The Britishness of 'British Video Games'

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British government policy has much to say about video games, through production support, regulation, and recognition (or lack of it) of their cultural nature, with games defined and promoted as part of the creative industries in a manner which owes much to film policy. Yet the drive to promote both the games industry and games culture, and the inconsistent usage of terms like culture and creativity, produces tensions between different elements of 'Britishness', expressed and experienced not only through policy, but also through the creation and consumption of games. In considering the specificity of games' contribution to British identity, therefore, we must understand how different elements of cultural policy interact with the interests of audiences and creators to define 'British games' – games which have the quality of being, or being seen to be, British. Such games might be expected not only to represent British culture within a global marketplace, and to project soft power, but also to address the British nation in some manner. This diversity, of global and local, of present-mindedness and nostalgia, suggests that British games articulate a complex and plural sense of national (cultural) identity.

Video games, British games, national identity, tax relief, cultural diplomacy

Introduction

In this article, I attempt to explore what it means to describe the 'Britishness' (or lack of it) of British video games.[1] Considerations of British culture, British identity, and the conception of the UK as a nation are very timely at present. Following the

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[1] I use 'video games' and 'games' interchangeably to refer to electronic games played on some form of display (e.g. monitor, smartphone). The terminology used to describe such games varies in policy documents and reports, where they have appeared as interactive leisure software, computer games, video games and digital games.

referendum vote to leave the European Union in June 2016, public debate around these issues has become extensive and heated in the UK, against the backdrop of rising nationalist sentiment in countries throughout the economic West. As Britain goes through a process of national reimagination, then, games scholars must consider the role played by games in this process.

In recent years, video games have demonstrated an increasing capacity to make political interventions, with games such as *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) and *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014) passing comment on politically-charged issues like immigration and conflict. Other, more subtle interventions take place when games reflect (or elide) diversity (e.g. Higgin 2009), afford alternative histories (Chapman 2016) or convey ideologies (Bogost 2007). In tension with such creative work, government policy has much to say about video games, through the support granted or denied to their producers; through their regulation, or lack of it; and though the extent to which they are recognised as things which produce symbolic meaning and experience, rather than as 'merely games'. And games are, of course, played, through which activity meaning is made.

Amidst these tensions, what contribution can/do games make to a sense of Britishness? The connection between national identity and media forms is well-rehearsed, not least in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (2006), which argues that there is such a thing as a national media, and that consumption of this media works to constitute a national community of values and ideas. Accepting, then, that there are even such things as 'British video games', what are they? How are they identified, and by whom, and how do competing pressures affect the outcome?

To understand how this functions in the context of Britain not only helps us to

understand how it might function elsewhere, under other national ideologies, but also highlights the specific contribution that games make qua games, rather than as generic forms of media text. Much has been written on national film, for example, so can we envision games as distinct from film in the contribution that they make to national identity? To say yes would be to argue not only that games are cultural – a position extensively rehearsed – but that they are cultural in their own terms, rather than as a result of their similarities to forms *like* film. The analysis that follows will attempt to draw out the specificity of games as well as their conformity to pre-existing conceptions of the relationship of media and identity.

Nation, film and games

Imagined Communities was distinctive in situating the emergence of national identity in the new world and not the old, a position contrary to the mainstream perspectives of scholars such as Ernest Gellner (1983), Anthony D. Smith (1991) and Eric Hobsbawm (1992). Yet there was no fundamental disagreement here on the conception of the nation itself: for Smith, a nation was

> a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and
> historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common
> legal rights and duties for all members (1991,14)

in comparison with Anderson's 'imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign', made possible by the cultural opportunity of print-capitalism (2006, 6-7, 37-46). The nation, then, is a politico-cultural construct, built on commonality/community, 'a cultural and political bond, uniting in a single political community all who share an historic culture and homeland' (Smith 1991, 14-5).

If the newspaper was the media form on which nations were built, however, a more diverse selection of media texts sustain them. It may thus be unsurprising that the connections between national identity and particular forms of media have been widely explored in academic work, perhaps most substantially in the space of film, in terms of Britishness at least. Andrew Higson's 'The Concept of National Cinema', published in 1989, has been followed by a wealth of analytical work (e.g. Hjort & MacKenzie 2000; Williams 2002; Leach 2004; Hjort 2005; Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah 2011; Hill 2016), which, along with Higson's own further explorations of British (1997) and specifically English (2011) cinema, aims to understand not only what national cinema *is*, but how it is valued by national communities and their governments. This discussion of the national often sits in tension with the global nature of the film industry, however, and the idea of transnational cinema has also been important in this debate (see, for example, Higbee and Lim 2010, and Bergfelder 2005).

