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“To what extent are real life cultures reflected accurately and respectfully through their character designs within video games with consideration towards stereotypes?”

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Abstract

In video games, cultures are widely represented in a variety of forms, most notably through character design, in which a multitude of cultures that are not often seen in media are able to be expressed through incorporation of history, mythology and tradition in design. Throughout this dissertation two different methods of research will be assessed in order to analyse the extent in which cultures are reflected accurately in video game character design, the focus being on stereotyping.

The initial research conducted will focus on secondary sources, by a multitude of book authors, research papers focusing on culture and its modern reflection not only in games but in its historical portrayal to define accuracy. An analysis of three games between the 7th and 8th console generation, with a focus on popular and yet controversial games such as Overwatch, Resident Evil 5 and Skyrim, and delving into how they're able to express culture in both a positive and negative way because of their recognisability and players prior context of the games.

Primary research is conducted through two separate surveys; with one's focus on player opinion on stereotyping and the other's focus is on cultures reflected accurately in character design and if that is something that players recognise. By using all of these methods, it allows for a deeper analysis and evaluation on the extent to which cultures are reflected in character design, and its important in cultural respect and accuracy.

The dissertation concludes and finds that while video games often include real-life cultural elements to an extent, especially in character design, they frequently rely on stereotypes, leading to inaccurate representation and potentially negative impacts that outweigh the positives. It also suggests future research should explore player perspectives on cultural diversity in games and whether excessive diversity can diminish meaningful representation.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Key Terms & Definitions

Key Terms:

Character Design (CD) - Character design is the process of creating a character's visual appearance, personality, and traits to fit a story or game.

Cultural Appropriation (CA) - Cultural appropriation is the adoption or use of elements from one culture by members of another, often without understanding, respect, or proper acknowledgment of its original meaning.

Cultural Representation (CR) - Cultural representation is the way a culture's beliefs, traditions, and identities are portrayed or expressed in media.

Video games (VG) - A video game is a digital interactive form of entertainment where a player uses a device to interact with a virtual environment.

Resident Evil 5: (RE5) is a co-op action horror video game by Capcom where two agents fight a bio-organic outbreak in Africa.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim: (Skyrim) is an open-world fantasy RPG by Bethesda where you play a dragon-slaying hero exploring a vast realm.

1.2 Dissertation Introduction

This dissertation covers the extent of how real-life cultures are reflected accurately and respectfully through their character designs(CD) within Video games(VG), and the significance of stereotypes as a barrier to respectful representation.

The aims and objectives of this research are to understand how designing cultures should be addressed in character design for VG, exploring positive/negative examples and the impact that these displays of culture have on audiences.

Chapter 2 will look at a variety of articles, books, research papers and historical art pieces discussing previous respectful and disrespectful portrayals of culture in media, to provide useful context to the study being presented.

Chapter 3 will discuss case studies on Resident Evil 5, Overwatch and Skyrim, each one presents aspects of correct and incorrect representation. The reflection on how audiences have reacted to these CDs and cultures will relate to the study at hand by providing important input on the acceptance of stereotypes.

Chapter 4 will cover the methodology used in this research. Discussing first-hand quality and quantified data gathering methods, secondary research such as articles mentioned in the literature review, SMART objectives and project planning.

Chapter 5 focuses on development and data analysis, which will discuss the results of the methodology. With chapter 6 as an analysis of an original character portfolio and how it relates to the study, with considerations towards the challenges addressed throughout the project.

Finally in chapter 7, the revelations of the study will be noted; answering the project research question thoroughly and giving a clear understanding on how real-life cultures have been reflected in VG thus far and consider the damages of stereotypes.

2.0 Literature Review

This literature review will serve as an established foundation for the research topic chosen. The review examines published books, research articles, academic papers and related studies to understand existing insights on the following topics, current representation within VG, the accuracy of culture represented in VG, the conflict between appropriation and the appreciation and the reflections of cultural stereotyping in CD. The use of literature will offer valuable insight on the research topic.

2.1 Representation in VGs

The first topic to be discussed is dystopia and race, with the book *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender and Sexuality in VG* by Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm [1]. Malkowski discusses that representation of the African American race more commonly occurs in dystopian VG media and how identity politics fit into the idea of the end-times. It follows the critiques of author Linda Williams in *Playing the Race Card* [2] in order to expand on the type of emotional responsiveness this theme causes.

The chapter *Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy in The Walking Dead and The Last of Us* [3] suggests that the lack of emphasis on race in the diversity within dystopian games is what makes good representation because it ignores the idea that everyone is of a different culture to begin with. Though, this is later argued by the fact that ignorance of black stories and culture, especially by killing off black characters to further white character stories and is described as a “pathos of black suffering”, thus only emphasising the current problem with representation.

The authors discuss that whilst the representation displayed is positive and allows for accurate characters and a wider appreciation; continuing to contain black representation within dystopian media takes away from the overarching importance of these black characters. It suggests that the extent of which cultural representation is portrayed is only limited to set genres, implying they do not fit elsewhere due to the genre stereotype. Their stories are not portrayed emphatically due to the primary storyline, which in dystopian games will be the end-times and the fact that race does not matter anymore, and in this case, assumes a lack of respect in representation.

When it comes to player relatability, The research article *Diversity without Defense: Reframing Arguments for Diversity in Games* by Adrienne Shaw [4] covers the subject of self-projection and the importance of representation in the relatability of VG protagonists. Survey research findings

suggests that those of less marginalised groups had no preference when it came to their player character, whereas those of female gender or homosexuality cared a great deal about including their same features into their characters. It further moves on to elaborate on how different ages from 11-18 react differently on character relatability, and those that are older found more appreciation and importance in the representation of their gender, sexuality, race and culture in VG[5]. It correlates to the previous article, expressing that there is a lack of cultures reflected in video game character design, although is something players want to see.

