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Tradition, Desire, Techno-Orientalism and Popularity: Oriental Elements in the 21st-Century Cyberpunk Video Games

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ABSTRACT

Cyberpunk is one genre with distinctive features, which depicts an apocalyptic world seeing technology as associated with capitalist oligarchy with highly solidified social identity and social class (Akşit and Nazlı, 2021). Nowadays, research about cyberpunk video games mainly focuses on the visual aesthetics of cyberpunk video games (Johnson, 2017). We adopted content analysis first to identify the oriental visual elements in 6 video games: *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED, 2020) (*CP2077*), *Gamedec* (Anshar Studios, 2021), *The Red Strings Club* (Deconstructeam, 2018) (*TRSC*), *VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action* (Sukeban Games, 2016) (*VA-11 Hall-A*), *Shadowrun: Hongkong* (Harebrained Schemes, 2015) (*SRHK*), and *Tales of the Neon Sea* (Palm Pioneer, 2019) (*TNS*), then analyze the historical and ideological reasons of using these elements on behalf of semiotic theory. This study reveals that using such elements in the 21st-century cyberpunk video games reinforces the stereotypes of Techno-Orientalism to a certain degree. However, these elements are mostly decontextualized as a representation of oriental culture and have no distinct error of oriental elements used but are mainly used to identify art style, which could be a helpful strategy for commercial selling.

Keywords: Cyberpunk, Video games, Orientalism, Textual analysis, Japan

INTRODUCTION

Cyberpunk is a subculture that emerged in the development of science fiction. Cyberpunk works have been widely influenced by Asian culture since the 1980s, including films and video games (Park, 2004). Cyberpunk games have mainly snowballed in the 21st century, and the oriental culture in cyberpunk is evolving. Thus, exploring the oriental elements in cyberpunk video games developed and published in the 21st century is vital.

To begin with, most of the existing investigations focus on the visual aesthetics of cyberpunk video games (Johnson, 2017) without in-depth analyses of their historical and ideological causes. This study searches for the typical oriental elements in six representative 21st-century cyberpunk video games, using content analysis in qualitative research to analyze the historical and ideological reasons for these elements. We bring out two research questions to fill gaps in existing research and make contributions to reveal the origins and

decontextualization of oriental elements in 21st-century cyberpunk games: (1) What are the iconic oriental elements in 21st-century cyberpunk video games? (2) What are the historical and ideological reasons for these oriental elements appearing in cyberpunk video games?

This study lays the foundations for future research in the relevant field and collates oriental elements and related connotations that have implications for game makers. Additionally, the world can better identify stereotypes about Asian cultures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to McFarlane, Murphy and Schmeink (2020), the term 'cyberpunk' might originate from Bruce Bethke's "Cyberpunk" (1983). From a movement to a culture, now it can be seen in many multimedia works, which generally portray dystopian worlds where technology is associated with capitalist oligarchy and highly solidified social identity and social class (Akşit and Nazlı, 2021).

This study mainly focuses on the East Asian elements which are commonly seen in cyberpunk works, including East Asian languages, characters, visual elements, and cultural references. For example, Rivera (2014) and Gibson (2001) pointed out the link between cyberpunk and Japan. In addition, Park (2004) mainly focused on the oriental elements in Hollywood movies. However, few studies focus on oriental elements in cyberpunk video games, which is a temporary blank that this study might fill.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative research strategy and employs a series of case studies to collect and analyze the application of the representative oriental elements in video games, predominantly East Asian. Due to the limited workforce and time resources, the game choice has been narrowed down to cyberpunk video games published after the year 2000, including *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Gamedec*, *The Red Strings Club*, *VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action*, *Shadowrun: Hongkong*, and *Tales of the Neon Sea*, and the researchers have collected oriental elements from the games, such as visual design, audio material, and storyline, are categorized and coded for textual analysis from different perspectives.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Ethnic Tradition

Numerous Chinese elements appear in the selected games, namely game characters dressed in traditional Chinese costumes and accessories, Chinese architecture such as wooden arch bridges, and iconic cultures such as Daoism. Chinese elements in the selected games are no longer limited to the representative East Asian slums of Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City, which were used as stereotypes of China's poverty and backwardness bonded with the cyberpunk genre. Game makers use Chinese elements without apparent errors in the selected games.

The development of Chinese elements in cyberpunk games is mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, to provide exotic feelings, the cyberpunk genre is bonded with Hong Kong in history. Secondly, China's cultural influence grows as the country's strength and national economic status have increased (Huang and Ding, 2006).