By comparison, there is surprisingly little research which engages directly with the concept of the 'British video game' as something demonstrably British. The work that does exist predominantly focuses on the historical scope of British games (e.g. Gazzard 2013; Wade 2016), supplemented by a small amount of published work which explores contemporary policy and industrial contexts for games within the UK (e.g. Mac Síthigh 2014; Woodcock 2016), and by panels on comparative industry and production studies at recent Games Studies conferences (e.g. Kerr et al. 2017). This scholarship is paralleled by a body of popular historical work, including books (Anderson and Levene 2012), documentaries (Caulfield and Caulfield 2014) and drama (Metzstein 2009), which typically focus on the 1980s 'golden age' of the British games industry. Beyond these engagements, British video games and the

British games industry generally appear in the context of discussions of games at a global level (e.g. Wolf 2015). This paucity may, of course, arise from the medium's relative immaturity as an accepted cultural form, but may also result from the marked tendency to see games and film as close cousins, and thus to see the work of Hjort, Leach, et al. as supplanting any need for reflections emerging directly from Game Studies.

Certainly, Film Studies provides a useful set of tools for understanding national media and cultural forms. Higson, for example, has proposed useful divisions between economic, textual, consumption-led and critical elements of nationhood (1989), demonstrating an acute sense of policy tensions between industrial and cultural Britishness (2011). Ideas of 'national cinema', however, remind us that games and films differ. The term encompasses medium, venue and canon in one, with a grandiosity about a sense of exhibition which is entirely absent from (and arguably inappropriate in) the debate around games. Given the limited literature available, though, it proves necessary to draw upon these models from film, albeit perhaps with caution.

Policy

As already implied, cultural policy provides a major space for the articulation of a sense of British games. Policy around video games in the UK has been distinctly shaped by policy around film, something demonstrated by the expansion of the remit of the British Film Institute (BFI) to the administration of the 'cultural test for video games', used to assess eligibility for 'British video games certification' (BFI 2017a), the passport to tax relief aimed at games companies registered in the UK. Introduced in 2014, this test, and the corresponding tax incentives, largely replicate (in structural

and procedural terms) the cultural test introduced for film tax relief in 2007.

Although it is underpinned by a cultural test, cynical observers have suggested that the tax relief is little to do with the protection of culture and exists instead for entirely economic reasons (Mac Síthigh 2014, 19). Jeongmee Kim argues that the definition of culturally British cinema in the 1990s was an attempt to differentiate British films within increasingly global media production and markets (Kim 2003, 405-6, 408), and the tax relief for video games emerges from similar pressures. Concerns were expressed that British games lacked global appeal (Spectrum Strategy Consultants 2002) and that the support policies of competitor nations, Canada in particular, were resulting in an exodus of talent from the UK (Gibson and Gibson 2008; Bakhshi and Mateos-Garcia 2010). It is also noteworthy that, after the initial cultural test proposal for film was rejected in 2006, it proved necessary to make the test markedly *more* cultural in order to satisfy the European Commission (Magor and Schlesinger 2009, 315-6; Hill 2016: 712-4), meaning it would no longer be possible to receive tax relief for a film simply because it was made in the UK by British workers. The cultural test for video games broadly mirrors that for film, and so games join discussions about the relationship between industrial and cultural Britishness mid-stream.

Yet while it owes a significant debt to film, the cultural test for video games would be unlikely to exist at all without the precedent set by the 2008 introduction of tax relief for French games (for a full discussion of this, see Kerr 2013). This process saw what was in effect a division between game developers, who supported the cultural recognition of games, and international publishers, who argued against such recognition. As Kerr notes, there was additional complexity, as Ubisoft, a large

international publisher, acted 'locally', against the interests of its fellow publishers (2013, 226).

These publishers had been concerned to avoid 'content and access regulations developed for cultural industries in Europe' (Kerr 2013, 228), and these concerns were reiterated following a UK government commitment to pursue similar relief (BIS/DCMS 2009, 129). ELSPA, the Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers' Association (later known as Ukie – The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment) indicated their support for tax relief, but their concern

> that the provision of a tax relief scheme on cultural grounds […] could be an irreversible first step towards the imposition of retail levies or further protectionist regulation aimed at sourcing funding to support the tax relief scheme (Martin 2010).

Although Ukie later retracted its reservations, they had clearly been heard. Tax relief was announced by the UK government in the March budget of 2010 (HM Treasury 2010a, 56), but withdrawn following the general election later that year (HM Treasury 2010b, 50), with culture minister Ed Vaizey suggesting that concerns about a cultural test, amongst other things, indicated that 'not everyone in the video games industry necessarily thought the tax credit was a good idea' (Scottish Affairs Committee 2010, Q205).

