistic showing that in Latin America, Asia-Pacific, Middle East and Africa over 82% of those who are able to access the internet are gamers. In Europe and North America, it was slightly less at 76% and 73% respectively. The same survey

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[19] Morris, Tom. 2020. "Chart of the Week: 4 gaming trends to get excited about in 2020". Global Web Index. https://blog.globalwebindex.com/chart-of-the-week/gaming-trends-2020/.

also showed that players identifying as male have the majority at 63%, with female players at 37% and that most players come from the Y generation (1981-1996), while the rest is made up of people from generations X and Z (born 1965-1980, born 1995-2012/15), and only 4% of people born earlier than 1965. The chart below was used to better illustrate these results.[20]

These numbers can be further supported by a 2020 report released by the Entertainment Software Association which developed player statistics for the USA and concluded that there are over 214.4 million video game players in the USA (70% children, 64% adults) with a slightly smaller gender gap at 59% male and 41% female players and the average age of the player being 35-44 years.[21]

Cultural sustainability

Culture is without a doubt an important aspect of sustainability in general, whether it is viewed as belonging to the social pillar of sustainable development or more recently forming a separate pillar of its own. Culture has great impact on people's identities, including their mindsets, values, connections to others and to their environment, which in turn have great impact on sustainable development in which all people play their roles. This is affirmed for example by the 2013 UNESCO Hangzhou Declaration. During the congress resulting in this declaration, the Director General of UNESCO Irina Bokova stated that "[c]ulture is precisely what enables

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[20] Morris, Tom. 2020. "Chart of the Week: 4 gaming trends to get excited about in 2020". *Global Web Index.* https://blog.globalwebindex.com/chart-of-the-week/gaming-trends-2020/.

[21] Fitzgerald, Dylan. 2020. "Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry". *Entertainment Software Association*. https://www.theesa.com/esa-research/2020-essential-facts-about-the-video-game-industry/.

sustainability – as a source of strength, of values and social cohesion, self-esteem and participation. Culture is our most powerful force for creativity and renewal."[22]

Culture therefore – whether it takes on the form of religion, traditions, literature or film – has a significant impact on sustainability. For this to happen, culture needs to be kept alive and allowed to evolve along with society. As the focus of this thesis lay on roleplaying video games, it will aim to explore the impact of this particular part of culture on people in regard to cultural sustainability (the sustainability of culture – experiencing, sharing and protecting cultural heritage).

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[22] "The Hangzhou Declaration: Heralding the next era of human development | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization". 2013. *Unesco.Org.* http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/resources/the-hangzhou-declaration-heralding-the-next-era-of-human-development/.

Literature review

In this literature review, the sources are arranged topically, but also with regard to the date of their publication. It is to be noted that reliable written resources concerning the topic of this thesis are still quite scarce and only beginning to appear. This is both due to the relative novelty of the medium of video games and also its stereotypically rather negative, scientifically not acclaimed, reputation, out of which it is still finding its way. Chosen sources deal with research on roleplaying games and shed some light on their nature, value and suitability for being used to access cultural heritage and gain benefits connected to cultural sustainability.

In his 2000 article presenting a qualitative study of multiple roleplaying sessions he conducted, Jerzy Kociatkiewicz noted that there is a great potential "inherent in roleplaying".[23] He pointed out the connection that roleplaying has to mythical narratives – both offer people support in building and enriching their identity, help them understand reality and make them more interested and curious about the world while also engaging their imagination.[24] This connection of the roleplaying games to myths highlights their natural cultural value. Kociatkiewicz's research is focused on classical, non-digital roleplaying games, similar in concept to the well-known Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) games. However, his views are without a doubt extendable to even the newest digital RPGs played today.

Roleplaying games can take many forms and there is only a handful of features that defines them (or at least the vast majority of them). Kociatkiewicz, just like other researchers within the topic, points out the importance of rules.[25] Without rules, the game would not only be less enjoyable for the players, but it would also possibly cease to be a game at all. This is recognized for example by Gonzalo Frasca, who in his 2001 thesis distinguishes between two concepts of 'ludus' or game and 'paidea' or play.[26] For Frasca, ludus is defined by having a chance to win or lose, while paidea is more like the play of children, following a set of

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[23] Kociatkiewicz, Jerzy. 2000. "Dreams of time, times of dreams: Stories of creation from roleplaying game sessions". Studies In Cultures, Organizations and Societies 6 (1): 71. Doi:10.1080/10245280008523538.
[24] (Kociatkiewicz, 2000), 71-86.
[25] Ibid., 72.
[26] Frasca, Gonzalo. 2001. "Videogames of the Oppressed: videogames as a means for critical thinking and debate". Master, Georgia Institute of Technology: 7.

regularities rather than strict rules and not having a winner-loser distinction.[27] Roleplaying games would then by most part fall into the latter category, however – which Frasca also admits – they may involve elements of ludus as well and switch between the two.

In her book Reality is Broken, Jane McGonigal, a game designer and researcher, defines and elaborates on three more core elements that games stand on apart from rules – a goal, a feedback system and voluntary participation.[28] According to McGonigal, all other features (narrative, characters, chance to win, point systems, etc.) are added in "an effort to reinforce and enhance these four core elements."[29] These then are the building principles of roleplaying games, but what is it that they bring to the table that makes them so valuable to their players?

Just like Kociatkewicz, Frasca sees great potential in roleplaying games. In his work he focuses on digital games and their possible positive pull for personal and social change.[30] He demonstrates this point by analysing and applying the features of Augusto Boal's participative theatre (Theatre of the Oppressed, Forum Theatre) to his own design (or rather alterations of already existing designs) of simple digital games (such as The Sims of the Oppressed), each using roleplaying to address and help the player deal with particular issues. Frasca sees digital games as "a tool to understand reality"[31] and facilitate critical thinking and discussion. The core recurring point of his work is that no matter how well a game is designed, it will always be the player who makes their own interpretations, decides the level of interaction and personal investment and draws conclusions and implications. With this being pointed out, Frasca also notes that other than this, players do not usually have much possibility to really co-create games (creation of mods or adjusting the game code are possible but hardly accessible to all players), as they have to move within the game producer's design.[32]

However, as for example a folklorist Ben Gillis argues in his 2011 article dealing with player practice and folklore in the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMO-RPG) World of Warcraft (WoW), having the ability of interpretation and freedom within a well-designed

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[27] (Frasca 2001), 9.
[28] McGonigal, Jane. 2011. Reality is Broken. New York: Penguin Group US: 21.
[29] (McGonigal 2011), 21.
[30] (Frasca 2001), 75.
[31] Ibid., 66.
[32] Ibid., 16.

platform can be greatly beneficial. For Gillis, game designers are "facilitators of folklore"[33], not its creators, but its enablers – they offer the players space and tools to work with, but it is ultimately the players who bring the software to life and use it to create meaning. Gillis points out that even though it is not possible to artificially create and control folklore and culture within RPGs, their existence is desirable for games that want to keep players interested.[34]

Rituals and cultural aspects within RPGs are also of interest to Eric Champion, a professor and UNESCO Chair of Cultural Heritage and Visualisation, who in his work on roleplaying and rituals stressed the connection of roleplay with cultural learning.[35] He argues that the cultural features of roleplaying games have been underestimated and often even merged with their social features without much distinction, which is not the approach they would deserve.[36] The three main concepts his work stands on are worlds, roles and rituals, which computer games feature and in which the cultural value is mainly rooted. Drawing on the previous work of other researchers, Champion sets on the table three defining aspects that an RP world should have – the worlds have to offer "freedom of choice, individuality and complex fate", interaction and conflict between chosen roles and lastly an aspect that lets the players act as "curators of tradition", meaning that they choose what information and values to communicate, and which ones to leave out. Champion goes on to explain that in his view, the establishment of both the cultural and social presence in RPGs is not only limited to multiplayer games where the roles and interactions are perceived and justified by other players. Instead, what is required to create the sense of cultural and social presence is, in Champion's opinion, a sense of "hermeneutic richness, the depth of interpretation available to self-understanding or understanding others through artefacts and other cultural remains."[37] Indeed many games are known to employ a feature known as 'environmental storytelling' which fits this Champion's definition, yet it is not mentioned by him – in environmental storytelling, stories and their context are meant to be discovered, followed and interpreted by the players themselves, while the game only provides them clues to piece the narrative together with. These clues might enrich the main story, but they might also offer small stories that act as extras to make the gameplay more exciting. For

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[33] Gillis, Ben. "An Unexpected Font of Folklore: Online Gaming as Occupational Lore." Western Folklore 70, no. 2 (2011): 166. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23124178.
[34] (Gilllis 2011), 4.
[35] Champion, Erik Malcolm. "Roleplaying and Rituals for Cultural Heritage-Orientated Games." DiGRA Conference (2015): 7.
[36] (Champion 2015), 6.
[37] Ibid., 7.

example, the game series Last of Us is known to employ this type of storytelling with particular success.

 As Champion notes, the computer medium is valuable and fitted for RPGs, as it carries with it "more opportunities to support deeper cultural aspects of role-playing"[38] He concludes that to create a cultural presence within video games is difficult, yet he can see that it could be highly beneficial – for learning about history, cultures and heritage.[39]

In their 2012 study of the browser game Real Lives[40], civic educators Bachen, Raphael and Hernández-Ramos have also focused on the learning potential of roleplaying games. They have conducted their study with the help of 301 high school students and their goal was to find out whether playing a simulation game, where the children made life decisions on behalf of a fictional person from a different part of the world, had helped in developing empathy and feelings of identification with the character. Their work is relevant for this thesis as in the findings of the research one can see not only how impactful roleplaying characters are created, but also some of the potential benefits to be gained from engaging with RPGs. The research has proved all three of the authors' hypotheses – students who played the game showed greater levels of empathy than the control group, they were also more interested in gaining intercultural knowledge and self-identification with a played character strengthened both aforementioned developments.[41] This article has defined several interesting concepts, among them for example the concept of *global empathy* and, elaborating on the definition provided by Paiva et al. in their work of 2005, *character proximity*. *Global empathy* may be viewed as "an important aspect of global citizenship"[42] and it has a close connection to culture[43], being both influenced by it and influencing it. This study by Bachen et al. has proved that playing games where one may take on a role of another character living within a certain culture improves the skill of global empathy, which provides more clarity in understanding both one's own and other cultures and cultivating tolerance towards cultural diversity. The authors' mention of *character proximity* and its importance for the effectivity of the RPGs, stresses how important

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[38] Ibid., 8.
[39] Ibid., 14.
[40] Can be accessed via http://www.educationalsimulations.com
[41] Bachen, Christine M., Pedro F. Hernández-Ramos, and Chad Raphael. 2012. "Simulating REAL LIVES". *Simulation & Gaming* 43 (4): 437-460. Doi:10.1177/1046878111432108.
[42] (Bachen, Hernández-Ramos and Raphael 2012).
[43] Chung, Winnie, Sherilynn Chan, and Tracy G. Cassels. 2010. "The Role of Culture in Affective Empathy: Cultural and Bicultural Differences". Journal of Cognition and Culture 10 (3-4): 309-326. Doi:10.1163/156853710x531203.

representation in games is – players identify easier (which enables them to immerse in games and engage with them more impactfully) with characters that share features with them. Important are both physical characteristics (for younger players especially) and similarities in mentality, emotions or situation the characters find themselves in.