An interviewee from the paper commented, “[Seeing people like me in media] shows that I’m being heard and seen and I’m being acknowledged and I’m here.” [6] which the paper then further analyses as an important part of representation. Representation is not just about seeing the character on screen but about the story that need to be represented, the dominance of the stereotypical “heterosexual, white, cisgendered men”[7] are unnecessary and suggest that even if the target market are those players, they can still create representation and diversify games.

2.2 Cultural Accuracy

Misrepresentation is a primary topic stemming from lack of cultural accuracies within VGs. The book *Embedding Culture into VGs and Game Design* by Rhett Loban[8] explores how some communities are misrepresented within games and what cultural considerations must take place to prevent misrepresentation and culturally enrich game worlds and designs. The focus of the book uses the *Torres Strait Virtual Reality* project[9] as an example to explore CR in game design. The central problem with how cultures is portrayed in games, is the poor inaccuracies or lack of intentionality - what is meant by this is that the unconscious biases formed by designers will force games to miss out on opportunities to represent deeper and meaningful cultural aspects. The author suggests that there are practices that can be put in place to help form a “respectful and reciprocal relationship with the community being represented”. [10] Furthermore the author conducts primary research by creating a game of their own with the knowledge of a culture they have researched in depth, and with a person said culture helping them directly with the game’s design. It suggests that game designers want to add aspects of culture into the design process but are currently not able to do so in an accurate or respectful manner without further research. Having community involvement in playtests and consultations with cultural knowledge holders and avoiding homogenisation would benefit cultural immersion for designers.

To build upon a solution to misrepresentation is an awareness of culture; The article *VG and Culture: A Case Study of EFL Student Players' Views on Their Acquisition of Cultural Knowledge and Sensitivity* by Ali Soyoof[11], delves into player awareness of intercultural literacy within VGs and how recognisable are cultures whilst considering ethical issues. Soyoof conducted research with a group of Iranian learners that played a variety of VGs. They were interviewed in order to understand their point of view associated with using gaming as a “superior tool”[12] to experience meaningful cultural differences and raise awareness on unbiased design decisions around cultures different to their own.

Furthermore, some results lead to an opposing answer through a breakdown of each individual student answer. It's stated that “one of the unique aspects of video games is learning subconsciously, which can ease learning the target language culture”[13], this is then countered by the fact that one student states that the learning is implied and not proven by a secondary source, explaining that the extent of cultural awareness learnt through games are a long term achievement rather than something developed over a single ‘level’ of a game.

Student 2

In my opinion, it is ridiculous for me to try to learn culture within the classroom context. There are limitations in classrooms. For instance, the majority of cultural differences cannot even be mentioned in a classroom, because the norms of different societies vary according to their beliefs, but video games do not have such limitations.

(Figure 1 – The opinion of a student on cultural education as part of research in the *VG and Culture: A Case Study of EFL Student Players' Views on Their Acquisition of Cultural Knowledge and Sensitivity* by Ali Soyoof[11])

2.3 Appropriation vs Appreciation

Majed S. Balela and Darren Mundy's paper *Analysing Cultural Heritage and its Representation in Video Games* [14] touches upon the ignorance of beautification in VGs, the idea of appropriation of cultures in *Assassin's Creed* (2007) is unearthed through an analysis of the beautification and ideological constraints within the game. It raises issues about how game designers can include cultural items within the game's content without removing its historical context and altering it through appropriating by “hollywoodisation”. “The ethnicity of the character does not represent people of the Damascus or Jerusalem regions with the stylised character being criticised for his ‘hollywoodean’ style.”[15] but is then countered by the explanation of the character's clothes being made aerodynamic and armoured, thus using designs neither from the era nor the region, being justified on the basis of gameplay.

On the other hand, the article Cultural Parameters of CD – a Proposal of Cross-cultural CD Procedure for Visual Perception Achievement by Sattayasai Puttachad, Jiang Peng, Tanaka Takamitsu [16] researches into cultural value in design, and found that participants of certain cultures preferred characters of a completely different one in its authentic form, whilst people of another culture would rather a character that represents them with smaller elements of a different culture[17]. This suggests that some cultural representations are sacrificed for beautification in this sense, while pertaining some of its accuracy, the respect in design drops significantly.

Table 3 Description of ten test characters

Design NO.	Picture	Cultural context	Cultural element			
			Color	Texture	Costume	Character type
1		Thai based	Thai	Thai	Thai	Thai
2		Japanese based	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese
3		Bi-cultural	Japanese	Thai	Thai	Thai
4		Bi-cultural	Thai	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese

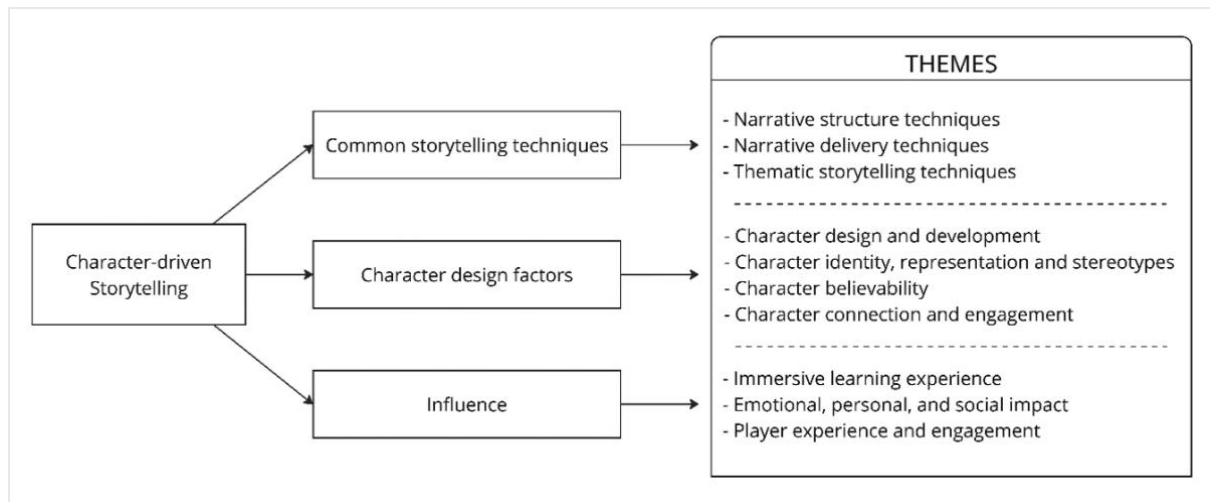
(Figure 2 – Four out of the ten test characters from *Cultural Parameters of Character Design – a Proposal of Cross-cultural Character Design Procedure for Visual Perception Achievement* by Sattayasai Puttachad, Jiang Peng, Tanaka Takamitsu [16])

Appreciating diversity can be a key factor towards understanding perspectives of diversity in VGs. The book *Redefining Culture: Perspectives Across the Discipline* by John Baldwin, Sandra Faulkner, Michael Hecht and Sheryl Lindsley[18], suggests that understanding a cultures core meaning is the most sought upon path to ensure a culture is appreciated rather than just used at face value. It analyses the derivation of English words, and insight into the book *Kroeber and Kluckhohn: A Klassic Kase of Kulture*[19] which defines culture and explains that it is characterized by “complex systems on inequality”[20] and historical civilisations. If these features are not considered when defining or showcasing a culture within media, it is assumed that the creator lacks knowledge and depth needed to appreciate it.

Another book, *Playing American: Open-World Videogames and the Reproduction of American Culture* by Sören Schoppmeier[21] agrees with the previous point, specifically pointing out that appreciation of cultures can be found, but only when the depth and importance of historical context is explained. The book analyses the VG *Grand Theft Auto* and its expression of American culture, comparing both its appreciated diversity and its negative stereotypical aspects. With this second source, it clearly defines that diversity, though at times limited, can persevere through appreciation and that audiences respond better to media where diversity is introduced[22]. Though there is backlash, these sources argue that when diversity is done correctly, it is perceived as appreciation rather than the appropriation that causes the confusion and offence that upset audiences.

2.4 Stereotyping and Character Design

Stereotyping can first be analysed through exploring believability of design. The article *Character-Driven Storytelling Design for Digital Games: A Scoping Review* by Athirah Zaini, Allan Fowler, Robert Amor and Burkhard C. Wünsche[23] studies the broader impact of character-driven storytelling and its potential to promote social awareness and enrich gameplay. To showcase this, they use a variety of research methods from graphing narrative structure techniques to geographical charts on the 69 analysed studies done in the paper. This was done in order to map key patterns and trends and the results they encountered from this research determined that “the continued focus on predominantly Western viewpoints in research underpinning game design hinders games’ ability to achieve true cultural inclusivity and narrative authenticity”[24]. Which expresses that the believability and respect of design is rooted in avoid reinforcing narrow cultural assumptions and stereotypes.



(Figure 3 – Themes chosen in the research questions in *Character-Driven Storytelling Design for Digital Games: A Scoping Review* a research article written by Athirah Zaini, Allan Fowler, Robert Amor and Burkhard C. Wünsche[23])

The paper *Designing for Diversity: Multi-Cultural Characters for a Multi-Cultural World* by Barbara Hayes-Roth, Heidy Maldonado and Marcia Moraes[25] digs into CD and its pursuits of cultural variability, explaining what 10 qualities and characteristics these animated characters should possess to foster "suspension of disbelief"[26]. The authors determined that qualities needed for a design and character portrayal to be believable is through "Identity, Backstory, Appearance, Content of Speech, Manner of Speaking and Manner of Gesturing, Emotional Dynamics, Social Interactions Patterns, Role and Role Dynamics"[27]. This source argues that believability is less about visual design and obvious cultural inclusivity, but rather a more internal characterised story.

For navigating stereotypes, the academic paper *Introducing Inclusivity Through Play: Blurring Societal Boundaries For Designers* by Lodha Antra, Kalai Pooja and Das Supradip[28] explores how designers in today's world and expectations towards designs not only have to be innovative, but also diverse. Through multi-sensory activities and inclusive learning methods, this study focuses on inclusive design in diverse social and cultural contexts. Some key findings note that the play-based learning promoted "social dynamics, promoting cooperation, cultural awareness, and openness to reflection"[29] which suggested that stereotyping in design was rooted deeper in the lack of awareness and lack of education rather than attitude towards design.

A research article by the title of *Narratives Crossing Boundaries. Storytelling in a Transmedial and Transdisciplinary Context* by Joachim Friedmann and Ezinne Michaelia Ezepeue[30] demonstrates an agreeing point through its study on a multitude of medias such as *God of War*

and *The Lord of the Rings*, analysing the hero's journey and narratives created in story. As the source dives into the television show *CSI*, it expresses the forced nature of the representation, which emphasises the idea of narratives becoming problematic when falling into the pitfall of stereotyping and lacking influence in writing[31]. It is then further noted by the authors that "indigenous southern African mythology and folklore can be represented and preserved in modern media to reverse the destructive effects of colonization on African culture"[32]. All it takes is for design to be appreciated correctly and accurately through education and cultural understanding to replicate that respect in video games.