Among the oriental elements found in this study, countless symbols come from Japan. Many character identities such as samurai, yakuza, and geisha, traditional Japanese costumes such as kimonos, traditional Japanese architecture such as torii and izakaya, and decorative elements such as koi and cherry blossoms visually contribute to the atmosphere of Japan.

As the most iconic imagery in cyberpunk culture, Japan is the result of its multidimensional approach and its rapid economic growth in the 1980s (Paulk, 2011). Thus, Japan has become one of the most popular sources of inspiration for cyberpunk video game makers.

Otaku Culture

Otaku culture is a sub-culture that germinated and developed in Japan. Otakus are mostly between 18 and 40, usually male (Azuma, 2009). They consume specific animation, comics, and games, usually produced by Japanese companies. Otaku culture links tightly to the post-WWII Japanese society and capitalism. In selected cyberpunk games, Otaku culture mainly appears in character and item design.

The character design links the Otaku culture to the cyberpunk theme. Julianne Stingray, the protagonist of the *VA-11 Hall-A*, is a typical otaku, bringing a new perspective to cyberpunk storytelling, unlike the rebellious hero seen in cyberpunk works such as *CP2077* and *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019). Besides, the selected games also contain a number of typical otaku items. In *TSN* and *VA-11 Hall-A*, players can find game consoles. Both of them look similar to Nintendo Famicom, the rise of which replaced the arcade game machines, which were mainly developed or originally designed by Americans (Picard, 2013), hinting at the rise of Japan.

Allusions in games create a communication system that allows the audience to interpret and discuss. We believe this communication system suits the elements we found in cyberpunk games. In selected games, there are multiple allusions related to Japanese animation. Most of these elements are well-known characters, such as an Android in *VA-11 Hall-A*, which has an appearance referring to Hatsune Miku. Besides, the appearance of the character Mario and his preference for motorcycles is a direct homage to Shotaro Kaneda, the protagonist of *Akira* (1988). This reference also appears in *CP2077*, where the appearance of one motorcycle is identical to what Shotaro Kaneda has driven. Such Easter eggs referring to Japanese anime and manga have a positive commercial impact because of the overlap of audience.

Oriental Metaphysics

The philosophy of "Zen" originated in India as part of Buddhism. It was then introduced to China and then Japan. In recent years, American popular

culture has adopted Zen as an oriental icon and has applied it to many artistic works.

In *TRSC*, In the dialogue between Diana and Donovan, Diana used Zen philosophy to refute western dualism and to try to persuade Donovan to accept the program, which can eliminate people's negative emotions. However, the player's final goal is to destroy this program. Therefore, we may conclude that this game's attitude towards Zen is not positive. Zen was also mentioned in *CP2077* when the player-controlled character (V) met a Zen master and learned meditation from him. According to this monk, practicing meditation is helpful for V to balance the two souls in V's body. This is indeed one of the realms that meditation seeks: Be the master of your own body and your own mind. In conclusion, both games show an appropriate understanding and application of Zen.

Feng Shui and Qi (also known as Chi) originated in China, influenced by Buddhism, Confucian, and Daoist traditions. Feng Shui is about identifying, manipulating, and utilizing the ubiquitous life force of Qi. In *SRHK*, Feng Shui and Qi are more than just a philosophical system but a form of magic in this world. The interpretation of Feng Shui and Qi in the game is basically the same as the actual meaning in Chinese traditional culture with only slight exaggerations, and it has successfully attracted players to pay for this mysterious oriental magic world.

Oriental Cityscape

Stylistic cityscape design has been one of the distinguishing features of cyberpunk visual culture, and it is not difficult to spot some 'oriental' elements which resemble highly with cities such as Tokyo and Hong Kong. From the beginning of 'Cyberpunk' as a science fiction genre in the 80s, it has been a hybrid cultural field with transnational multiculturalism and notable reference to other pop culture forms like crime fiction and film noir, which are closely connected with urban transitions in postwar America. In *Blade Runner* (1982), the tradition continued with the 'asphalt jungle' of LA replaced by the post-modern collage of urban landscape taken from Shinjuku and Kowloon city. This section focuses specifically on Orientalism in the cityscape and built environment design of cyberpunk video games in recent years through cross-media historical tracing and close analysis of two influential examples: *Shadowrun: Hong Kong* and *Cyberpunk 2077*. Although the visual design of cityscape in cyberpunk games generally adopts previous works under this genre, the capacity for the video game as a new medium presenting cultural diversity and multi-layered decentralized space is enormous.