Another paper of utmost relevance to this thesis has been published in 2015 in the Furnace journal by a Bond university (AU) researcher Jakub Majewski.[44] In his paper Majewski not only explores the potential and suitability of roleplaying video games as a carrying medium for cultural heritage content, but he also divides RPGs into four categories (commercial games, serious games, culture-centric games and mods) based on their main focus and describes their benefits and challenges considering the quality of cultural heritage content and sphere of impact. Even though it is clear from his research there is still a lot that can be improved (he notes issues with flattening heritage, authenticity, lack of funds/interest in serious games) to make RPGs an optimal tool for transmitting and conserving cultural heritage, Majewski sums up that "the utility of video games in general, and RPGs in particular, for cultural heritage is no longer a potential possibility. In fact, games are already used for heritage in interesting and diverse ways, as well as making use of heritage for their own purposes."[45]

In 2018 the handbook Role-playing game studies (referenced above) was published. 50 researchers collaborated on it to provide outlooks on the relevance/connections between their various fields and roleplaying. Over 10 different fields are featured here, from psychology to economics, as well as comprehensive and in-depth definitions of different forms of roleplaying. The handbook is an expansive resource on role-playing, mapping out the current state of research on the topic and explaining many key terms and concepts this thesis works with.[46]

Finally, the author would like to include in this literature review a book published most recently by the researcher Michał Mochocki. Even though Mochocki focuses on non-digital forms of roleplaying, namely historical re-enactment, tabletop roleplaying games and live-

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[44] Majewski, Jakub. 2015. "Cultural heritage in role-playing video games: A map of approaches". Furnace Journal, no. 2. https://scholar.google.com.au/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=_KVeYaMAAAAJ&citation_for_view=_KVeYaMAAAAJ:qjMakFHDy7sC.
[45] (Majewski 2015), 12.
[46] Zagal, José Pablo and Sebastian Deterding. Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations, edited by Zagal, José P., Sebastian Deterding. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2018. Doi:10.4324/9781315637532.

action roleplaying (LARP) his work brings up several themes relevant to this thesis and is definitely worth looking at. Mochocki commendably approaches the topic from two angles – from the point of view of heritage studies as well as game studies (using transmedia narratology as his method). Bridging the two disciplines is quite the task since both are interdisciplinary as is. He argues that all three of his points of interest are narrative media in nature, as well as genres of heritage, and he draws parallels between aspects of game immersion and experience of heritage authenticity. Mochocki concludes with mapping out in detail the features specific to each kind of researched roleplaying medium in connection with this immersion/authenticity.[47]

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[47] Mochocki, Michal. 2021. Role-Play as a heritage practice. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group.

Player survey

As a core part of the research for this thesis, an online questionnaire has been constructed. Since the writing of this work takes place during a worldwide pandemic and even more importantly also since the target group of this research has a strong online presence, this has been deemed as the most suitable means of gathering data. The initial intention was to follow the survey up with interviews of willing respondents (many have agreed to do this) to improve the understanding of their viewpoints on the matter, this plan was however not executed in the end, both due to restrictions connected to the pandemic noted before and the unexpectedly high number of responses gathered in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was created in order to find out how – according to their players – are roleplaying games able to serve as a suitable platform for accessing cultural heritage within the medium of video games, what forms does cultural heritage appear in video games (what does 'accessing' it mean for the players), what are the benefits of engaging with cultural heritage in this way and what potential do RPGs have vis-à-vis the field of cultural heritage and its sustainability. The purpose of this questionnaire is then to explore and deepen our understanding of this topic and its implications for the field of cultural heritage with the help of data collected from players and compare the findings with the insights offered by the literature review. What the author attempts to do with this survey is to make the players reflect on cultural heritage and bring their attention and focus to it – while, in turn, collecting their opinions and views to bring the attention of the field of cultural heritage to them and to the potential that engaging with video games has.

Data collection process

The form has been developed using Google Forms (chosen for easy navigation and accessible analysis tools such as built-in graph generators) and released on two social platforms where the author saw best possibility to naturally reach target audience – Reddit (in the r/SampleSize forum thread visited by people interested in taking part in academic research, the survey managed to get attention of many people here, was given numerous positive reviews and a community award which inspired more respondents to answer it) and Facebook (author's

network and two groups gathering video game players). It was open for responses for seven days and has collected a total of 564 answers from respondents all over the world. The target audience for this questionnaire were primarily people who consider themselves video game players, as gaming-related experiences, motivations and perceived values are the focus of this research.

The questionnaire consists of five parts. In the first part, the respondents found a brief introduction of the author and two questions which, when answered, served to provide an introduction of themselves in return (single choice questions). A second part followed, aimed at finding out the respondent's motives for playing games in general (multiple choice questions with write-in options). The third part brought up the topic of roleplaying and asked questions focused on the corresponding genre of games, striving to acquire an understanding on what makes players engage in roleplaying games (multiple choice questions with write-in options). In the fourth and most extensive part, respondents' opinions concerning cultural heritage are collected (weighted scale questions, open-ended questions, yes/no questions). Starting with asking about the respondent's understanding of cultural heritage in general, the questions gradually become more focused on CH within the context of video games. Most of the questions in this part are either open-ended or weighted scale questions with options to elaborate on the chosen values, which allows the respondents to use their own words and answer more freely.[48] The reasoning behind why was a given question asked is provided later on in their analyses.

Data analysis method

In order to analyse the enormous amount of data acquired from the questionnaire, it has been collected into a simple profile matrix[49] using an Excel sheet with horizontal lines belonging to individual respondents and vertical columns sorted by question. To illustrate the results, graphs were generated for each question, except the ones that were posed as open-ended.

[48] Passmore, Cindy, et al. "Guidelines for constructing a survey." FAMILY MEDICINE-KANSAS CITY- 34.4 (2002): 281-286.
[49] Kuckartz, Udo. 2013. Qualitative Text Analysis: A Guide to Methods, Practice and Using Software. London: SAGE Publications. Accessed April 9, 2021. ProQuest E-book Central: 71.
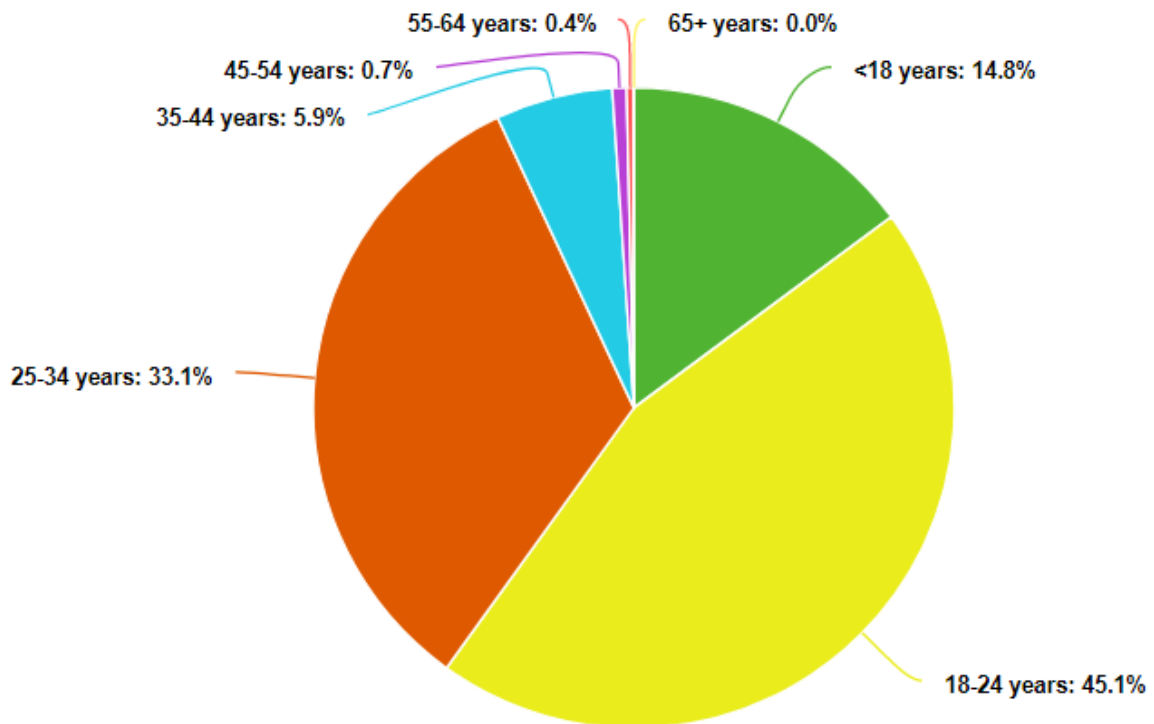
As for the open-ended questions, which were quite plentiful in the questionnaire, a different approach was needed. All the responses were transformed into Word files and divided by question, which made it easier to work with them. Firstly, the author has read through all the answers closely, to reach an understanding of the individual points and determine whether the question has been posed effectively and information learned from the responses is relevant to this paper.

Questions, the responses to which were found irrelevant or overly repetitive, were either omitted from the analysis altogether or only briefly discussed. Then the author would go through the texts once more using manual coding, breaking down each response into general categories, groups and more particular motives, looking for patterns and marking down the scope of the responses to determine which points were talked about most frequently, grasp their variety in order to create a text flow, provide a thematic summary and interpretation for the thesis.[50] In vivo coding (using the original formulations of respondents as categories) was also utilized and when finished, the created categories were widened to group similar meanings.

Respondent demographics

To find out some information about who the respondents to this questionnaire are and what is their connection to video games, the form opens with a couple of simple questions. On the chart below (559 responses) we can see that a majority of responses (78.2%, 437 in total) was given by adults aged 18-34, which aligns with the data samples collected by the sources (Global Web Index 2019, Entertainment Software Association 2020) cited earlier.
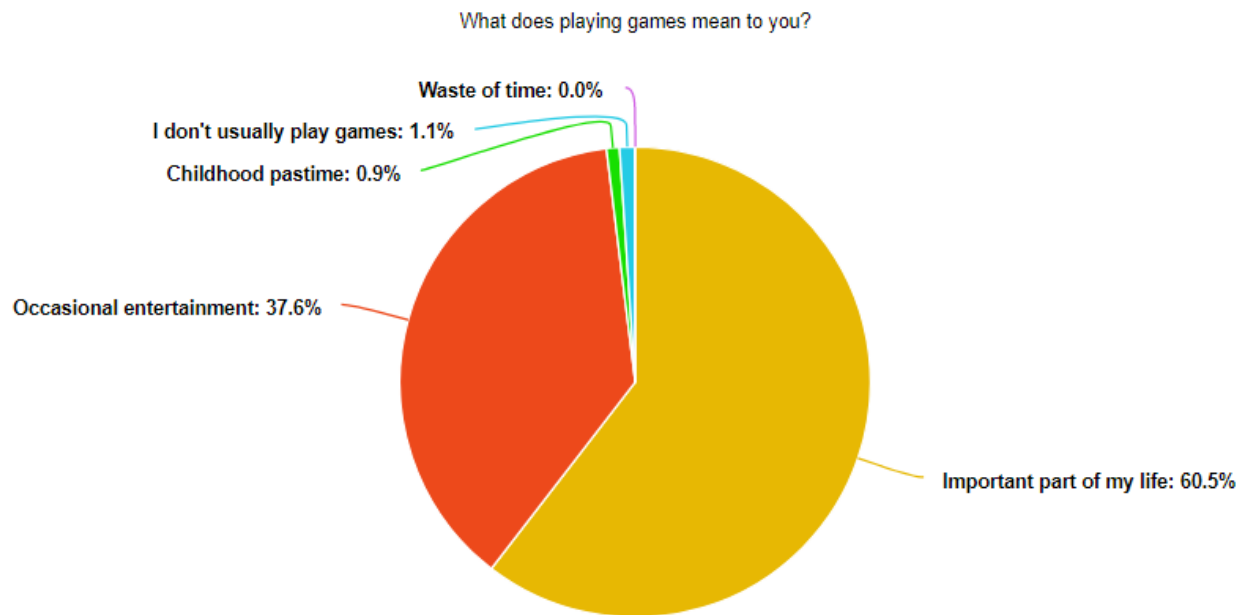
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[50] H. Russell, Bernard. 2011. Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. 5th ed. Lanham: AltaMira Press.

55-64 years: 0.4% 65+ years: 0.0%
45-54 years: 0.7%
35-44 years: 5.9%
<18 years: 14.8%
25-34 years: 33.1%
18-24 years: 45.1%

The respondents were not specifically asked about their nationality, however as many have mentioned it while answering other questions it has become clear that the respondents come from a variety of places, with responses from countries such as for example Germany, Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Russia, USA, Sweden, India, Bangladesh, Portugal and Japan (these countries were specifically named by the respondents). The diversity of the answers is therefore quite wide in this matter.