3.0 Case Studies

By taking a look at popular VGs as a medium, it allows for an in-depth analysis of CD and cultural representation(CR) in media. There are three games that can provide information about not only story and player views on culture but the views of the creators and designers themselves.

3.1 Video Game: Resident Evil 5 (2009) – Insensitive Cultural Portrayal

Resident Evil 5 (2009)[33], became publisher *Capcom's*[34] bestselling game for 9 years, as well as the bestselling *Resident Evil* game until 2025[35]. The game is a co-operative third person action shooter, where the main protagonists investigate a terrorist threat in a fictional region within West Africa. The story develops within the African village where the locals have been infected and must be killed by the player.[36]



(Figure 4 – Cover image of the main protagonists of RE5)

Due to clear aspects in the story and the location of which it takes place, there is a clear narrative that is being driven. Though, many may disagree and although it may not have inherently been intentional, many players were outraged with the portrayal of African culture within the game, despite the village itself being fictional, the nuance behind the story was not well received. Narratively, this would argue that perhaps this form of representation, though meaning to diversify the game, has in fact belittled itself in its portrayal of African culture. An argument could be made that the over-the-shoulder perspective that the player uses could help separate the player from the actions that they must take in the game, but ultimately this conflict of culture is apparent throughout the storyline, as it reinforces the idea of a cultural cleanse.



(Figure 5 – Wetlands Majini enemy from RE5)

Enemies remain relatively within 2 main categories, the natives that have been infected and the infected creatures that resemble arachnids and parasites. The reflection of the natives primarily in the enemy design, is perceived as disrespectful and inherently offensive when analysing the combat and appearance of them. The primary example for such a reflection is the “Wetlands Majini”[37], the way the infection affects them is shown through a devolved state as they “throw off their clothing, cover themselves in war paint, and take up the weapons of their ancestors”. Whilst at first this may not be all that offensive, it speaks volumes towards the amount of research done during the game’s creation, the ignorance in design displays itself in the weapon, the wetlands Majini uses a bow whilst in ancient African culture, bows being used in combat was not common, instead the use of spears or smaller arrow like weapons were utilised. Although it may not seem like an important detail, having details as simple as weapon choice for the enemy to be overlooked, overshadows the immersive quality of the game by displaying simple stereotypical CD choices, assuming “because they are natives they must use bows”[38] instead of researching into the cultural history.

Of the main characters there is Chris Redfield and Sheva Alomar, Sheva is an African operative that the game relies heavily on as a positive source of CR and displays the complete contrast to other African natives in the game that appear as enemies. Sheva’s character was met with much less confrontation than the enemies, and actually being perceived as a good piece of cultural portrayal, by being seen as a “strong and capable”[39] in a way that didn’t deter from her beauty and further still representing her culture and her importance to the story’s development without being seen as simply a tool for its narrative. Sheva became so integral to the game that her tribal costume won an “Outfit of the Year” award [40]. Her existence is proof that a character can represent a culture, be beautiful and be strong without having to remove defining features of her identity for industry beautification.



(Figure 6 – Sheva from RE5)

RE5 is an example of a game that possesses both good and bad portrayals of culture, the bad being particularly insensitive and lacking depth in the enemy and story design when it comes to the representation of the African culture. The extent of which expresses an almost stereotypical point of view and removing any historical context or design that could have been presented to further the storytelling and accuracy of the culture at the heart of the story's path and gameplay.

3.2 Video Game: Overwatch (2022) - Cultural Character Design Variation

Game of the year winner *Overwatch*[41] is an online hero-based team shooter, known for having an extensive roster of characters to choose from. One key feature of the game that has been positively remarked in the game is its diversity in character culture[42]. There is a total of 25 different countries represented, some with multiple characters that represent different cultures within them.



(Figure 7 – Overwatch 4th year anniversary character lineup)

The variety of characters are praised through their cultural CD variation and are further supported by its ability design and use of a culture's historical myths and information in the character's weapons and playstyles. This emphasis on variety within the CD not only opens the amount of representation shown, but the creativity is expanded upon through dialogue between characters in game and utilises recognisability of characters for players during matches.

Some of the wide variety of countries represented in the game include Egypt, United States, Sweden[43]. Each character within that country has a corresponding ability associated with that country's history. As an example, Japan has 4 characters within the game, though the variation in design is extensive, Hanzo and Genji are brothers, both include symbolism of dragons, a sign of strength, although utilised in different ways. Genji uses his dragon with his katana; a Japanese weapon, whilst Hanzo releases his two dragons through a bow. Both clearly include elements of their culture in similarities but are different in appearance and playstyles. This variation suggests that video games don't have to sacrifice beauty for cultural accuracy, it further depends on the stylization of design. Hanzo wears a stylized hakama whilst Genji, despite being imbued with tech, wears tactical streetwear that originated from military fashion trends in Japan[44]. Then there's Mizuki and Kiriko to consider, both characters are healers using different forms of Japanese traditions to heal their teammates. Kiriko for example uses elements of Yokai, derived from Japanese myths and the way she heals is through sending out healing ofudas which are a type of talismans made as a symbol of purity. Kiriko is a shrine maiden, a traditional role in Japanese shrines and thus it is culturally accurate for her to heal others with such an item. Mizuki on the other hand wields a glaive, which is what ancient Japanese samurai would use, and to heal he uses a kekkai, which is a spiritual separation marked for protection and for spiritual purposes of meditation and prayer.



(Figure 8 – Characters Hanzo and Genji from Overwatch)

The variation here is imperative to the way players interact and experience culture, the fact that many different designs and expression of one culture can be shown is positive and allows for a reduced narrative surrounding stereotyping in CDs. Instead of suggesting doing one Japanese character as a samurai for example, the Overwatch designers push the conventional standard aside, creating 4 unique designs including different elements of history with an emphasis on individuality and importance.