A tax relief system underpinned by a cultural test was, of course, ultimately introduced, albeit some years later. This test, through which games 'qualify as British' (BFI 2017b), presents criteria in four sections, offering a total of 31 points, with detail offered through supporting guidance documentation (BFI 2016). Scoring 16 points or more qualifies a game as sufficiently British for tax relief, as long as a proportion of those points derive from the game's content, rather than simply the context of its

production. Sections address national dimensions of 'Cultural Content' – setting, characters, plot and language (16 points); 'Cultural Contribution' – representational innovations, heritage and diversity (4 points); 'Cultural Hubs' – production location (3 points); and 'Cultural Practitioners' – the nationality of the production team (8 points). This distribution reflects that in the cultural test for film as originally certified, whereas the current film test has changed subtly in the interim (BFI 2017c). It was in the two initial sections, on content and contribution, where points were added to make that original test more cultural, with content increased from 4 to 16 points, and contribution newly added (Magor and Schlesinger 2009, 315-6). As the documentation suggests, however, this is a test concerned with the 'definition of a British video game' (BFI 2016, 7). It may primarily be for the purposes of tax relief, but in making this assessment, and in publishing the list of games which have passed, the BFI here sets down a marker for what a British game *is* or *can be*, and thus what it might reveal of, or contribute to, our ideas of Britishness.

It is interesting, then, to reflect on the contribution of the European Commission (EC) here. Through its intervention, the original test was made effectively 'more cultural', and 'the nationalist dimensions of this test were significantly enhanced' (Higson 2011, 6-7). Certainly, the only place in the guidance where the phrase 'culturally British' is used is in respect of the discussion of cultural contribution (BFI 2016, 14-15). Yet there is a corresponding Europeanising pressure within the fabric of the test, too; for this is as much a European cultural test as it is a British one, designed to conform to the state aid provisions of Article 107 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Indeed, beyond that small section on cultural contribution, only the language and production location elements of the test for games specify the UK as a necessity (BFI 2016, 13, 17). In all other areas, use

of the term British or UK is qualified by the phrase 'or any other EEA [European Economic Area] state'. It would not be possible to achieve 'British game' status on the points in the UK-specific areas alone.

As Kerr has observed (2017, 147-8), although the European Commission's Directorate General for Competition were reassured that the planned tax relief would focus 'on a small number of distinctive, culturally British games' which struggled to find private finance, the relief is readily exploited by multinational publishers. According to information published by the BFI Certification Unit (BFI 2018), 481 games had received final certification under the scheme by the end of 2017. While these represent a broad range of different kinds of video game, including browser-based serious games, mobile games and massive, multiplatform releases, it is noteworthy that this list of 'games certified as British' is populated not only by independent productions such as *Surgeon Simulator* (Bossa Studios 2013) and *Worms W.M.D.* (Team 17 2016), but also by a large number of properties underpinned by transnational developer/publisher relationships. These include games developed by British independents, under the auspices of large international publishers (e.g. *Forza Horizon 2*, developed by Playground Games and published by US giant Microsoft Studios), and games produced by studios which are subsidiaries of non-British international companies (e.g. *Formula One 2017*, developed and published by Codemasters, a subsidiary of Mumbai-based Reliance Entertainment). Significantly, the list also includes global hit *Grand Theft Auto V* (produced by Rockstar North, a British-based subsidiary of a US company) – perhaps not a game we might expect to struggle for private finance – and, more surprisingly, *Gears of War: Ultimate Edition* (produced, it is generally understood, by Vancouver-based developer The Coalition,

again for Microsoft Studios). In total, by July 2017, almost £119 million had been paid out since the introduction of this tax relief in April 2014 (HMRC 2017, 7).

The cultural test, then, immediately suggests the complexity that the idea of British games holds within it. We might see the tensions that Higson talks of between the industrially British and culturally British (2011, 6) as effectively encoded within the test: content and contribution vs. hubs and practitioners, and in this mode, and in light of the concerns with the original film test, uncertainty about the purpose of the test perhaps seems justified. This scepticism seems equally valid in respect of the cultural test for games when one considers, as Daithí Mac Síthigh has pointed out, that not even the culture minister mentioned the word culture in the press release to announce its ratification by the EC (Mac Síthigh 2014, 7).

Soft power

It is important to acknowledge, however, that both in the case of video games and in the case of cinema, the concerns which led to the introduction of tax relief do appear to have included not only economic performance but also the cultural dominance (and effective hegemony) enjoyed in particular by the US, and also, in the space of games, Japan. (Indeed, Mia Consalvo (2006) has argued that the global console games industry is effectively a hybrid of US and Japanese corporations). In terms of cinema, governments intervene when frightened of a foreign cinema, and while this can be a purely economic fear, it is a response driven far more strongly when national film consumption results in the widespread circulation of the ideas and values of a foreign state (Higson 1989, 43). And this, of course, only describes a situation at home; that nation's cultural products might also play a similarly representative and influential role in other nations.

Games are equally sensitive to these pressures of globalised economies and culture. Location within a global (cultural) marketplace is already a feature of writing on games (e.g. Carlson and Corliss 2011), and recent work suggests a continuation of this trend (Fung 2016; Kerr 2017). Cultural sensitivities are particularly strongly demonstrated by studies of games in a South East/East Asian context, arising in part from political tensions between Japan and her former colonies in Korea and China, and between Japan and Taiwan on the issue of national recognition. These tensions resulted in historic restrictions on Japanese cultural goods, which made these markets more difficult for Japanese companies to penetrate, with a corresponding positive impact on domestic games industries, supported by significant investment from government (Jin and Chee 2008, 46-7) and other technonationalist policies (Ernkvist and Ström 2008). Yet evidence again suggests that these are politically complex interventions that run beyond the merely economic; in China, for example, these supportive policies are paired with informational restrictions which reflect a fear of cultural impact (Ernkvist and Ström 2008, 99, 105).