Video games

In the second section of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to relay their relationship to video games (564 responses). As the questionnaire was primarily intended for respondents who consider themselves gamers, the results are perhaps unsurprising, yet still helpful in painting a more detailed picture of the respondents and estimating the impact video games have on their life. As is illustrated by the chart below, more than a half of the respondents (60.5%, 341 total) consider playing games an important part of their lives, while 37.6% (212 total) of them view it rather as a form of occasional entertainment.

What does playing games mean to you?

Waste of time: 0.0%
I don't usually play games: 1.1%
Childhood pastime: 0.9%
Occasional entertainment: 37.6%
Important part of my life: 60.5%

The last question in this section was posed to understand the motives of the respondents for playing games – "Why do you play games?" (564 responses). This was a multiple-choice question with the option of write-in answers (not shown on the graph). Most respondents found suitable options already provided, but several of them offered different motives as well – playing games to experience them as an art form, to create something, to have a sense of instant gratification, to roleplay characters, to relax, to stand up to a challenge, out of nostalgia, as a part of one's job or simply to 'kill time'.

Almost all respondents have agreed that playing games has an entertainment value for them, however many also feel that playing helps them step out of their own world for a moment, enjoy stories conveyed in games and develop characters other than themselves. These results also show that playing games has significant social values. It is worth pointing out that the answers to this question are almost identical with the responses to another question posed later in the survey inquiring about the benefits people can gain from playing games which seem to mirror player's reasons for playing. Storytelling, as is visible from the graph below and clear from several following response summaries, always occupies an important place in gaming and is one of the main reasons video games are culturally significant. Stories, as pointed out earlier when talking about roleplaying, are an important part of our culture, they have always been used as a means of sharing knowledge and experience, to remember, explain the world, find our place in it and develop our own identities. Video games, it seems, are valued as a new

medium for storytelling, now more immersive and interactive, yet still with thousands of years of tradition, which make it a deep-rooted part of humanity.
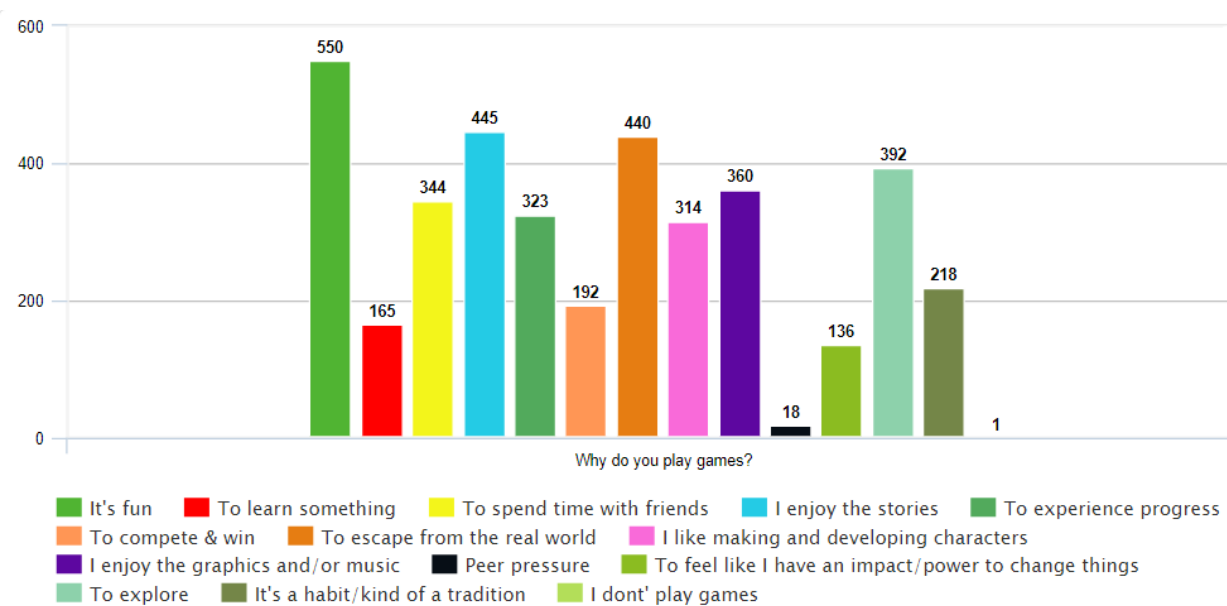
Why do you play games? (564 responses)

Roleplaying in games

The third section consists of three questions specifically about roleplaying games, which is the particular game genre this thesis focuses on. It is important to ask about roleplaying games to check whether the values that literature connects them with are relevant to the players. We begin with inquiring after the players' motives for playing RPGs, asking "If you play roleplaying games, why do you play them?". This is a multiple-choice question, and 564 answers were collected. A write-in option was included to ensure that all the respondents interested in answering were able to express their point of view. The following graph shows the response ratios for the pre-made options.
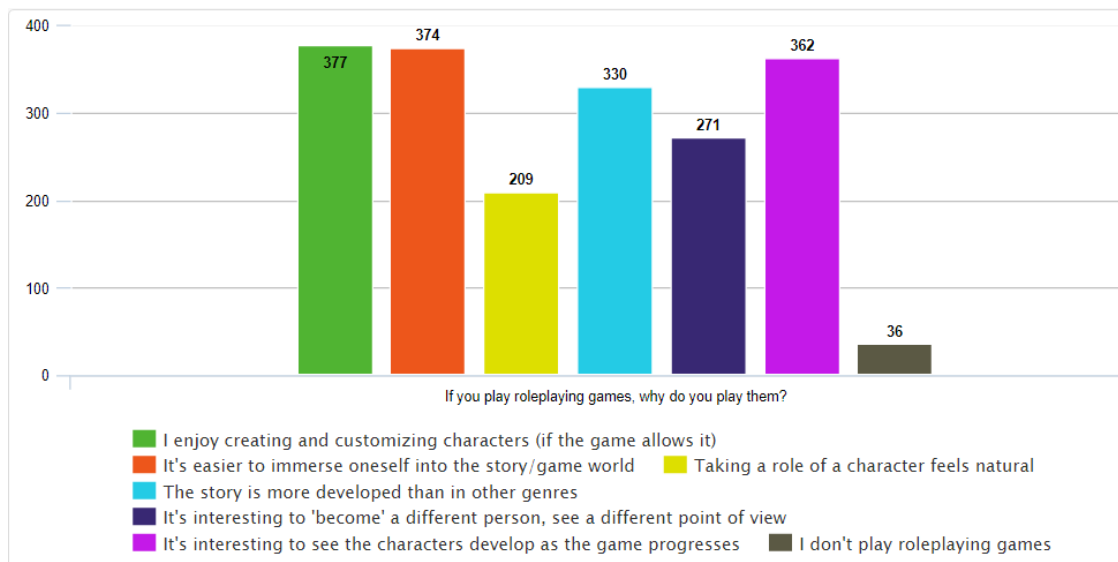
If you play roleplaying games, why do you play them? (564 responses)

As we can see from the chart, most of the options got quite high scores, with only a small number of respondents stating they do not play games of this genre. Now we can see that a majority of players who have filled this questionnaire out, do play roleplaying games, which points out not only the high level of popularity of these games, but also enables us to see that their responses will be relevant to this thesis.

Thanks to this question it is visible that agency and personalization (green), immersion (orange), storytelling (blue), acquiring a different point of view (dark blue) and character development/sense of progress (purple) are indeed important aspects of why people choose to play roleplaying games – they are not just extras, but significant parts of the gaming interaction. 30 people chose to use the write-in option and have mentioned other reasons for playing RPGs, among the most frequently mentioned ones was that playing games of that genre gives them a sense of having an impact on the (in-game) world (5 responses), they enjoy exploring the game environment (2), creating a backstory and a personality for their character (2), breaking real-life norms and experimenting with other selves (2), disguise self to avoid assumptions of others (1), etc.

In the following question, the players were – perhaps similarly to the first question, yet in more detail – asked what does roleplaying a character mean to them. They were given a beginning of a sentence and asked to finish it using multiple-choice options and a write-in space. 555 respondents have answered.
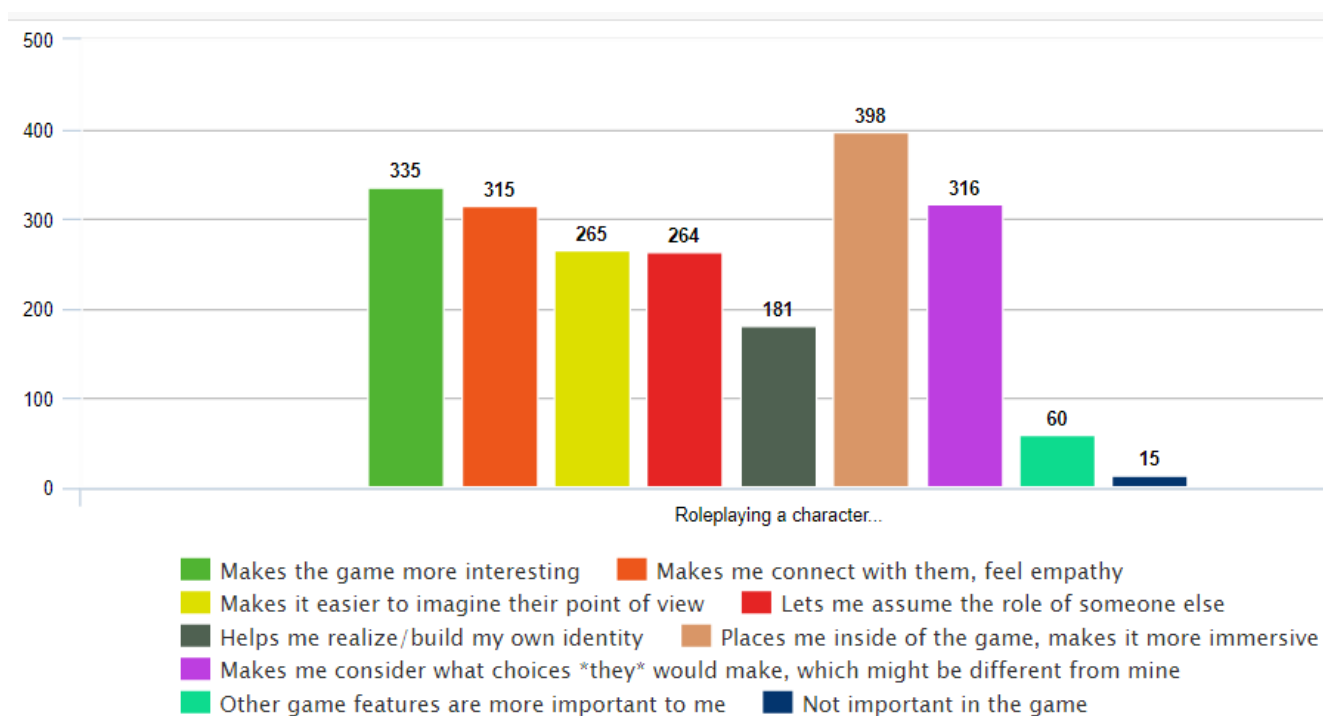
Roleplaying a character... (555 responses)

This graph confirms that roleplaying as a mechanic supports immersion (tan) into the game/story, which is valued by a great number of the respondents. Roleplaying a character is also seen to make the game overall more interesting (green) and even more importantly as a means to practice empathy and approach situations from a point of view different from one's own (purple, orange, yellow).