As of early 2026 the same thing cannot be entirely expressed, Overwatch has been widely criticised by many of its fanbase for a new character introduced by the name of Anran[45]. When she first appeared in both an animation and a comic, her face appeared more angular, unique and overall closer resembling the typical features of someone from Chinese culture. Though when her final in-game model was revealed, her features were softened and simplified, which made her appear more to the character Kiriko. Kiriko is known to the fans as a character that is primarily there to make sales because of her beauty and popularity, the way this relates to Anran, is by simplifying her face to appear so similar to Kiriko, it raised questions behind the motive of this change when she appeared so differently in her original appearance. It suggests to audiences that its alright for culture to be visually removed from a character if it means the game's sales will increase. This situation was commented on further by the disapproving voice actress of Anran herself.[46]



(Figure 9 – Anran face model, before and after fan criticism)

Overall, Overwatch does a well in creating thought out cultural CD variation. Even though there have been notable problems and struggles when it comes to the audience's view on some character depictions, on the whole the game succeeds in avoiding stereotypes and producing good representation[47].

3.3 Video Game: The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011) - Stereotyping Design Causing Division

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Skyrim) is an action roleplaying game released in 2011 by Bethesda Game Studios [48], the player travels through a fantasy open world, fighting various enemies and following the core storyline of the quest to defeat Alduin the World-Eater.



(Figure 10 – Skyrim character race lineup)

When the game begins, the player is given a choice to alter their main character, they can choose the race, gender, overall appearance and name. Throughout the game the player will meet numerous characters, where some of their dialogue adapts to the players characters race; this can cause players to feel divided from other races purely based on how characters may treat them.

Within the game, the humanoid race that resemble bobcats known as the Khajiit, are seen as slave races. Due to this, they are not respected by many of the games non-playable characters (NPC) regardless of the races of those NPCs. Their race contains elements from Egyptian culture in its references to cat-like humanoids, although most of the naming conventions. As well as history of the culture are similarly sourced from Romani traveller and South Asian cultures.[49] .

The stereotyping of cultures being reflected into the CD of these fantasy races is arguably overlooked due to the fact that it is a fantasy game. The characters aren't real, the divide between characters is not real, the only reason for it is to encourage player immersion because realistically even in a fantasy setting not everyone will like each other. This attitude isn't just for different races though but it is done for the different genders and classes too, which ultimately contrasts the argument that the characters stereotyping is causing a divide, because the divide will be there regardless of your character choices, it's ingrained into the world for realism, not to offend people.[50]

Skyrim is an example of stereotyping a culture in order to create fantasy designs that have a depth to them, inspired by real cultures. Though in doing so has caused a rift between character races, thus, despite it being in the narrative causes a divide in players, limiting or altering interactions depending on their choices when making a character. Evidently this leads to a very subtle amount of character representation that players often would not be able to recognise if it weren't for the stereotypical aspect of it.

3.4 Summary of Case Studies

The text examines how CR in VGs can vary widely, using *RE5*, *Overwatch*, and *Skyrim* as examples. It argues that while games like *Overwatch* succeed in showcasing diverse and thoughtful cultural CDs, others such as *RE5* rely on stereotypes that can be seen as insensitive or harmful, particularly in their portrayal of African culture. *Skyrim* sits in between, drawing on real-world cultural influences to build its fantasy races but sometimes reinforcing stereotypes that affect in-game interactions. Overall, the discussion highlights that although CR is common in games, its quality depends on how accurately and respectfully it is handled.

4.0 Methodology

As a part of this dissertation there will be a study using questionnaires that gathers insight through both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the player viewpoint of accurate CR within CDs both through games and original designs.

4.1 Survey on Dissertation Topic: Player Opinion

Player opinion is imperative to a game's success or failure, by using Microsoft Forms[51] a survey will be conducted to investigate both qualitative and quantitative data from 15 participants that are frequently involved with games on three set games. This is to analyse the player themselves and how representation can be important or be meaningless and understand to what extent do players no longer appreciate, or ignore representation. The smaller sample size was utilized to focus on respondents within the VG industry, and the method of surveys was used over interviewing since it would reduce unconscious bias.



(Figure 11 – Cover title and description for survey 1)

4.2 Questionnaire on Original Cultural Character Design: Viewer Feedback

The survey aims to gather viewers' opinions on accurate CR in character design CD, focusing on recognisability and its importance. Conducted via Google Forms, it collects qualitative and quantitative data from 30 participants involved in gaming, either professionally or casually so that it is clearer which players do not follow the response bias.

The survey includes open, closed, and multiple-choice questions based on 15 original character designs across three genres; horror, fantasy, and post-apocalyptic. Each genre features five designs inspired by Welsh, Māori, Iroquois, Korean, and Russian cultures, allowing analysis of perceptions of cultural accuracy in character design.



(Figure 12 – Cover title and description for survey 2)

4.3 Objectives

The project aims to explore the balance between accurate cultural representation in VG CD, considering both positive and negative uses of stereotypes. This will involve reviewing academic literature on culture, stereotyping, and CD.

For primary research, 15 characters will be created, with 5 evaluated through a survey to gather qualitative and quantitative feedback on cultural readability and the role of stereotypes. A second survey will compare three case studies, focusing on player responses to different types of representation.

SMART objectives will guide the project. The specific aim is to assess how accurately cultures are represented in game character design, including both appropriate and stereotypical portrayals. Success will be measured through responses from at least 30 participants across two online surveys.

The project is achievable using accessible tools like Photoshop and Microsoft Forms, along with academic resources from the library. Its relevance lies in analysing player perceptions of cultural representation and evaluating the importance of accuracy. A Gantt chart will be used to manage progress and ensure completion by the end of the 2026 academic year.