Much as with film, then, there is a sense, or at the very least a fear, that video games can be culturally influential. It is widely accepted that games can carry ideological weight (e.g. Frasca 2003; Galloway 2006; Bogost 2007) and thus, following Althusser, can convey 'the set of ideals, values, doctrines, principles and symbols that defines a social order' (Althusser 2001, 96; Saber and Webber 2016, 4). When circulated internationally, therefore, they can be seen as a tool of 'cultural diplomacy', a key component of 'public diplomacy', sometimes called 'soft power' (see Nye 2004; Schneider 2005). Given their market dominance, we might imagine that this works for the US and Japan already, although Chi-Ying Chen's examination of the performance of Japanese games in Taiwan suggests that, while successful at

building and burnishing the image of the nation, games may be less successful at driving broader consumption of national goods (Chen 2013, 423). Elsewhere, the presentation of a copy of *The Witcher 2* as a diplomatic gift from Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to US President Barack Obama in 2011 (Goulter 2011) suggests that games are being taken seriously as units of cultural exchange.

For Britain, soft power is a tremendously important aspect of international presence, with one 2015 report suggesting that the UK is unmatched in its capacity to project soft power internationally (McClory 2015, 25-6), ahead of both Germany and the United States (although Brexit will pose a significant challenge here: MacDonald 2016). This is articulated through organisations charged with cultural diplomacy, such as the British Council and BBC Worldwide, and, increasingly, through the activities of large companies engaged in what has been referred to by the British government as 'commercial diplomacy' (Bell 2016, 76). Other private sector elements to play an important role include the various creative industries, as well as major sporting institutions (McClory 2015, 26). Of course, such cultural diplomacy is underpinned by robust cultural policy, and here again Britain has been tremendously influential internationally, in particular around this notion of 'creative industries' (e.g. Flew and Cunningham 2010). In effect, however, a distinction between an emphasis on culture (as in cultural industries) and creativity (creative industries) is inscribed throughout British cultural policy (see Garnham 2005), posing questions about the cultural status of games and their corresponding place within cultural diplomacy. Due to the aforementioned international policy influence, these questions arise in the context of a number of other countries as well.

Culture vs. creativity

The shift in tone in UK policy from 'cultural industries' to 'creative industries' took place during the late 1990s under Tony Blair's Labour government. As Nick Garnham (2005) has remarked, the change was neither meaningless nor simply rhetorical, and marked an attempt to connect cultural work to the idea of the information society and knowledge economy in order to make strong claims for the economic value of the sector. In so doing, it broke down some pre-existing barriers between previously identified cultural workers, and software producers, publishers and media organisations, collapsing as it did so a distinction still being made in 1997 between creative workers on the one hand, and media industries on the other (2005, 26). The outcomes were policy principles seen by Garnham as artist-centred, popular with the arts lobby and a move away from a focus on distribution and consumption (2005, 27), placing an emphasis on the 'creatives' themselves. However, subsequent attempts to measure the value of these sectors suggest that this emphasis was increasingly realigned to the 'industry' component of the equation (echoing, perhaps, David Hesmondhalgh's concern that policy based on ideas of creative industries signals a 'considerable degree of accommodation with neoliberalism' (2008, 552)).

In any event, the result of this policy has been a discomfort about the relationship between culture and creativity in cultural policy in Britain and elsewhere; a position in effect that all cultural work is creative, but not all creative work is cultural. While the combined idea of cultural and creative industries, CCIs, has increasingly been adopted at European level (see European Parliament 2016; Comunian, Chapain and Clifton 2014), usage (in the UK at least) is inconsistent. The creative industry label tends to capture the value or economic priorities of IP generation, with cultural industry more emphatic of symbolic meaning, of identity and

of heritage, with value measured in those terms. This is clearly apparent in the attempts to promote the creative industries, as part of that process of cultural diplomacy, for example in the discourse of the Creative Industries Council, which promotes the UK's creative industries 'to the world' as they put it. Their website presents a raft of UK creative successes, including games alongside advertising, architecture, arts & culture, craft, design, fashion, music, publishing, technology and TV and film; but note that these are separate subsections, so a division is drawn between arts and culture and everything else (CIC 2017).