If your character dies in a game... (556 responses)

The last question in this section was posed to make the respondents reflect on/realize how connected they usually feel to the character they are playing in a game. This was a very simple question aimed to find out the level of immersion into the game via a character and to also somewhat hint at the ratio of players who are able to identify with the character (even if only on this low level) and immerse themselves into their situation (character proximity). 556 respondents have answered. Character proximity – which, as we can see from the chart, is to some degree experienced by 92.6% (515) of the addressed players – is key to fully unlocking

the potential of roleplaying games (as noted earlier in the review of the work of Paiva et al.), especially considering developing and practicing empathy.
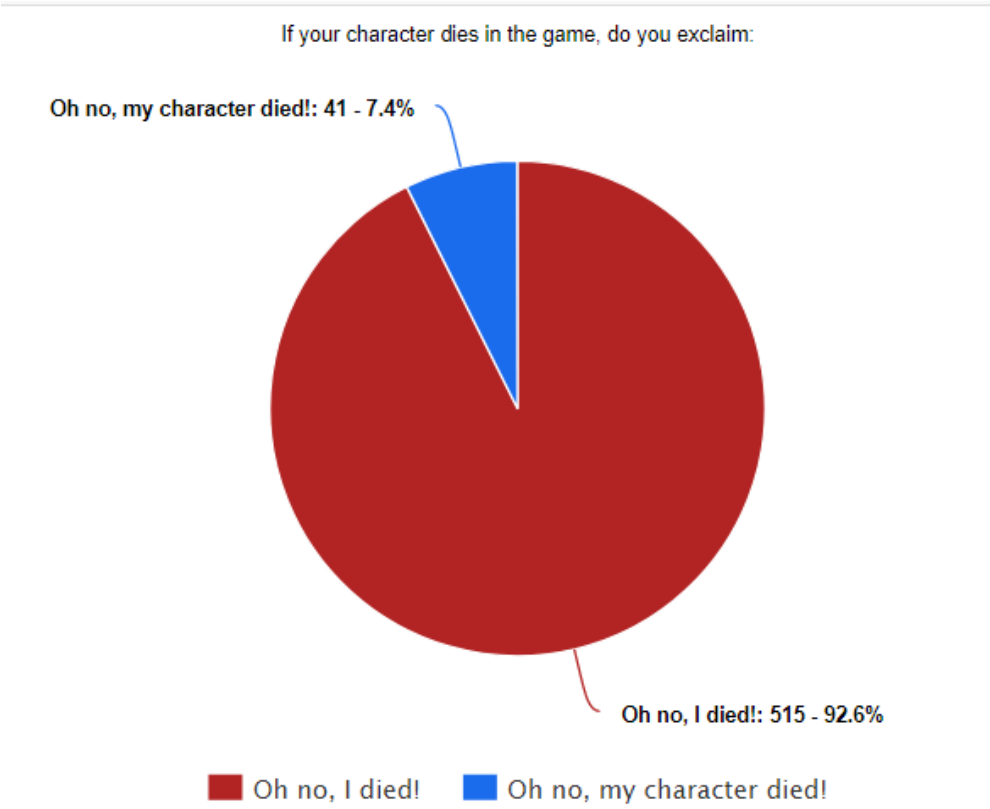
Cultural heritage in video games

What do you yourself consider as "cultural heritage"? (461 answers)

/A word-cloud visualisation of the themes in responses to the question/

In order to develop an understanding of what do the respondents imagine under the term "cultural heritage", an open-ended question is posed, the format of which does not limit the responses and gives the respondents space to think about what meaning does the term really have for them personally and sets the stage for following questions. A brief open explanation of the vastness of the term was provided, to serve the readers as inspiration and affirmation that no answer to this question is incorrect. Several respondents were satisfied with this short description and have written that they agree with it without any further comments. Only a handful has stated that they do not know the term or feel no relationship to cultural heritage. However, a vast majority of respondents has chosen to provide their own take on the definition. The aim of the following text is to provide an outline of the responses, an insight of how the respondents understand cultural heritage, which is vital for contextualisation of the other responses to the questionnaire.

Each response is original and differently nuanced, yet a majority of them share similar thoughts, such as in the examples found below.

"Myths, traditions, architecture, anything exclusive to a local culture that they developed or carried down from their ancestors."
"I consider cultural heritage as beliefs and traditions and culture that are passed down."
"I would call it things that are passed generationally because of a larger group affiliation. Thus, things like language, mannerisms, and expectations are included with things like traditions and customs."
"Customs, traditions, folklore, ancestry."
"A certain set of values, ideas and views that pass on from one generation to another."
"History of culture."

Cultural heritage according to these – most common – responses is a set of both material and immaterial things and concepts, out of which people often chose to name several examples yet admit that there are many more. Traditions (150 responses) were mentioned most frequently, followed by language, art, history, stories and food. Modern aspects of culture, such as the internet, podcasts or memes also appeared. Respondents have often pointed out a 'scale' of things that may fall into this definition, noting that it may consist of quite grand concepts and

generally valued objects, yet also include very small, perhaps more personal things, as the response cited below captures.

"[…] Depending on a lot of factors it can range from ancient texts to the recipe that your grandma makes the same way her great grandparents did. It's all of that kind of stuff, the historical museum stuff, and the personal histories and traditions passed down in families. […]"

Another important aspect of cultural heritage as seen by the respondents and noted in the examples above is that it consists of something of value (cultural value, part of daily life, etc.), which is passed down through generations, inherited from ancestors. Some respondents elaborated on this further, most often concluding that this set of values is likely to be specific for a certain group of people – this could be a family, distant ancestors, a community tied to a geographical place or to shared interests, a nation or other kinds of societal groups. Cultural heritage is often defined as the most relevant and valuable when it is personal.

As is apparent from numerous responses, one person may belong to and feel connected and influenced by several 'heritage circles' at once – personal cultural heritage is then most often perceived as an amalgamation of values held by various groups an individual counts themselves into and develops along, gaining meaning in accordance with the proximity the individual feels towards a given group.

Many respondents also chose to describe their cultural heritage by specifying their nationality, religion or sharing some details about their upbringing, family or home.

"Christian American."
"Indian."
"A kid from a broken family and a podunk farm town."
"My cultural heritage consists of our ancestors struggle to live in a place divided between two nations, taken from ourselves. Also, we like to cuss, like a lot. And we have beautiful doors, gates and traditional clothing."
"Love of snow/nature/hardship from the perspective of Scandinavia/Denmark."

A small number of responses also point out the connection between cultural heritage and common national stereotypes, as the following example shows.

"Ultimately it boils down to national stereotypes. While exaggerations, they do tend to hit on some key behaviours and quirks many of us have at least in some part. So, seeing how the "others" perceive your culture can be enlightening, even if it's negative. Cultural heritage is about acknowledging the stereotypes and deciding to either embrace that which makes you distinct and unique, and work towards bettering the parts that aren't as favourable, but still present a part of your cultural identity."

One aspect of cultural heritage that many people consider key, visible from the examples above, but also specifically named by other respondents, is its ability to differentiate one group from another, its originality. Many respondents also note that cultural heritage does in their opinion influence the formation of one's identity or the identity of a particular group of people, for some respondents this is one of its defining features, as we may see in the following responses.

"Things passed from elders or along family lines, but more than just traditions. They form a piece of identity for the person."
"[…] as mentioned, historical artifacts, rune stones and such, affect how we perceive our identity; if my ancient great-great-great-grandparents plundered villages (maybe a bit extreme), drank milk from horses (the Mongols), etc. I may find unity with others who have the same ancestors."
"Cultural heritage is the things and ideas that inform your cultural identity: the language you speak, the foods you eat, the type of house you live in, the religion you follow, and a thousand other large and small things that influence you and people like you. Different types of cultural heritage can overlap and coexist in one person, for example, racial heritage, national heritage, and the heritage of your identities (for example, GSRM/LGBTQIA+). Similarly, heritage from one identity can override another-- for example, an ethnically Indigenous person in the United States who only learns English and does not learn their tribal language."

A great number of respondents (as mentioned earlier and visible from the themes visualisation) perceived cultural heritage as tied to the past, to history. These ties may be so strong that

cultural heritage is simply described as "history of culture" by some respondents. It may also be viewed as a legacy, a way of remembering, yet, as some respondents point out, it is important to realize that we interpret it via our present gaze, via the values and views we hold now, which might cause us to put certain parts of it into the spotlight while leaving the unfitting ones in the dark.

"As with culture but, it is restricted to the past. What is defined as Cultural Heritage depends on how we right now put emphasis on past cultural elements. That is, the current time and our current day perspectives decide which things go into the cultural heritage."

"[...] It could be further argued that we do normative distinctions about ""good"" or ""bad"" elements in the cultural heritage, as well as leave out things that may well be part of it. [...]"

Finally, many respondents chose to comment on the nature of cultural heritage, which they most often characterized by being inherently and exclusively human, often this was the only feature provided, used to encompass the wide variety of meanings cultural heritage may have.

"Anything people of that culture make or come up with."

"Creations by people that had historical value and were appreciated by people."

"Anything made with human input or creativity is a part of our cultural heritage. Not all of it is worth keeping and showcasing, but it all says something about our people and society at large. The pre-planned sprawling luxury subdivisions in my city tell a story of wealth disparity. The sidewalk art outside my local hospital tells a story of gratitude. My niece's crayon drawing of herself as a queen tells a story of childhood imagination and dreams."

Summary

This question served to turn the respondents' minds to cultural heritage as a concept, to have them recollect and express what this term – often misunderstood or viewed as overly academical or perhaps too wide – means to them. Rather than providing the players with a premade definition, the author chose to ask them for theirs. The diversity of meanings cultural heritage has for the addressed players can be seen in the word cloud visualisation formed from these results and featured at the beginning of this chapter. Knowing the respondents' view on cultural heritage not only helps us better understand responses to the following questions, it

also shows us how cultural heritage is viewed within the targeted social circles. The answers show us that a great number of video game players have a developed understanding of cultural heritage – reading this chapter provides us with a comprehensible and far-reaching definition of cultural heritage and its various aspects – which in itself is a truly heartening find.

Is it important to you? In what way? (450 responses)

To follow up on the previous question, the respondents were asked whether cultural heritage, as they defined it previously, was important to them and to elaborate on their answers. A simplification of the results shows that the majority of the answers (291) were to some extent positive, but there was also a significant number of negative responses (110), with rest of the voices in the middle. A couple of respondents have misunderstood the question, which perhaps points to its overly brief formulation, which would have benefited from further specification that this is a general question, not yet one focusing specifically on video games. If we look at the responses closer, it also becomes clear that perhaps this question would have been more effectively posed in the form of a rating scale question, as a nuanced scale on which nearly all of the results could fit emerges when studying them. However, the open question format allowed respondents to express themselves more freely and provide explanations and comments concerning their perspective on the matter. Let us go through some of the answers to illustrate the wide range of standpoints of the respondents.

The first group of respondents is the one that would rank cultural heritage with the highest degree of importance. These responses often came from people who were familiar with the concept on a more detailed level, have studied it or work within the field. Cultural heritage is perceived by these respondents as a key to understanding the world or even a core part of their identity and life, such as the citation below expresses.

"Yes, immensely. Cultural heritage defines my values today and the premises of my life, what I think is good, bad, possible, or inappropriate. It's the strength that stems from me and the chains that hold me down."

They relayed that it is important for them to understand their own roots as well as the origins of other groups/cultures, which is often motivated by specific interest (archaeology, genealogy, etc.), relationships to their family and connections to their culture/country, sense of pride, one's beliefs, a wish to learn from history (from both positive and negative aspects of it) and inform the future about our time, to find one's place within society/to develop a sense of belonging, to improve one's grasp on diversity, or simple curiosity about the world. Social motives, such as the previously mentioned sense of belonging, inclusion, acceptance, and possibility to be understood had a strong representation.

Other respondents have attributed a slightly less vital value to cultural heritage as they perceive it, while remaining on the positive side of the scale. These respondents see cultural heritage, or in some cases only particular parts of it – such as observing certain holidays, visiting museums/sights, raising flags, admiring architecture, following traditional recipes, telling stories, etc. – as a part of their daily lives. It is not as essential to them, yet they see it as an element that enriches their lives and would be missed should it disappear. Some respondents even stated that although they themselves might not see any significant value in cultural heritage, they are aware that it is something that is 'supposed to be important' since other people think it is and have taught them so – it is not their personal value, but one they merely see as a generally recognized one. A couple others noted that it does not matter whether they think it important or not, since cultural heritage envelops and may influence us anyway, intentionally or not.