4.4 Project Planning

Following the overall project plan discussed previously, a GANTT chart was created to optimise organisation and track where in project everything should be completed by to succeed in efficiency



(Figure 13 – Personal project GANTT chart)

5.0 Development and Analysis

The following is an analysis of the development of the project, focusing on the primary research conducted through surveys, specifically through the use of Microsoft Forms. Both surveys conducted were completed with a sample size of 15 for the first and 30 candidates for the second, with a focus on participants that play VGs in order to receive accurate quantitate and qualitative answers associated with games and CDs mentioned in association with the extent of which players recognise and think about representation.

5.1 Survey on Dissertation Topic: Player Opinion – Analysis

The first of the surveys conducted, questioned player viewpoint on CD and further questioning associated with the VG Overwatch, RE5, and Skyrim, conducted in the case studies to discover how stereotyping and cultural portrayal are represented and the impact or lack of impact on players. This analysis' focus will be on the responses that agree or contradict the research conducted in the literature review.

In total, a series of 35 questions with the survey taking a total of 30 minutes for the average candidate to complete.



Q2:

(Figure 14 – Answers to question “Gender?”)

Most participants presented were male, with this in mind a subconscious bias toward questions pertaining CR could form.

Q4:



(Figure 15 – Answers to question “Association to games?”)

The participants answers suggest that the survey reached the correct audience and that responses should be accurate to how players feel about representation in VGs.

Q8:



(Figure 16 – Answers to question “From 0-10, do you think the character line-up contains enough cultural diversity?”, referring to RE5)

The responses align with the point of view that RE5 lacks cultural diversity, with 70% of participants agreeing with this statement.

Q10:

7	anonymous	In my opinion, the portrayal of the African villagers in Resident Evil 5 feels quite mixed, but leans more toward being problematic. While I understand that the series typically uses infected locals as enemies, the lack of more balanced or humanised representation makes it come across as reinforcing negative stereotypes. Especially in an African setting, it feels like there could have been more effort to add context or diversity in how characters are shown. Although characters like Sheva help to balance this slightly, I still think the overall portrayal could have been handled more carefully.
8	anonymous	I think they portray the village as being quite poor and dirty, which I would consider to be a stereotype of Africa and not a representation of Africa as a whole, however this can also be a reality for many places.
9	anonymous	NA
10	anonymous	From the parts I have played, their portrayal follows stereotypes posed by western views of African villagers.
11	anonymous	Fine, the story is more about the demographic location being in Africa not the people themselves
12	anonymous	Its very story driven and I dont think it reflects on the African variable. Given that Resident evil 4 focuses on a whole white community being infected.

(Figure 17 – Answers to question “If you HAVE played 'RE5', what are your views on their portrayal of the African villagers within the game? If you have NOT played, note 'NA' below.”)

Of the 20% of participants that responded, the commonly used description of the game is “stereotype” which when evaluated, coincides with the narrative that the games portrayal is offensive.

Q14:

8	anonymous	I think overwatch has quite a diverse range of characters already, however I have not seen characters outside of the gender binary represented in the game
9	anonymous	No suggestions, each character has design choices that pay homage to their particular cultural backgrounds
10	anonymous	Add more variety into body dimensions for both male and female characters, in the case of female characters only 2 have a different body structure than the "standard slim" feminine body type
11	anonymous	I think overwatch fits in fine with representing different diversities
12	anonymous	I think there is a good representation in these designs for all demographics.
13	anonymous	Not sure
14	anonymous	Character designs are basically perfect. You can tell that their diverse without making assumptions.
15	anonymous	With the large amount of characters displayed and the story behind each I think their designs suit their characters well.

(Figure 18 – Answers to question “How do you think they could improve representation in their character designs?”)

This question explores deeper CD opinions by evaluating the representation made in Overwatch. Whilst Overwatch is widely considered to have one of the most diverse character rosters. Instead of pointing out culture, players want to see more representation in body types, which was not initially considered.



(Figure 19 – Answers to question “Many praise 'Overwatch' for their variety of characters from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. What do you BELIEVE makes them STRONG in this aspect?”)

The responses support the case of Overwatch’s diversity being their strong point, the variation of culture having a positive effect on representation, with one participant stating “All characters are unique and portray their personality - by both looking at their designs and playing them, each character feels unique and culturally diverse.”

1	anonymous	I think real life cultures can translate well into a fantasy setting but I think it completely depends on what culture you're trying to represent or base it on. I don't know enough about Skyrim to tell if it's been successful in this.
2	anonymous	Based from the example image alone I don't think skyrim has successfully portrayed a difference in cultures, their outfits and general designs are too similar from one character to another.
3	anonymous	people love fantasy
4	anonymous	They can, when done well. Using a balance of accurate cultural references and fictional
5	anonymous	I think they can work well, as long as the designers do thorough research and make sure they don't end up just doing stereotypes. It's also worth taking extra care if the fantasy culture you are making is going to be the "evil" or villain race, because that's where racism/anti-semitism tends to show up most often in games and media
6	anonymous	yes i think that this can work and it has in skyrim with the races in the game having their own culture but also having influences from real world cultures

Q20:

(Figure 20 – Answers to question “Do you believe real-life cultures can translate well into a fantasy setting? Why has 'Skyrim' been successful OR unsuccessful in achieving this?”)