The British government also articulates the national brand through the GREAT Britain Campaign (2017a), an international promotion of 'the best of Britain'. Here, sub-brands like Business is GREAT, Shopping is GREAT and Countryside is GREAT sit alongside Culture is GREAT and Creativity is GREAT. Games appear twice in the featured gallery, using images of *LEGO Lord of the Rings* (produced by Traveller's Tales, a subsidiary of Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment) and *Sea of Thieves* (produced by Rare, a subsidiary of Microsoft Studios). In both cases, along with TV, comics and, unusually, theatre, they are branded as Creativity. It is fine art, sculpture, museums and festivals that merit the Culture tag. Close examination of the supporting imagery (GREAT Britain Campaign 2017b), however, indicates a further complexity to the presentation, with links suggesting a complex interweaving of departmental responsibility: Creativity is predominantly the purview of UK Trade and Investment (recently replaced by the Department for International Trade), Culture that of Visit Britain (i.e. the British Tourist Authority); both, occasionally, also fall under the remit of the British Council. Confusingly, Film apparently has its own section (directing interested parties to UKTI). This in itself might pose a question on the extent to which government

direction on these matters is a balance of thoughtfulness and raw pragmatism, while also conveying a sense that Britain will sell you its creative output, but you have to visit if you want to experience British culture.

Here, then, we can see something of the architecture of Britain's cultural diplomacy, and a national 'brand', as articulated, at least in part, through video games. This picture obtains further complexity when it is considered that the British Council, the nation's cultural relations organisation, has included games in its Arts Programme since early 2017 (British Council 2017). The plurality of labels for games from the perspective of policy and support – through the cultural test, through cultural diplomatic work and through the marketing of the creative industries – demonstrates that games are used to present Britishness both in creative *and* cultural terms by the UK government and attendant organisations, even if this presentation is enormously inconsistent in the language it employs. Indeed, the confusion of voices is perhaps ironic given that the games sector so lacked an unambiguously cultural voice that, in taking on the cultural test, the BFI had adopted that role almost by default just 3 years ago. Thus while British games exist to the extent that the UK government can champion and employ them, and the industry which produces them, to project cultural power, this remains relatively new ground, and calls for an equivalent of We Are UK Film (Ukie 2016, 4, 7), and for a British Games Institute (BGI 2017), continue to betray the draw of the pedigree of cinema.

These distinctions between culture and creativity matter because they reflect different perceptions of how creative and cultural output – in this case games – can be, or be seen to be, British. The fluidity and inconsistency of this terminology is central to what is in some ways an attempt to grasp the ungraspable – the definition of a mutable concept like a specific national identity based on the material remains it

leaves behind. Yet what it also demonstrates is the lack of certainty with which we can recognise that tension between industrial and cultural Britishness with respect to games. In many ways, we can read this relationship as mapping directly to that of creativity and culture in the discussion above; one focused on the making, the other on the communication of values and ideas. And certainly, it would be comfortable to think of things in this way, at least until we return to the cultural contribution section of the cultural test, which allocates points not only for the presentation of British cultural diversity and cultural heritage, but also for cultural creativity (BFI 2016, 14).

In this collapsing together of the two elements of discussion, however, we might appreciate that reference to diversity; for it is perhaps the case that British games are at present defined by a willingness to recognise diversity, and to celebrate the polysemy of the label. As we have seen, government policy around games deploys them as part of a complex presentation of Britishness, itself having many parts and contradictions. Through its presentation, the cultural test in fact seems to make two arguments of this kind: firstly, in the numerous references to other EEA states, it argues for the 'European-ness' of British games as a minimum criterion, and their protection as part of, rather than in spite of, the European Union and the single market. And secondly, in the notion that the most British of these games – those which achieve the highest points ratings – will be the output of creative producers working in the UK, and reflecting British values and interests – it argues that these games have the potential to genuinely reflect everyday Britishness, through the conveyed experience of those who live there.

Britishness

This idea that British games are something which articulate the most mundane

elements of living in Britain returns us to the discussion of nation at the outset of this piece, and Smith's proposal that a nation is, in essence, people sharing things, one of which is a place. British games, as defined in the cultural test, are British because they arise from these processes of sharing – of stories, space and daily experience. Yet, as Anderson's thesis makes clear, in order to contribute to a sense of Britishness, British games must do more than simply reflect, present and engage with it: they must communicate that Britishness to the British themselves. Higson remarks that the parameters of national cinema should be drawn as much at the site of consumption as at the site of production (1989, 36), and for games this is even more surely the case. Distinguishing games from films, William Uricchio notes that, where films present to the reader, games give over to them 'the creation of coherence and meaning', allowing for 'wide-ranging user structured meanings' (2005, 328, 332).

Of course, films are not restricted to a single interpretation, and it is considered 'highly difficult' to incorporate a 'nationally specific and stable meaning' into a film at the level of production (Bergfelder 2005, 326). But in presenting national identity, games allow for negotiation around the terms of that presentation, allowing the player to selectively edit it. This may be even more pronounced in those games which offer the capacity for users to generate content. *LittleBigPlanet*, for example, a series of games developed originally by British independent Media Molecule, provides a range of tools allowing players to make their own objects and levels, and it has been argued that this grants it the potential 'to serve as a forum for cultural engagement, empowerment and meaning making', albeit within the limitations of the game's code and mechanics (Grimes 2015, 384).