A significant amount of the respondents leaning more towards the negative side of the scale said that no, their own cultural heritage is not particularly important to them, however, what they are interested in/enjoy/value, is learning about the cultures of others. They view cultural heritage as interesting rather than important per se.

Respondents who have answered this question negatively without any exceptions noted, have in multiple cases explained their standpoint by writing that they are an individualistic or a progressive person, which points to that cultural heritage may be perceived as something that opposes this, a concept with strong ties to the past/community rather than to the future/individual. It is crucial to realize that while some people say that cultural heritage helps them develop their own identities, others prefer to separate themselves from it as they may

view it as a burden rather than a gift. This can be often (but not exclusively) the case when one's core beliefs clash with those connected with their cultural heritage – an example of this is given by one of the respondents, who relays that what would be typically seen as their heritage has strong ties to slavery and racism, which they do not wish to praise or justify by celebrating their cultural heritage which only succeeds in making them feel guilt and therefore they have built their identity on actively disconnecting themselves from it.

However, disconnection or uninterest in cultural heritage can stem from a wide variety of other reasons or decisions not necessarily tied to negative heritage. Among the ones mentioned by the respondents to this questionnaire being for example a feeling of 'not having' any heritage (which was often interestingly followed by the respondents stating that they are 'white', 'American', 'British', which points out to a stigma of Westerners perceiving themselves/being pushed into seeing themselves as heritage-less).

Summary

This follow-up question strove to make the respondents elaborate on the value of cultural heritage identified by them earlier. A scale emerges from this response collection, with positives slightly outnumbering the negatives. Players who price cultural heritage highly view it as an important part of their identities and often deliberately seek ways to engage with it, others view it as something that enriches the world and although not vital for them, its input is still valued. In the middle of the scale, we find responses that point out the inevitability of cultural heritage – us not being able to live untouched by it, whether we like it or not – stating their potential opinions would therefore be pointless. On the negative side of the scale, we see responses dismissing the importance of their own heritage but attributing value to learning about other cultures different from their own. There are also respondents who view their own traditional cultural heritages as negative and therefore build their own identities on actively contradicting them – which then might be seen as them building their own cultural heritage, imbued with their own values and torn from the obsolete past ones.

Link between playing video games and cultural heritage values

As we can see from the answers to the previous questions, majority of the respondents have been able to identify a certain set of values they attribute to cultural heritage. The first question of the survey to inquire about the connection the respondents see between video games and cultural heritage asks them whether they find some of the values, which they have previously identified as cultural heritage values, in video games as well. 493 answers were collected, the respondents were given simple options of yes or no.

So far, the respondents have been inspired by the questionnaire to form their opinion and realize their relationship to video games and cultural heritage separately – it is only now, in this part of the questionnaire, that these are put together and examined as two merging concepts/worlds.

As the chart below illustrates, most respondents (347 in total) decided that video games do share certain values with cultural heritage, while the rest (146) responded negatively.
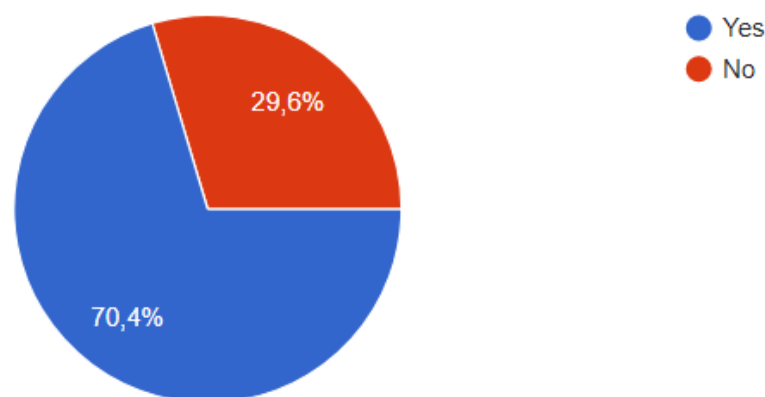
Do you find some of these values in video games as well? (493 responses)

Here, to avoid losing track of what values exactly are we speaking of, a follow-up open-ended question has been posed, asking the respondents who have chosen the affirmative to provide a brief example of how the values in question manifest in the game. 309 respondents have offered examples/comments, mostly from their own personal experience with playing games.

Some of the provided examples were very specific, describing situations, characters, etc. from particular games, while others were more general.

Three categories of values arose while closely reading through the answers to this question, showing us which roles does cultural heritage appear in within video games. These are: real-world cultural heritage, fictional/created cultural heritage and social values.

Real-world cultural heritage

A great number of respondents have chosen to talk about the ability of video games to present real cultural heritage that has its origins in the offline world. They pointed out that various games have been able to re-create and let the player engage with (more or less) historically accurate depictions of past cultures, environments, and lives. In connection to the cultural heritage values, they have identified earlier in the questionnaire, the players have especially highlighted their appreciation of being able to see/interact with historical architecture in games, depictions of both known historical personalities and ordinary people's lives in a given era and diverse historical cultures with everything that belongs to them, such as historical music, art, traditions, crafts, skills, etc. Some respondents have also mentioned that playing games that offer a high degree of historical accuracy/immersion makes it possible for the players to 'participate in' or 'witness' historical events or hardships of life from a safe space, which then allows for better understanding of those or even a sense of a connection with the people from the past who have witnessed them in reality – these features/possibilities of games are highly reminiscent of those offered by in-person historical roleplaying/living history re-enactment, as mentioned before in the definitions chapter.

Several players have also mentioned that playing certain games which implement real-world history makes them feel connected to their ancestors – one respondent for example noted that playing the game Red Dead Redemption 2 helps them understand the harsh lives their settler ancestors led on the American Frontier, while another shared that according to a family legend their ancestors were pirates and founders of a certain village, later destroyed by the Spanish navy, whose history was interpreted in the game Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag so faithfully it brought their grandmother, the keeper of the story, to tears.

Real-world cultural heritage in video games is not focused only on depicting the past, but also on depicting a variety of different cultures – past or present, which the players of the game have a chance to experience and learn about. Cultures in games are identified for example by appearances of the people and the environment, but also by the depiction/interpretation of traditional events, art, shared values and – most importantly – storytelling. Myths were identified as one of the greatest inspirations for many games that the respondents found impactful – several players for example mentioned the way The Witcher game series works with Slavic myths, Celtic and Norse mythology in Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice or for example Greek and Norse myths at the core of the God of War game series.

Fictional cultural heritage

However, real-world cultural heritage in games is in most cases supplemented with varying degrees of fiction. These two – real-world heritage and fictional heritage created for the game, often mix, but in many cases the first one is just a distant inspiration to the latter one, which may take some elements/mechanisms from it, but in the end creates something different, entirely fantastical. Video game worlds are often inhabited by fictional peoples/creatures, and to make these worlds (and characters in them) functional, believable and interesting, cultural heritage along with history is created for them and implemented in-game. As a couple of respondents stated, cultural elements help bring the stories in games to life, and they are an important part of quality world-building. For example, games like The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim or World of Warcraft were frequently named by the respondents for having well-build fictional cultural heritages – in both games there are 10 or more different playable races with unique histories, characteristics, appearance and both worlds were built with extensive lore that the players uncover in the course of the game (and from additional materials outside of the game, such as books, online wikis, etc.). This can be done by talking to "people" (NPCs), listening to stories, reading in-game texts, taking part in quests or merely observing and exploring the world, witnessing events, politics, taking in art, music, landscape, language, fashion etc. – much like in the real-world. While interaction with real-world cultural heritage in games might bring to mind historical re-enactments, fictional CH in games has a similar real-life parallel as well – live action roleplaying (LARP), which often includes fictional themes and inspirations.

Similarly to a book, film or a theatre play, fictional cultural heritage has an incredible ability to – as several respondents have stated – become a mirror to the real-world and its society. The players have brought up that even in games with a fictional setting they are able to find relatable characters, use their knowledge of the (in-game) world/lore to inform their (in-game) decisions, see how culture shapes the world, how diverse character backgrounds affect their behaviours, etc. Games may even use fictional setting to explore problematic real-world topics (injustice, oppression, etc.) – as is illustrated by one respondent's comment on notable racism between two fictional races (salarian and krogan) in the popular sci-fi game series Mass Effect, which is shown to stem from the vast difference of their cultures and a history of conflicts – or even serve to criticize certain cultures, such as another answer mentions when describing the action-adventure series Grand Theft Auto as a "a mockery and parody of western society".

What many responses point out (to some extent echoing the points made by Frasca and Gillis mentioned earlier) is that a game is always impacted and informed by its creator's culture, standpoints/mindsets and biases, it may into some degree reflect the real world, yet this always happens through its developers' eyes, which is important to keep in mind. Video games, just like other forms of storytelling and art are interpretative and therefore should be taken as such.

Respondents have also frequently mentioned empathy and compassion as values often present (or available as an option) in games – several of them mentioned being put in a moral dilemma or voluntarily choosing to go against simple gaming mechanics (to get most points, to win) in order to behave more empathetically or morally. The game series Dishonored has been mentioned a couple of times in relation to this, respondents have noted that in this game it is possible to choose not to kill any other characters, yet it makes the game much more difficult to beat. Similar theme is known to appear in the game Vampyr, where the player may kill civilians (to gain power) or help them, expending their own resources and not gaining much else than moral high ground.

Social values

Social values, such as evoking a sense of belonging, sharing experience with others, bonding with family and friends, connecting people, creating common ground and discussion topics, are commonly mentioned as well. Games have an important place in many of the respondent's lives (as we know from the introductory questions) and so they share examples of how they help them create and deepen social connections. A couple of respondents commented that playing games in itself has become a special kind of their families' cultural heritage and described how gaming as an interest was passed to them and how they pass/plan to pass it further to a younger generation. Another respondent points out that the culture of video games impacts those who have been brought up playing them by giving them a 'gaming instinct' (naturally understanding and assuming basic game mechanics) and making them familiar with gaming language. More generally, respondents also often see games as a medium with significant impact on the worldview of players and recognize its formative ability.

Other values and aspects that the players find in both cultural heritage and video games include courage, integrity, aesthetics, respect for elders, yearning for freedom and justice, sense of threat (for example in games depicting dying or post-apocalyptic civilisations), exploration, immersion into culture, roleplaying, seasonal events, helping others, sense of pleasure, joy, finding representation, self-expression and nostalgia.

Summary

The answers to these two questions bring insight into whether and what cultural heritage values do players think are present in video games, what is the role of CH there and in what forms do players encounter it. The responses are sorted into three main categories for better clarity – real-world cultural heritage, fictional heritage and social values. As we can see here, respondents register those various values and topics connected to cultural heritage transcend into and manifest themselves within the medium of video games, which therefore indicates that it is possible for players who engage with games to engage with these values and topics as well. Cultural heritage can appear in video games in a variety of ways, players may for example interact with virtual models of real-world built heritage, learn about history and culture (both real and fictional, inspired by real-world heritage) from diverse modes of storytelling in games,

enjoy aesthetics, music, interact with political and societal models, practice compassion and empathy, develop cultural curiosity, etc. Players have also identified numerous social values that place video games into an important position within our cultural heritage, such as forming communities, connecting people, passing on skills and knowledge to younger generations and so on. The role of cultural heritage in video games is to make them work for people – to make them not only enjoyable, but also more deeply valuable, significant and impactful.