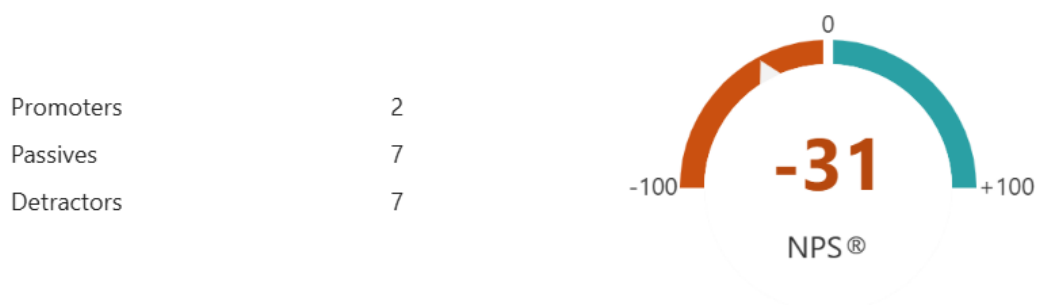
Based on responses, real-life cultures can work in fantasy, but only with careful, nuanced adaptation. In Skyrim, Nordic elements feel developed, while others rely on stereotypes, weakening the world and dividing player opinion.

1	anonymous	Yes, I think it makes games interesting, it would be boring to see the same person repeated multiple times, and it adds realism.
2	anonymous	Yes, it gives the opportunity to learn from each culture.
3	anonymous	i feel represented
4	anonymous	It allows me to experience cultures worlds apart from my own, and helps to educate others
5	anonymous	Yes, representation is important. If everyone in a given world looks exactly the same, then it's hard to tell characters apart or make them recognizable.
6	anonymous	yes i like it as when games tell stories from different cultures it allows me to experience that culture when i other wise wouldnt be able to

Q23:

(Figure 21 – Answers to question “Do you like seeing a variety of cultures represented in games? Why?”)

The extent as to how much players enjoy seeing varied culture in their CD was slightly different than was anticipated, the responses suggest players only prefer CR through CD when it suits its context and would prefer specific accuracy in design rather than a generalised design to fit the setting.



Q29:

(Figure 22 – Answers to question “If a character cannot be both, would you prefer a VG character to be culturally and historically ACCURATE or BEAUTIFUL with less accuracy to its origin culture.”)

The responses to beauty versus accuracy were mixed, though when reviewing the other questions alongside, the users that prefer beautiful designs over accurate ones, tend to be heterosexual males, suggesting that attractiveness in character appearance does play a part in their mind.

5.2 Questionnaire on Original Cultural Character Design: Viewer Feedback – Analysis

The latter of surveys sought out answers associated with culture focused CD with the use of actor designs created specifically for the project.



Q4:

(Figure 23 – Answers to question “From appearances only, what culture do you believe this character could be from?” Korean)

The following questions all followed the Joseon Dynasty Korean[?] CD, it surveys the topic of cultural accuracy and from the results suggests that despite the historical accuracy of the character’s design, players cannot distinguish the differences between it and other East Asian cultures.

Appearance
the clothing shows the traditional Japanese attire and the smoke looks like something from Japanese folklore
They look like they could be a myth or folklore in certain asian cultures
The design of the clothing this character is wearing resembles traditional women clothing from the Japanese culture
I feel that the design mimics the vibes of what is described under japanese myth
The clothes mainly.

Q6:

(Figure 24 – Answers to question “Based on your answer for the previous question, why do you think that?” Korean)

A confidence in respondents’ answer indicate an agreement with an earlier point made, suggesting a lack of knowledge on design would lead to a stereotypical view of a character, with no real focus on its origin.



Q10:

(Figure 25 – Answers to question “From appearances only, what culture do you believe this character could be from?” Iroquois)

Based on the Iroquois design, answers typically followed the same pattern of native American recognition but not the individual specific culture within the broad range. This further alludes to the narrative that cultures can be represented clearly and still not be understood fully without context.

the makeup and headpiece represent traditional native american attire
I like how it reflects what Indigenous people would wear in the time period this is based in, plus the inclusion of animals like legs could suggest myths and beliefs of these people
The design of the clothing slightly resembles the clothing found in African culture
Character color scheme reflects that of some traditional native clothing
Mainly due to the hair and animal hide they are wearing.
The warpaint on the character's face and the way they are dressed

Q12:

(Figure 26 – Answers to question “Based on your answer for the previous question, why do you think that?” Iroquois)

Most participants then connote that the primary reasoning for their choice is due to depiction of animals in the design, one participant suggests the design is stereotypical in its expression.



(Figure 27 – Answers to question “From appearances only, what culture do you believe this character could be from?” Welsh)

However, for the third design only around 55% of participants recognised Welsh cultural CD and thus implies that difficulty understanding sources of culture comes from its lack of popularity and representation in media.



Q18:

(Figure 28 – Answers to question “Based on your answer for the previous question, why do you think that?” Welsh)

From the participants that did recognise it as Welsh culture, only around half understood it was from Y Mari Lwyd folklore, which suggests that the extent of accuracy relies on players understanding the context, which some players may not have.



Q22:

(Figure 29 – Answers to question “From appearances only, what culture do you believe this character could be from?” Māori)

Of all designs, the Polynesia was the worst one received, only 2 participants understood its origin. Interestingly, it denotes that straying from stereotypical expressions of culture can impact and confuse viewers.

	n/a
	the colour scheme make them look like they are a nature god, but the pose and the cracks in the body make them look like a mossy statue
	The colour, and the the attire
	The clothing seems to resemble Greece mythology
	In line with nature, reflective of hawaiian culture
	From someone with little knowledge on cultures and beliefs I don't think it is incredibly obvious. But again please note I have very little knowledge.
Q24:	The shell necklace and skirt make me think he characetr is from Austronesian culture

(Figure 30 – Answers to question “Based on your answer for the previous question, why do you think that?” Māori)

Participants acknowledge the links to Polynesian culture but do not believe that the cultural links are strong enough to encourage the understanding of the CD.