The very fact that the experience of playing a game, and thus the message, ideas and values communicated, might differ from player to player seems at first

glance to present a challenge to the core conception of the imagined community. For how, if our imagined community arises from the playing of a game, can it be constituted if we all play the game differently? Yet the print media upon which Anderson built his theory were plural and varied, and what occurred in relation to those media was not only consumption of political positions and ideologies, which would naturally have varied across the media spectrum, but news of events, the presentation of specific forms of language in reported speech and the narrative of stories, all contextualised within the ritual of reading the paper itself.

National identity, here, is thus an aggregate of differing views of the nation, not the dominance of a singular view; as with games, then, the community is built not through homogeneity but through diversity, and through the discussion that diversity produces about the responses to particular information, grounded in a specific cultural context. Transnational, diasporic influences, the work of those who 'have a presence within the nation […] but find their origins quite clearly beyond it' help to extend this diversity, questioning the 'fixity' of the national discourses produced in these exchanges (Higbee and Lim 2010, 11). The imagined community is then created through wondering what others did when confronted with a dilemma, and in some cases realising that many would have acted as you did because national enculturation led them along that path. Indeed, the significant challenge to the imagined community arises from a different direction: that Anderson postulated a national media, the purpose of which was to communicate to and between members of the nation – inward looking, then, in its imagined audience. Yet as we have seen, British cultural policy is driven strongly by a desire to export British culture (or British creativity), to aim at a non-British audience as much as a home audience. So do 'British games'

addresses British audiences, not simply as a subset of an international audience, but in a more direct and insightful manner?

Nostalgia and the local

In exploring the characteristics of European games, Óliver Pérez Latorre highlights a number of what we might consider traditions of British video game making – a 'magnificent reputation' for car racing games, strategy games including 'the famous *Football Manager*', games offering social commentary and/or critique – *Grand Theft Auto*, for example – and games incorporating satire and parody (Pérez Latorre 2013, 145-7). Yet while a number of these games have significant commercial appeal in the UK market and can sometimes trace their lineage back to earlier, more locally-orientated iterations (e.g. *Football Manager* to *Championship Manager*, originally limited to the British football league), the address of contemporary games of this kind is usually substantially international in orientation, often under the auspices of transnational ownership (Sports Interactive, developer of *Football Manager*, is a subsidiary of Japanese publisher Sega). Thus, while such games clearly offer the kinds of shared experiences which might constitute a community (see Crawford 2006), this is a community situated on increasingly transnational foundations.

This does not, of course, means that games in transnational circulation cannot incorporate content which speaks to, or reflects, a more direct engagement with forms of everyday Britishness. This is evident in the output of independent studios such as The Chinese Room, which have developed games situated within, for example, recognisably British landscapes, offering a referential form of experience which speaks to a British audience in a way that it may not do to international players. We can think of these games as British in a number of respects: they would meet the

criteria of the cultural test (produced in Britain, about Britain), and they are self-conscious, and indeed self-consciously artistic, about their representation of Britain: so, both cultural *and* British, perhaps. In games such as *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room/SCE 2015), this Britishness is firmly entangled with a sense of nostalgia. The landscape represented is that of the leafy lanes and cottages of rural Shropshire in the 1980s, and reviewers and commentators have discussed the 'familiar' Britishness (or indeed Englishness) of the game at length (see Stuart 2015a; Catte 2016; Smith 2016), with one commentator remarking that 'for my generation, it's like returning to our childhood and finding it deserted' (Elliott 2015). Notable, also, is the power of the game's soundtrack, 'inextricably tied to the English countryside', designed by composer Jessica Curry to, in her words, evoke a 'timeless' Englishness, based around a 'nostalgia for an England which never existed' (Stuart 2015b), one which needs to be explained to a non-British audience.

This is perhaps reminiscent of the claims to closed textuality sometimes made for European films, in their resistance to more 'open' American productions (Bergfelder 2005, 325), and a similar desire to access an imagined past has been identified in British film studies through the label of heritage film – productions which engage with what is often a white, middle class and imaginary Britain of the past, including costume dramas based on well-known literary works by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, among others (see Vidal 2012). In *Rapture*, the historical moment is rather closer to the contemporary, but the function of nostalgia is no less well-served. While this perhaps reflects a growing trend in video games to seek to engage the nostalgic leanings of their players, signalled in games such as *Gone Home* and *Blood Dragon* (Sloan 2015), we might also consider this nostalgic view of the British past to echo something of the Britishness of the moment. The rejection of the

European Union marked by the Brexit vote is widely acknowledged to contain a strand of deep nostalgia for the days of empire and colonies, a form of modern medievalism which hearkens back to a 'simpler' time. Yet the 1980s nostalgia of *Rapture* strikes a different note, that of childhood memories for those now in or approaching middle age – the first generation, indeed, who have grown up with video games. Importantly, as the reviews and comment show, *Rapture*'s nostalgia acts to build a community through an appeal to a shared past and the consequent common behaviours: those 'common myths and historical memories', that 'mass, public culture' (Smith 1991, 14).