Are games a valid medium to access CH? (532 responses)

All of this said, however, the nature and history of the video game medium still has to be taken into the account. As pointed out before, games have not been commonly seen as the most reliable or serious platform in general and even though cultural heritage may be present, this might not equal to games being a good way of engaging with it. A question was posed, to find out whether players think games valid for the purpose of accessing cultural heritage, and as we can see from the graph below, 89.7% (477) of the respondents do, while only 10.3% (55) chose to reply negatively. A vast majority of respondents see video games as a sound, credible means of engaging with the cultural heritage content in them. The next question is aimed on better understanding the benefits of this medium, understanding what is it that makes it valid.
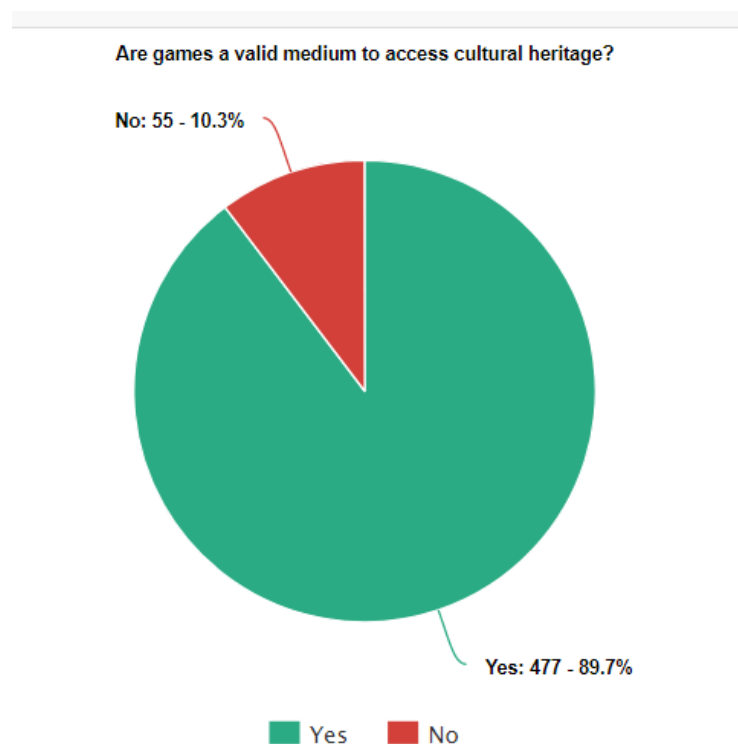
Are games a valid medium to access cultural heritage? (532 responses)

What benefits do you think games bring people who play them? (437 responses)

The expectations for this question were high, however it is to be admitted that it would have been better posed as a multiple-choice question, as it is quite wide and the responses to it, while interesting and valuable, are general and not revealing much in connection to the topic of the thesis. The main point that the result analysis of this question found, is that video games are a medium fully comparable to other media like books, films, art, music, theatre, etc. with a layer of added features and benefits. It takes inspiration from older media, brings innovation and elevation.

Majority of the players recognize games as a form of entertainment, something that primarily brings them joy and happiness (166 mentions), which is of course quite unsurprising when talking about games. What is more interesting is that 116 respondents have stated that playing is a form of temporary escape from reality for them. Art in general is also sometimes described as a form of escapism, a diversion, and seeing this possibility present in gaming helps us understand its value to the players. The other three most often mentioned benefits are socializing (189), mind broadening (149) and relaxation (100). Many respondents state that these benefits are much easier to access in video games than for example while watching a movie or reading a book. As one respondent points out, a game, with its interactivity, "engages you in a way that passive media could never hope to achieve. If I don't do anything, nothing happens. Film and TV "feeds" me, games invite me to play along." Instead of simply consuming content, the players have agency (41 mentions), games engage their critical thinking/problem solving skills (53), offer them cognitive challenge (35), give them a sense of progress and achievement (36). Concerning all these features and tying it to the escapism mentioned earlier, one of the respondents called video games an "idealized form of work", which numerous others have supported stating that progress, motivation and accomplishment are much more noticeable and fleshed out in games than in reality. Agency and interactivity along with immersion (39) are what games bring to elevate the benefits of classical entertainment media.

This question was not explicitly connected to the topic of cultural heritage and cultural sustainability and the benefits connected to those concepts, yet many were mentioned spontaneously by the respondents. Apart from the ones already noted, the examples of these

include: inspiring and sharing creativity (58), acquiring different points of view/understanding other people's mind sets (50), strengthening empathy towards others (30), engaging with storytelling (30), self-exploration and development (24), broadening one's view on different cultures (23), learning about tolerance and morality (11), practicing new languages (9) and increasing awareness of reality (6).

Critical thinking, communication, creativity and collaboration were all mentioned above as potential benefits of playing video games. It is perhaps interesting to note that these four are known to be the so-called 4 C's, a skillset deemed to be essential for teaching and learning in the 21st century.[51]

Summary

Respondents have pointed out that video games are a medium generally comparable to other popular media, while also being innovative and bringing something new to the table. Games benefit players by entertaining them, helping them escape reality, socialize, broaden their minds and relax. Games differ from the other media by offering the player agency, immersion, interaction and cognitive challenge, hence improving their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which many of the respondents value. Games are also a platform that inspires creativity, sharing of creations, acquiring different points of views, improving empathy, engaging with storytelling and one's own or different cultures, and aids in self-exploration and development.

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[51] Chiruguru, Suresh Babu. 2020. "The Essential Skills of 21st Century Classroom (4Cs)". Doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.36190.59201.

Do you think gaming can help improve players' tolerance towards others/other cultures? (545 answers collected)

As pointed out by Alexander O. Karpov in his 2017 article[52], tolerance is one of the principles of cultural sustainability. Therefore, when researching the advantages that video games offer their players in regard to cultural heritage, it was decided to inquire about it in the survey. As we can see from the graph below, majority (74%) of respondents answered affirmatively (220 votes for 'rather yes' and 183 for 'considerably'), which points to games having a great potential for improving player's tolerance towards other people and other cultures. To elaborate on this result, an open-ended question was posed, the analysis of which follows after the illustration.

Do you think gaming can help improve players' tolerance towards others/other cultures?
545 odpovědí
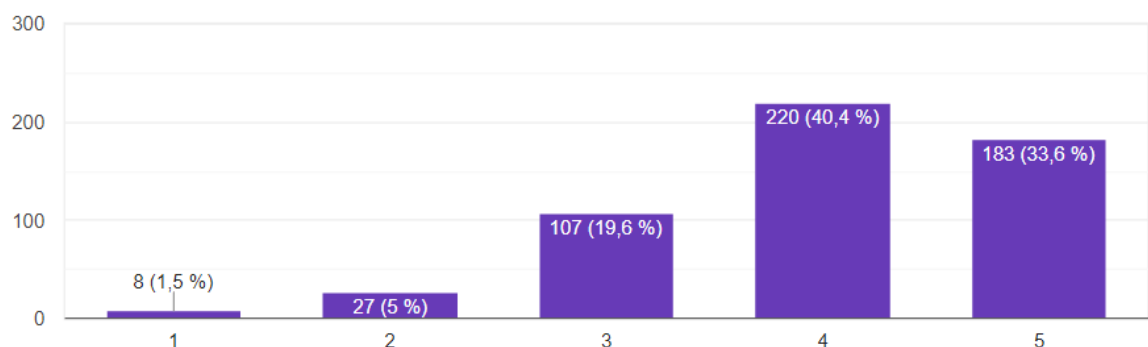
If yes, how do you think this happens? (398 responses)

Out of 545, 398 respondents offered an elaboration on their chosen answer. And even though the graph simply shows positives definitely dominating over the negatives, the follow-up question helps us unravel much more about the respondents' reasoning, conditions and nuances in their answers and allows us to understand this topic in depth.

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[52] Karpov, Alexander O. 2017. "Dissonance Tolerance as a New Principle of the Cross-cultural Sustainability". Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 237: 728. Doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2017.02.113.

The means most frequently noted by the respondents (119 mentions) to support tolerance towards other cultures is exposure to them. This is well captured by one of the respondents, who explains that "[…] games with an international outlook like Overwatch include diverse characters who offer an (admittedly limited and somewhat caricatured) insight into different parts of the world. The Assassin's Creed series has been exploring the mythologies of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Scandinavia in recent years. Gaming, by allowing interaction with these different cultures helps remove barriers to understanding, […]" In roleplaying games, players are exposed to various cultures in many ways and forms, it can be through the environment the game is set in, quests and stories, art, music, meeting other non-player characters, etc. It can be also done via the player's own in-game character. As the respondents have pointed out, roleplaying a character (52 mentions) – or as many respondents chose to put it 'stepping into someone else's shoes' – also has the potential to improve one's tolerance and interest in other cultures. This can be, according to the players, more specifically done by developing and practicing empathy (64) whether towards the played character or other characters one meets in-game.

Another important factor named by the respondents is immersion, which seems to play a key role in how impactful games are to their players. Immersing oneself (or self-insertion, similar to roleplaying although not entirely identical) into a different point of view has been mentioned by 84 players.

The next frequently mentioned means of supporting tolerance in games is gaining knowledge about a given culture (57) which one of the respondents highlighted to be the "first step to build tolerance", while another eloquently stated that "knowledge and experience are the silver bullets to bigotry and hatred". Learning about other cultures from games is connected to exposure, but it is perhaps more impactful, as simple exposure may not necessarily lead to gaining knowledge. In relation to learning from games, game content sparking interest in learning more was mentioned (21), along with learning by play (15), learning that other cultures are similar to one's own (11), and games being a safe environment to learn and try new things (9).

Empathy, as mentioned before, is a reoccurring theme in the answers to this question, however it extends past the player's own character and NPCs – meeting real people (in online RPGs) from other countries was noted 46 times as being the driver for tolerance building, learning and gaining interest.

Games have been also said to support tolerance by normalizing diversity (20), helping to build open-mindedness (16), getting to experience stories (16) and challenges/limitations of others (8).

However, for games to be truly beneficial to their players, the respondents set multiple conditions. Many of them stated that while games have a potential to have a positive impact (in improving tolerance, but also generally), this depends on whether the cultures in them are portrayed positively and accurately (33), which allows for positive experience with in-game characters to transfer into real life (9). 29 respondents aptly noted that any impacts depend on the particular game – which needs to be well-designed (21) – and the player, who needs to be open-minded and want to learn (12),

Balancing out the optimism about the potential of video games were also respondents who cautioned against their negative impacts (55). A wide array of negative aspects that could work against tolerance and learning was identified, with topics such as stereotypical representation and developer bias (13), negative portrayal of cultures (5), exclusively promoting the western point of view (2), harassment and toxic behaviour in online communities (10), promoting distrust (3), creating echo chambers (6) or simplifying and flattening real life (2) were named. It is important to hear these voices, even if they were in minority here, to prevent glorification of video games – just as other media, it has a great potential to impact people, but whether positively or negatively depends on many factors, which should all be considered.

Summary

As the respondents agreed, video games are able to benefit players' tolerance towards other cultures. This happens via various means, ranging from simple exposure to immersion into a different point of view, gaining knowledge of other cultures, making connections with other players from all over the world and building empathy. Roleplaying improves (or even

mediates) these benefits. However, we need to bear in mind, that whether this promising potential comes true relies heavily on both the game (its design, the portrayal of cultures there, etc.) and its players themselves.

Do you think gaming can improve players' understanding of the diversity of the world? (545 answers)

Understanding the diversity of the world is another aspect/ability linked to cultural sustainability and even to sustainable development in general. In the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, cultural diversity is deemed to be "the key to sustainable human development".[53] In materials regarding the role of culture in sustainability written for the 2012 The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio (also known as Rio+20) it is noted that "[r]ecognition and respect for the diversity of cultures also creates the conditions for mutual understanding, dialogue and peace."[54] Being able to understand the world's diversity is therefore a valuable skill with a sustainability impact – can playing games help develop it? 545 respondents have participated in answering this question. Vast majority (83.7%) replied positively, with 235 people saying that gaming can considerably improve this skill and 221 choosing the 'rather yes' option, which perhaps (judging by all overall spirit of all the survey responses) points to games definitely having this potential, yet some time/development might still be needed to fulfil it and improve players' understanding of diversity efficiently.

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[53] "UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity: UNESCO". 2021. Portal.Unesco.Org. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
[54] "Globalization and Culture | United Nations Educational, Scientific And Cultural Organization". 2021. Unesco.Org. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/culture-and-development/the-future-we-want-the-role-of-culture/globalization-and-culture/.

Do you think gaming can improve players' understanding of the diversity of the world?