(Figure 31 – Answers to question “Use one word that you think best describes this character.” Russian)

The horror aspect of the design came across but highlighting a disconnect between design and culture, the only reflection of culture is the clothing which is noted by participants as a lack of representation despite the historical context behind the design.

not sure
something royal because of the cloak
Japanese
Romanian
I wish I could give an answer, but I wouldn't know where to start.
I think the character could be from Slavic cultures
Norse, Northern/ Eastern European, Slavic
Q28: haitian?? one of the ones where they eat mummys and eachother

(Figure 32 – Answers to question “From appearances only, what culture do you believe this character could be from?” Russian)

Overall there’s a large variety in the responses, the most notable reflections of accurate CD helping to understand that although accuracy is valued, the overall design and context is much more important, accuracy alone is not enough to represent a culture since many players will incorrectly view it as a different culture, opposed to the one being displayed. This highlighted a disconnect, where stereotypes were higher valued in player understanding, and overall helping the representation shown.

6.0 Evaluation

During the project, there was a necessity to include some of the personal practical work into the paper to garner primary insights on player view. This took place during the surveys using 5 originally designed characters and asking questions relating to their cultures, this ensured that not only would players get to analyse CDs from already created games, but CDs that are not commonly found, and seeing how opinions differ depending on the amount of representation of a culture is reflected in the visual design. This would further the discussion of what extent of culture is represented by comparing the views of lack of representation expressed in the secondary sources, to the primary sources created with the CDs. The five cultures chosen for the survey was Welsh, Iroquois, Māori, Joseon Korea and Russian not only due to the variation but because of how uncommon they are to see in VG CD.

Overall, the responses to the surveys with the CDs went well, most of the characters were recognised and were able to give me a deeper insight into how stereotypes can be beneficial to a design when set in the correct context.

To improve further there would be a survey created for all 15 designs rather than just the five of them, the reason they were not all added into the survey was due to how long the survey had become, with only the initial five it had become a survey of 45 minutes on average to take and thus would be unrealistic for participants to take a survey of any longer time.

From the experience, it's understood that the comparison of both real games and CDs done for the practical were a beneficial way to garner information that can both support and deny the literature review and case studies. That being said, what can be learnt is that increasing sample size and creating further shorter surveys for the practical designs, may be beneficial not only for answers but for frequent broader analysis on respectful cultural CD in games.

7.0 Conclusion

Everything from the secondary to primary research, were all conducted to understand and gauge as to what extent is culture reflected accurate in VG CDs and to consider the effects of stereotyping. By analysing literature such as books, research papers and academic articles, garnering insight through studying popular modern VGs Overwatch, RE5 and Skyrim and by creating two separate surveys on the topic, it would garner insight into the accurate and inaccurate CR in gaming and was able to evaluate player opinion on accurate cultural reflection.

During the literature review the findings overall imply that cultures are represented commonly, though it argues that it is often the same cultures and follows stereotypical views of cultures rather than including historical context. The first category was an analysis of representation in VGs, following the research, it's clear that certain genres coincide with specific cultures, which argues that some cultures are better suited to contexts and seem forced if they're places outside of their 'typical genre'. A second piece of literature on the topic suggested that diversity in representation was beneficial for player relatability, though clearly uncommon in most games despite its apparent value. It explained that representation, regardless of portrayal was important to players and is actively sought after in CDs. Cultural accuracy was imperative for the information gathered and managed to develop insight that although cultures are represented frequently in media, which contrasts the previous point, it is not reflected accurately, and it is something that games need to build on. Games rely on stereotypes which make for a lack of accuracy and overall undeveloped design for a character that would benefit from accuracy, not only for the design itself but for players and educating them on real-life cultures.

Furthermore, another topic analysed to define the extent of CR is the argument of defining appropriation versus appreciation. The primary understanding gathered from the sources suggest that appreciation is only something that can be defined by people of that culture, what is often seen in games and television media is "hollywoodisation"[14] but on the other hand was argued by another source suggesting, particular cultures prefer beautification since it paints the culture in a pristine light. This argues that stereotyping is not always a negative thing when it comes to CD and is preferred if it doesn't take away from the representation already present. The final literature topic explained the negative impacts of stereotyping and how without previous context can be used as an easier readability example for players but can otherwise be offensive if misused.

The case studies focused on Overwatch, RE5 and Skyrim. All three contain clear contrasts in the way they portray CR. They all include varied CDs, Overwatch with its diverse roster, RE5 with its inappropriately portrayed cultural diversity and Skyrim with its fantasy cultures based on real-life ones that players have mixed views about due to the realism and discrimination portrayed.

To support the research made, two surveys were created in order to dive further into how players react to stereotyping and diverse character rosters in their games, and if they believe it is necessary to see more, or if what is portrayed currently in popular games is enough. This helped to grasp an understanding that players are fond of representation but are not always able to recognise it to the extent in which it is shown and express that stereotyping can be both beneficial and damaging to design and recognisability which removes the point of representation to begin with.

To conclude, the findings in the dissertation were able to provide significant insight into the extent of representation of real-life culture in games, its focus on CD and the accuracy of cultures compared to the stereotyping suggested that although culture is commonly reflected in VGs, they are not often reflected correctly, and the negative impacts of those stereotypical views can outweigh the good in games that are not able to reflect a CD respectfully. Survey responses suggest that players welcome cultural diversity in games, provided it aligns with the game world, maintains immersion and supports the video games story-narrative. If further research on the topic was conducted in the future, there should be an encouragement into discussing the views of players for overly diverse games, and to what extent does it become almost pointless in its representation.

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10.0 Appendices

Appendix 1: Korean character in survey



Appendix 2: Iroquois character in survey



Appendix 3: Welsh character in survey



Appendix 4: Māori character in survey



Appendix 5: Russian character in survey