Of course, games can foster an engagement with a nation's past in a way that moves beyond nostalgia, for example to a practical, contemporary engagement with a difficult past (see Martin 2016). Yet as the idea of heritage film suggests, constructions of Britishness in media forms tend strongly towards a nostalgic mode. As noted earlier, the historical work which typifies writing on British games tends to offer a critical engagement with what has become, in popular historical work, a golden age of games production, rooted in the 1980s and presented through the oral histories of the few (Wade and Webber 2016, 6). Yet the responses to the nostalgia of *Rapture* foreground a further set of ideas which develop a number of these issues, and perhaps offer another way of thinking through how British games contribute to a sense of Britishness: the idea of the local.

The field of local game studies seeks to unpick globalised narratives of games culture, and a central component of such work critiques the hegemony of the US, Japan, and even the UK, in game histories (e.g. Swalwell 2015; Wade 2016). Much like ideas of nation, ideas of the local explore distinctiveness at least in part through an engagement with a specific, shared past, and resist the imposition of external

narratives, here those of a particular creative and cultural form. But the idea of the local can also offer us further perspectives on how games present a form of national identity through processes of localisation. These demonstrate some of the more distinctive aspects of games' engagement with ideas of nation, operating at the intersection of policy/regulation and the text in a similar manner to the cultural test.

As Rebecca Carlson and Jonathan Corliss (2011) have indicated, localisation is more than simply translation, marking a complex mediation of the transnational circulation of games. Games are localised in response to the perceived requirements of particular national cultural contexts, leading in part to an essentialisation of the characteristics of different nations and a series of imagined 'natural' cultural divides coterminous with national boundaries (2011, 67, 70). Shaped by a variety of negotiations between different interested parties, localisation produces a variety of interventions, from the removal of culturally provocative elements (e.g. samurai on game boxes sold in South Korea) through to the addition of local cultural references (e.g. local car models in racing games; see Kerr 2017, 126-7). Yet this process also produces a rhetoric of difference, and the management of risk can result in a form of self-regulation, a tendency to conservatism (Carlson and Corliss 2011, 70-1). Products are made 'localisation ready' (Kerr 2017, 126) by the removal of explicit cultural references (Carlson and Corliss 2011, 66, 74), which would seem to undermine the contribution of games as vectors of national identity. Equally, some games are consumed precisely because of their foreignness, their 'cultural odor': 'the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas, often stereotypical, of its way of life are associated with a particular product in the consumption process' (Iwabuchi 2004, 57). In this process, then, those involved in localisation are

intermediaries (Carlson and Corliss 2011, 61); perhaps, following Bourdieu (1984), *national* 'cultural intermediaries', constructing odour rather than taste.

This conservatism is perhaps warranted, given the pressure that nations can exert on the capacity of cultural goods to circulate, and games can be banned if their core message is unpalatable to a nation's government or people. Yet games are also subject to interventions with effects radically different from those seen in other cultural forms; people replaced with robots to assuage the concerns of German regulators (Frank 2017), for example, or avatars amended to desexualise them for a non-Japanese market (Klepek 2015). In many cases, this appears to leave the game entirely undisrupted while offering potentially significant alterations to authorial intention.

This combination of the policing of national boundaries and the intermediation of localisation workers provides two forms of national identity outcome; it creates a negotiated Britishness in those games arriving in other nations, while imposing a form of Britishness on games imported into the UK. By extension, games of non-British origin shaped for a British market by the forces of active mediation and government regulation have some claim to Britishness, if only in the compulsion to conform to the shared 'mass, public culture' of the nation, notwithstanding their capacity to retain some sense of their originating cultural context.

To return to *Rapture*, though, there is a further manner in which locality can help us to understand how games can be British, or represent Britishness. This comes from the very specific local references in the comments about the game; the particular alignment to *England* rather than *Britain*. This is a politically and socially important distinction within the UK, as a nation formed of regions which are also countries in their own right, suggesting we would be mistaken to consider the local purely within

the global context: to see the national *as* the local, as opposed to something arising from myriad local contexts and activities. Might we then understand an inclusive imagined Britishness which accommodates the differences within the nation as well as the similarities, and in what manner do games speak to such an idea?

There are, certainly, moments in the story of British games which provide clear signals of this greater locality. The internationally successful *Grand Theft Auto* series, developed originally in Dundee, is littered with allusions to contemporary Scottish life – accents, dialect, beverages and even character names referencing a local football club (McLean 2017). Elsewhere, the nostalgia for the 1980s recalls a moment when British games hardware was part of the national industry, including specific, self-consciously Welsh hardware in the form of Dragon computers (Prior 2015). This suggests a richness to be found in text and hardware, even before we reflect upon what it means to *make* games in Devon or Cornwall rather than London or Leamington.[2] This suggests that further consideration of games might reveal a Britishness which goes significantly beyond a sense of nostalgia and of position in the global marketplace.