545 odpovědí
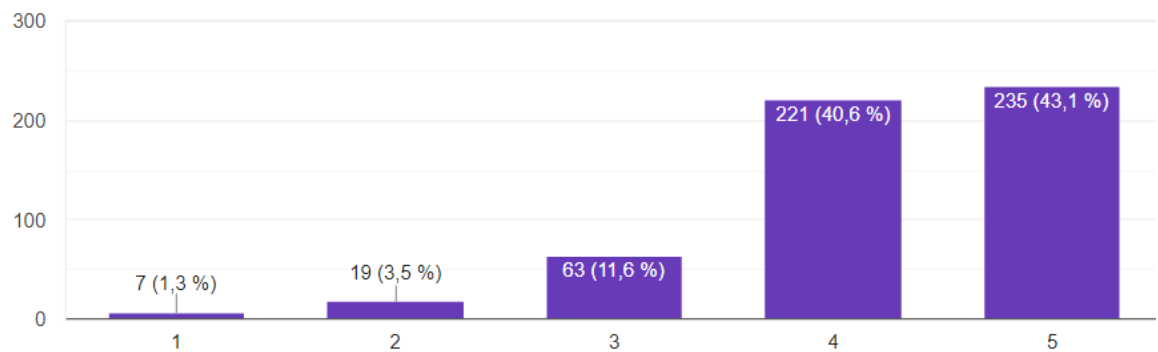
Do you think gaming can help spark the players' interest in new topics/learning about them? (546 answers)

546 respondents have given their answers and the results are clear – majority of respondents (348) thinks that gaming definitely has the potential to spark interest in learning. 161 others also leaned towards the affirmative, with 33 respondents undecided and only 4 on the negative side of the scale.

Do you think´gaming can help spark the players' interest in new topics/learning about them?

546 odpovědí
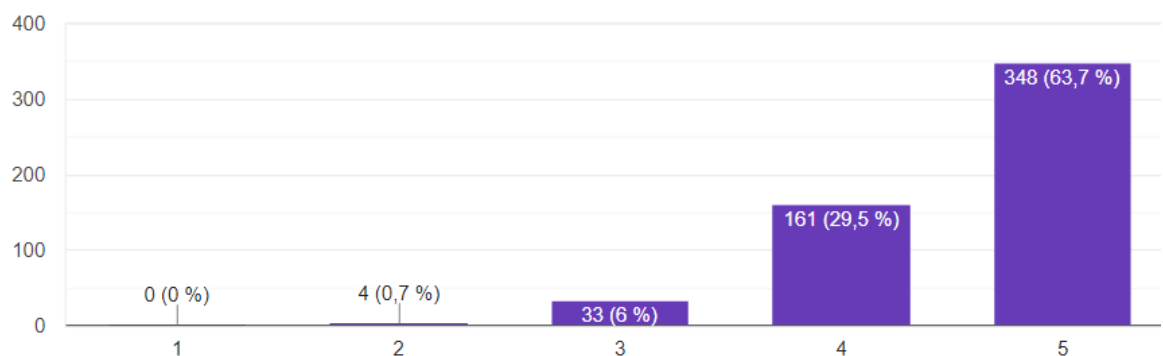
Do you think gaming can support players in building their own (personal and cultural) identity? (545 answers)

The responses to this question, while still clearly leaning to the positive side of the graph, show the votes between scales 3 (20,7%),4 (34.1%) and 5 (37.2%) are more balanced. Respondents

were fairly cautious with attributing this benefit to gaming as it perhaps (as understood from the reading of the open question answers) heavily depends on a wide array of factors (the game in question, the player themselves, etc.) to be clearly decided. However, as is visible from the graph, majority of responses were positive and so even if some players have not experienced this benefit on their own, they surely remain hopeful and open to this being a possibility.

Do you think gaming can support players in building their own (personal and cultural) identity?

545 odpovědí
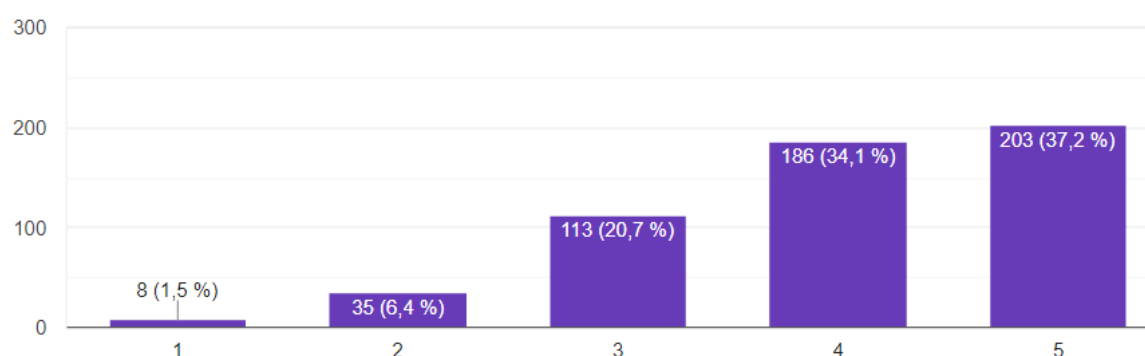
Do you think roleplaying can enhance such potential benefits of playing video games (tolerance, understanding of cultural diversity, interest in learning, identity building, etc.)? (541 answers)

This question was posed to help us with answering the research questions inquiring about the advantages and value of accessing culture via roleplaying games (and not any other kind of video games). The respondents have determined that games in general offer various benefits to their players – does the roleplaying genre amplify them? 541 respondents have given their votes on the weighted scale question and the vast majority of them (79.9%), similarly to previous questions of this type, chose the affirmative. This shows that in most cases, roleplaying, according to the players, helps strengthen the (culturally significant) advantages of games, which makes it a valuable genre for accessing culture and cultural heritage.
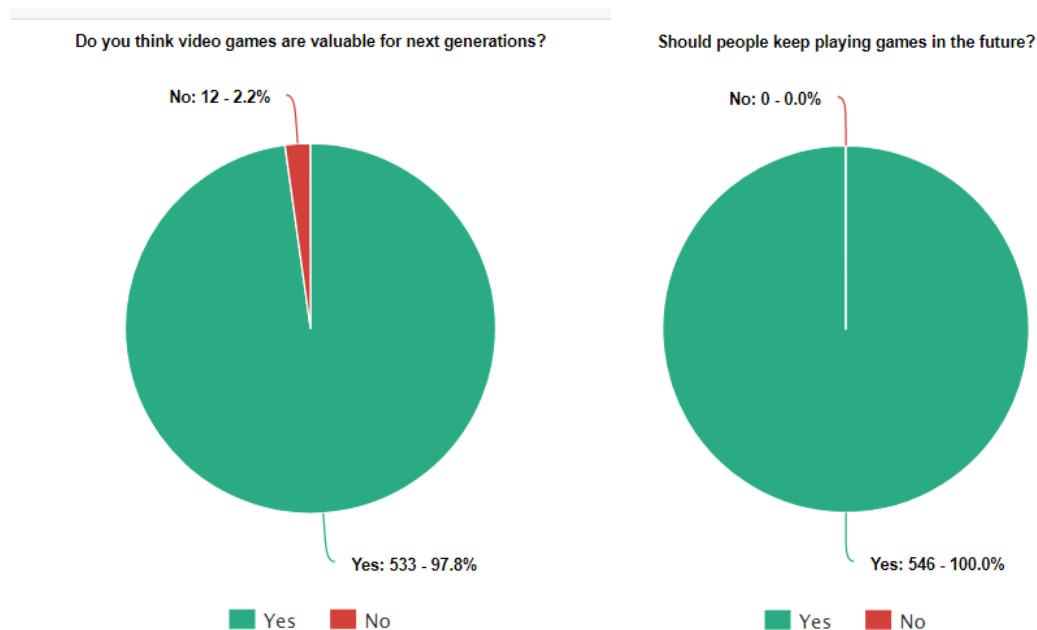
Do you think roleplaying can enhance such potential benefits of playing video games (tolerance, understanding of cultural diversity, interest in learning, identity building, etc.) ?

541 odpovědí
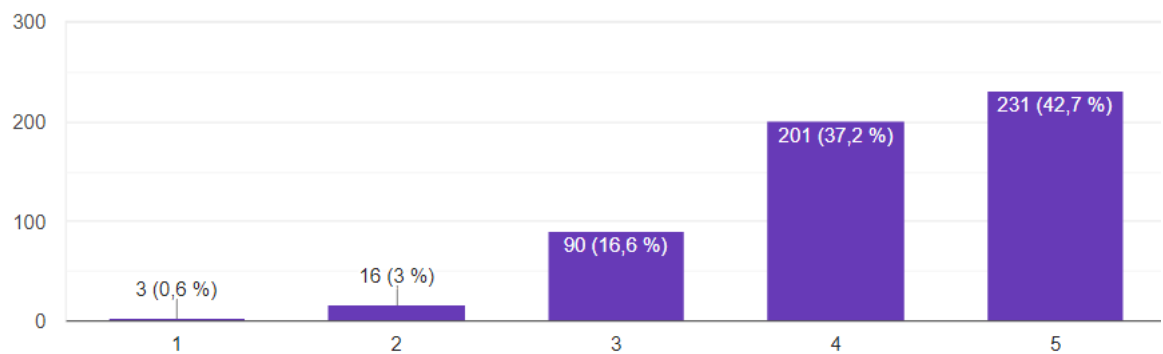
Are games valuable for the next generations? Should people keep playing them in the future? Why/why not?

These questions conclude the survey by inquiring about the value video games are able to offer to future generations. As the majority of respondents identified earlier in the questionnaire, one of the main characteristics of cultural heritage is that it is something that is passed on through generations, therefore the author wanted to find out whether players think that video games share this value, which would affirm them as a valid part of our cultural heritage. The graphs below illustrate the gathered data, and we can see that a vast majority of responses were positive. 545 respondents participated in the first question, 533 them (97.8%) chose to answer 'Yes' with only 12 (2.2%) answering negatively. The second question, which is connected to a follow-up open question, was answered positively by 546 respondents, which is the same as the total of respondents who took part in this question, making it a 100%.

Do you think video games are valuable for next generations?

No: 12 - 2.2%

Yes: 533 - 97.8%

■ Yes ■ No

Should people keep playing games in the future?

No: 0 - 0.0%

Yes: 546 - 100.0%

■ Yes ■ No

These graphs tell us that almost all the respondents to this survey see enough value in video games for them to be worth sharing with future generations and continue to be played. Throughout the survey the respondents have identified various benefits of video games, whether connected to cultural heritage or otherwise, so their reasons to answer these two questions affirmatively might already be quite apparent. The survey however still asks them to elaborate on their answer, to see whether the benefits and values in playing video games that were mentioned earlier truly are the reasons for them to be passed on to next generations. 369 respondents offered their thoughts on why they think games should be played in the future. Overall, the responses matched with the points made earlier by the players. Entertainment was again identified as a key value by 123 respondents, followed 74 mentions of games being a useful tool for learning and understanding, socializing (36), creativity outlet (15), stress relief (19).

The new piece of information this question brings us lies in remarks upon the nature of this tool and its future. 35 respondents stated that games are an artform, which deserves to be treasured and enjoyed. 9 people have offered remarks on the history of games, which have always been a part of human lives and are, as one of these respondents puts it an "integral part of humanity". 35 respondents have pointed out that games have a great potential and are still developing, 17 others said that video games are both a driver and product of innovation and 7 respondents even expressed the excitement they feel about following the evolution of games.

Games have been identified as a medium quite similar to others (television, books, film, etc.) by 39 people, but most of them also pointed out that video games have a unique feature classic media does not possess – interactivity resulting in high level of engagement. 2 people used the formulation that games are like 'evolved reading' and along the same lines 30 others have noted that it is a new way to tell and experience stories. 9 others decided to describe video games as an amalgam of art, music, writing, technology, socializing and interactivity, calling it "the ultimate medium" or "the future of entertainment". We can see how these responses align with the viewpoint of many games researchers as well as this thesis – play is a natural part of human life and as humans evolve, so do their games. As 19 respondents summed up, games are a rich part of culture and cultural heritage and are worthy of being passed on.