Conclusion

I asked at the outset whether or not we can see games as distinct from film in their engagement with Britishness, and while there are clearly significant commonalities between the two media forms in their regulation, and in their presentation of themes of Britishness, activities like localisation demonstrate the capacity of games to be distinct. In addition, the agency granted to players by games allows them in effect to

[2] For which idea I am indebted to Paul Callaghan of the British Council. Aphra Kerr (2017, 138) notes the importance of attention to the region and the city alongside national and transnational organizations in understanding cultural production.

perform Britishness themselves, offering a more nuanced and complex engagement with ideas of national identity than that possible through film.

As noted, this agency also allows for different ways of playing; and while I have argued that this does not undermine the capacity of games to constitute an imagined community, in an age of globalisation that imagined community has the potential to go far beyond the boundaries of the nation being imagined. It may, indeed, be drawn across lines which are not national in conception at all (as with *Football Manager*, for example). Anderson's imagined community of the nation is not simply a political community, however, but one which is 'both inherently limited and sovereign' (2006, 6-7). So, while we might see the projection of soft power as an attempt to extend the boundaries of that community, in a variety of more and less subtle ways, the interaction of national regulatory systems with practices of localisation works to reify and reinforce the limits to these communities, and to project sovereignty within those limits. Thus a sense of imagined national community arising from the consumption of imported media will be inflected by local constraints or interventions, as Carlson and Corliss indicate (2011, 62, 79). Furthermore, the logic of nation suggests, per Anderson's definition, that we must consider imagined communities divided by boundaries of sovereignty to be discrete.

The value of soft power rests in its ability to foster understanding and to potentially effect cultural change across these boundaries of sovereignty, and explorations of cultural relationships around games in (South) East Asia have made extensive use of the idea of hybridity, a postcolonial concept particularly useful here due to Japan's colonial past. Hybridity has been presented as a strategy adopted by Japan in order to maintain cultural subjectivity while adopting foreign ideas and technology, a process recognised through the myth of an 'essential Japanese ability to

take in, adapt, and control foreign cultural influences' (Martin 2016, 4, 7). In a similar manner, we can expect British games not only to convey a nationally-recognised form of Britishness but also a number of forms of hybridised Britishness too – indeed, Aphra Kerr has referred to localisation processes as 'designed hybridity' (2017, 137). Given that the Britishness of British games also draws upon the local cultures of the UK's component countries, it is clear that we have to reject an essentialised idea of Britishness here, instead accepting a discursive and fluid conception of national identity which can respect many different ways in which games might be British. That *Grand Theft Auto,* as a national icon of game production, is of Scottish and not English origin helps to unpick any confusion of Britishness and Englishness; yet at the same time, this series is set in a variety of imagined US cities, its maker the subsidiary of a large US publisher, offering a good example of the industrial/cultural tensions at play.

Grand Theft Auto's success would, however, imply that such tensions are more productive than they are problematic. That it, and other internationally-owned, successful game properties continue to be made in the UK is perhaps a testament to the success of the tax relief in making the UK a more attractive place to make games. If so, this is a success which is *not* purely economic, irrespective of the cynicism about the purpose of the relief. In the context of the cultural test, the tax relief acts to support an environment in which games can communicate Britishness internationally in a variety of ways, reinforced by the deployment of games as specific components of national branding and cultural diplomacy. That the games used most obviously in this way are produced by British-based subsidiaries of US companies is reminiscent of co-productive activities in film and, just as in film, suggests policy shaped from the outset by an international context (Schlesinger 2015, 30), in which defence of the

national industry is balanced against the recognition and exploitation of transnational opportunities for funding and collaboration (Hill and Kawashima 2016, 669).

We should also not forget that the cultural space secured here results from European pressures – the requirements and expectations of the European Commission in accepting the tax relief as culturally-motivated. This enables games produced in the UK to effectively circulate in an international space under the auspices of non-British publication and/or ownership, while retaining recognisably British (or Scottish, etc.) qualities and sensibilities, even in the face of the requirements of 'localisation readiness'. The transnational relationships thus encouraged produce a variety of hybridised forms of Britishness; hybrids which have, in effect, been sustained, if not created, by the strictures of EU membership and regulation, and its interaction with national cultural policy. It may be of interest in this respect to consider that these co-productive activities have occurred in the absence of access to the treaty frameworks supporting film, even though budgets for larger game properties (*Grand Theft Auto V* being one example) are comparable with those for major film releases.

The idea of the national, of Britishness, then, remains a ground of struggle. Yet it is apparent that the tensions presented and reflected in the space of policy, between industrial and cultural Britishness, between creative and cultural Britishness, and even between filmic and ludic Britishness, are productive tensions which celebrate and nurture a complex and hybrid Britishness, rather than prescribing a defensive and limited one. This position results from interactions between British policy objectives, European regulatory constraints, and the broader international marketplace and development environment for video games. The 'British' games produced in this environment, in all of their various forms, offer a capacity to present, represent, and allow a personal engagement with, many different kinds of Britishness.

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