Challenges in roleplaying video games

Before moving to the final discussion, there is one more topic that should not be omitted when talking about the medium of RPGs. Countless advantages and potential benefits of them are identified throughout this thesis and therefore it might be easy to gloss over their challenging or even problematic/possibly problematic features. This text will not go into depth on this topic, but it will attempt to briefly outline the most challenging aspects of video games as well as mention existing research that focuses on this.

One of the main challenges regarding video games is that they may contain misleading information, disinformation or bias, which might have a rather negative impact on the player's experience and take-away from the game. As Thomas and Zeiler point out, concerning cultural heritage, numerous scholars have voiced their concerns over insufficient levels of historical accuracy in video games, which, whether caused by the game script or lacking technology, can pose a risk of misinformation, flattening cultural heritage (see for example the paper by Lars de Wildt and S. D. Aupers on flattening religious cultural heritage in video games[55]) and simplifying or even ignoring challenging topics.[56] Video games, like other storytelling media,

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[55] de Wildt, Lars, and S. D. Aupers. 2020. "Eclectic Religion: The flattening of religious cultural heritage in videogames". International Journal of Heritage Studies 27 (3): 312-330. Doi:10.1080/13527258.2020.1746920.
[56] Zeiler, Xenia, and Suzie Thomas. 2020. "The relevance of researching video games and cultural heritage". International Journal of Heritage Studies 27 (3): 265-267. Doi:10.1080/13527258.2020.1762705.

may also present the players with stereotypical and potentially hurtful representations or misrepresentations of cultures. While many of these challenges, as numerous survey respondents have aptly pointed out, rely on the game developers (their interpretations, bias, beliefs, values), the benefits of video games are also impacted by technological limitations and the funding they receive.

There is also considerable research concerning the challenges of interpreting video games and the gaming culture that envelops them in museums ("translating them into cultural heritage").[57]

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[57] See for example: Nylund, Niklas, Patrick Prax, and Olli Sotamaa. 2020. "Rethinking game heritage – towards reflexivity in game preservation". *International Journal Of Heritage Studies* 27 (3): 268-280. Doi:10.1080/13527258.2020.1752772. and Eklund, Lina, Björn Sjöblom, and Patrick Prax. 2019. "Lost in Translation: Video Games Becoming Cultural Heritage?". *Cultural Sociology 13* (4): 444-460. Doi:10.1177/1749975519852501.

Discussion and conclusion

The main aim of this thesis was to collect a corpus of data and analyse it in order to determine whether roleplaying video games are viewed by their players as a suitable (and possibly beneficial and valuable) medium for accessing, interacting and understanding cultural heritage, a medium that is able to capture culture heritage values and provide a platform to conserve, develop and share them. To explore this topic further, the work also offers a look into various forms and roles cultural heritage appears in within video games and the ways players engage with it and experience it. In the course of the research, advantages and disadvantages of accessing heritage via this medium are identified, strengthening the position of roleplaying video games in the cultural heritage field, but also cautioning against possible negative effects tied to them and noting aspects in need of improvement. Finally, the potential beneficial effects of roleplaying video games for cultural heritage and cultural sustainability are explored.

The central part of this thesis is formed by a questionnaire which has been filled out by 564 respondents. This quite high number of people, who have offered their insight into the topic, lends the results considerable credibility and allows us to understand the topic from a variety of different angles. As we can see from the results presentation, several of the survey questions have produced quite similar answers, or at least answers expressing the same spirit of interest, belief and excitement about (the potential of) video games. This is, of course, given by the target audience of the questionnaire – players – who engage with games for those very reasons. The results presentation has been written so that the points made by the respondents are not needlessly repeated (repetitions are marked by numbers of mentions), instead different themes are brought forth at different times so that the reader may explore a wider scale of them more deeply.

Firstly, let's revise the recurring themes and points that arose from the survey. Reading through the responses we learn that roleplaying video games are in fact a great multitool for the players, far from being purely entertainment. As the players have expressed, video games are like other media, but with a layer of added benefits. Roleplaying video games, specifically, are an interactive storytelling medium with more impact on the player than other passive media. They offer a more active engagement, agency, control, players can immerse into them, relax, view them as an art form or simply follow their stories in which they themselves often play a key

part. Roleplaying as a mechanic greatly strengthens the immersion of the player into the game, which the overall impact and meaning of the gaming experience for the player rely on. As the literature review tells us, this mechanic is in turn strengthened/made functional by quality design of the game with focus on character proximity and diversity of choices. If a game is well-designed (a condition often mentioned by the respondents), players may successfully immerse themselves into its world, where they are able to follow the story, take in the created environment and connect to both non—player characters and other players, practicing empathy, communication, learning, gaining new points of view. From this position the player is also best suited to access, take in and interact with the various forms of cultural heritage included in games.

As discussed before, this cultural heritage may be a digital rendition of real-world heritage (presenting, recreations, models, depictions of past lives, environment, cultures representation via architecture, personalities of characters, stories, etc.). This is often the case for example in RPGs with historical themes, such as the Assassin's Creed game series (well-known for its faithful recreation of renaissance Florence featuring the Florence cathedral or 1789 Paris with Notre Dame cathedral) or Kingdom Come Deliverance (in-game world consisting of a 1403 Bohemian region recreation with several accessible historical settlements such as Skalitz or Talmberk). However, heritage in games can also be fictional, created for the game while only drawing varying degrees of inspiration from the real-world heritage, which ensures that the fictional CH in game – and hence the entire in-game world – is believable, attractive and functional, serving quite the same purpose as real-world CH in offline world – breathing life into it and enriching it.

An instance of this can be seen in countless games, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, for example, takes place in a fantasy world where one may encounter dragons or use magic, but at the same time it clearly draws inspiration from medieval Northern Europe in many aspects. Another example of a game with fictional cultural heritage may be seen in the Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, a game often dubbed the most popular RPG of all times. The world of Witcher 3, from geography and politics to its metaphysics, is entirely fictional, yet again, it uses European mythology, folklore and real-life history (medieval central and eastern European) parallels as a base.

In the beginning of the survey, the respondents were asked to define cultural heritage with their own words. In their responses, they pointed out that cultural heritage – a concept inherently and exclusively human – is most relevant and valuable when it is personal, when one feels included in it and is able to interpret it on their own terms. This point helps us understand why it is specifically the roleplaying video games that possess the ability to be a beneficial means of accessing cultural heritage – it is thanks to the immersion they offer. This immersion, along with other benefits of games, is employed to aid the most traditionally human form of learning – storytelling. As can be noted in the corresponding chapter, the vast majority of players have showed an in-depth understanding of cultural heritage and were able to express it in their own words – this points to that cultural heritage is an important topic for video game players and many of them reflect on it while playing, which gives the field of cultural heritage studies great relevance in face of modern media.

To summarize the outcome of this research, we have learned that roleplaying video games are a valuable platform for accessing cultural heritage with great potential in supporting its sustainability. This is because RPGs combine values of games (accessible, impactful, popular, entertaining, engaging, etc.) and roleplaying (immersive, helps learning, improves storytelling, empathy, proximity, presence, advocacy, unlocks different points of view, etc.), creating a mixed medium well-suited for engaging with culture. They are a modern constantly developing storytelling medium, with roots in traditional approaches which are elevated and improved.

RPGs are a product of culture, which is mirrored in them and the shards of which the games contain. Uncountable variations of cultural heritage are present both in the content of the game (game worlds, characters, stories, architecture, mythology, etc.) and in the processes that surround playing (player communities, game conventions, art created by players, etc.). Playing roleplaying games means participating in culture and cultural learning. This thesis is based on previous research in roleplaying, video games and cultural heritage. It contributes to research of the potential and present use of RPGs for the field of cultural heritage and conservation by synthetizing relevant information from these sources, which is then used to create a player survey and analyse its results. The amount of collected data offers reliability and uniqueness to this work, as this has not been done at this scale and with this particular focus previously. Research on roleplaying games within the field of cultural heritage and conservation is still developing and not many scholars have taken it up so far, even though several researchers, such

as Xenia Zeiler and Susanne Thomas did in the introductory article for a special 2020 issue of the International Journal of Heritage Studies, have shown interest and noted that video games have vast potential to benefit the field. As mentioned previously in the literature review, the work of Jakub Majewski is also greatly relevant to this thesis the findings of which align with and considerably complement his research with valuable data gathered from video game players. The RPG categories created by Majewski based on their CH focus are also to some extent echoed in the categories that have emerged from the survey data. However, Majewski's categories (commercial games, serious games, culture-centric games, mods) examine how well do which types of RPGs serve to transmit/conserve CH to the players (vis a vis accuracy and accessibility), while my categories (fictional heritage, real-world heritage, social values) focus on the nature and diversity of heritage content in games along with benefits they offer. My research outcomes also agree with Majewski's in the point that RPGs truly have a great potential in the cultural heritage field, which is already starting to be realized and enjoyed by the players.

The survey results, in line with previous research, also show that engaging with cultural heritage via playing RPGs – i.e., gaining knowledge, deepening the understanding of world diversity, communicating with others, practicing empathy (as Paiva et al. have previously presented), tolerance and other such skills – is potentially beneficial in regard to promoting and practicing cultural and social sustainability, hence making them a valuable learning tool and an asset for society. The results of the survey agree with the words of Gonzalo Frasca, who has noted in his work that games help players develop an understanding of the world, as well as inspiring critical thinking and discussion.

It bears keeping in mind that RPGs are a highly interpretative medium, their content is always to some extent influenced by their developers. Players also have a key role – as both Frasca and McGonigal have previously also pointed out – they curate their experience, decide what to take from a given game and what to omit. What a player gains from the game then depends quite entirely on themselves.

The contribution of my research for the field of cultural heritage/conservation lies mainly in exploring the topic of RPGs via the gaze of the players who interact with them first-hand while specifically focusing on the benefits and potential of these games for cultural heritage. I have

collected an extensive corpus of data which sheds light on how cultural heritage within games is understood and approached by the players and which can be drawn from in future to research this topic further. My research significantly complements previous sources which saw much potential for video games in cultural heritage. Realizing that video games are still far from being a spotlessly perfect medium (struggling with challenges such as oversimplification or flattening of heritage which we need to be aware of when engaging with them) I have found RPGs to be a great asset for the field of cultural heritage nonetheless, a medium new to the field which we should take advantage of. The reasons for this include:

- Contemporary culture is expressed and preserved in video games
- Games are an educational tool/ help with spreading knowledge and awareness about various topics
- Real cultural heritage may be conserved in video games and vice versa, game content can also be used to conserve/save real-world heritage (for example as it was proposed in the case of Notre Dame[58])
- Games can be used to experience and share heritage of all kinds (e.g., indigenous games[59])
- Shared features with experimental archaeology and the living history museum storytelling technique
- Future of cultural heritage, evolved storytelling, interactive and immersive
- Wider reach, engaging the public/lay people
- Promoting environmental/cultural/social sustainability, mind-broadening, inspiring tolerance and understanding of diversity
- Games mirror our society and help us develop an understanding of it
- Games are a form of art, a product of human creativity

Tapping into the growing potential of roleplaying video games indubitably brings many benefits to the field of cultural heritage and conservation and should be further researched and applied. The extensive set of data collected from the player survey also inspires and could be

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[58] See: Sherrill, Cameron. 2019. "'Assassin's Creed Unity' Could Help Rebuild Notre Dame After the Fire". *Esquire*. https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/a27181197/notre-dame-fire-assassins-creed-unity-rebuild-donation/.
[59] See for example: LaPensée, Elizabeth. 'When Rivers Were Trails: cultural expression in an indigenous video game'. International Journal of Heritage Studies, March 2020, 1–15. Doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1746919.

used to produce various research articles focusing on answering different questions. It would be very interesting, for example, to look more closely into how fictional heritage in games differs from the real-world heritage (in the offline world), whether it truly serves the same purpose and functions within the same mechanics. Another topic to explore further in the future might be the process of how and what kind of new cultural heritage is created within games.

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