DISCUSSION

Through all the findings and analysis, three main features can be found: authenticity, Techno-Orientalism, and strategy for selling. These features reveal the cultural attitude, ideology, and marketing consideration behind oriental elements in the 21st-century cyberpunk video games. This part combines the discourse criticism based on postcolonial theories and the observation from an industrial perspective, which aims to form a relatively

comprehensive discussion and strengthen the contemporary dimension of the seemingly obsolescent question of Orientalism under globalization and the age of consumption.

Authenticity

Through the games we research, the first summative feature of in-game oriental elements is their authenticity. The authenticity here means that the design of oriental elements generally follows the fundamentalist-like tradition based on East Asian culture, indicating the respect and fondness of the game developers. In this part, three main authentic uses of oriental elements will be analyzed, with three reasons for the authenticity of these elements in the following paragraph.

Firstly, the use of Chinese characters and Japanese kana is authentic. From logo design of in-game companies to signboards of Asian restaurants, the use of Chinese characters and Japanese kana follows the basic language grammar and fits into the context and environment. Unlike the illogical Chinese characters in *Blade Runner* (1982), the Chinese characters and Japanese kana are functional and appropriate.

Secondly, representing traditional oriental belief-related metaphysical concepts with detailed and appropriate explanations enhances the authenticity. Instead of barely borrowing names from these cultures, *SRHK* and *CP2077* embedded the metaphysical meanings of Feng Shui and Zen into characters' lines and gameplay, promoting storytelling and letting the players learn about the oriental culture.

Thirdly, Easter eggs in these games, functioning as homages to classic elements, especially those from Japanese manga and animations like *Akira* (1988), show the game makers' knowledge and fondness for Japanese pop culture. To pay tribute to classic Japanese fiction, game makers need to understand the memes and iconic elements of these works and naturally transform them into their own games with respect. Knowing and enjoying the otaku culture, Christopher Ortiz and Fernando Damas, the creators of *VA-11 Hall-A*, have brought authentic and humorous homage to Japanese otaku-related culture, adding extra joy to gameplay and topics for the fandom community to discuss.

Three reasons ensured the authenticity of these elements. To begin with, game makers from East Asia have started to create cyberpunk theme games with their East Asian cultural backgrounds. For example, the developers of *SRHK* and *TNS* are from Asia, which ensures the authenticity of oriental elements in their games. Secondly, considering the global market of video games, the game makers of games like *CP2077* have hired localization teams and consulted experts to avoid cultural appropriation and try to make oriental elements one of the selling points (*How did they localize Cyberpunk 2077 in Chinese*, 2021). In addition, globalization makes the cultural atmosphere different from that in the 1980s when William Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* with relatively limited knowledge of Japan (Gibson, 2001). The Internet, in nowadays globalization trend, as one of the main themes in the cyberpunk genre, helps the search for authentic materials for reference and online

communication in the real world, so that cultural appropriation can be avoided by consulting local people and localization experts online. The process reveals the intertextuality between reality and the fictional world, retaining authenticity to oriental elements.

To sum up, all three reasons lead to higher participation of people with East Asian backgrounds or experts in oriental culture, which ensures the authenticity of the oriental elements in 21st-century cyberpunk games.

Techno-Orientalism

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) laid the groundwork for many critical approaches to studying East-West relations in a postcolonial context in the humanities and social sciences. In this seminal work, Said defined Orientalism as a way of adapting to the East based on its unique place in the Western experience of Europe. Nowadays, with the rapid trend of globalization, especially in the world view of the 21st-century cyberpunk games, classic Orientalism cannot fully explain these oriental elements. Therefore, we will apply Techno-Orientalism in this study.

Techno-Orientalism represents a kind of conflict between the United States and East Asian countries, in which the technological progress of East Asian countries, especially Japan and China, is emphasized as the source of evil (Akşit and Nazlı, 2021). According to Morley and Robins (1995), it is an ideology and discourse formed after World War II due to the technological progress in the Far East and the hope of European and American countries to control modernity in the hands of the West. In the 1980s, as Japan's science and technology leaped to the forefront of the world and even reached the "post-modern position", the modern world represented by the United States and other western countries had to regard Japan as a symbol of the future (Akşit and Nazlı, 2021, pp. 201-202).

Early cyberpunk works have shown this concern: on the one hand, they believe that East Asia is what the future looks like. Therefore, abundant Oriental elements were being used indiscriminately without regard to their true meaning. On the other hand, the image of East Asians has shifted from the traditional Orientalist "Other" to the villainous "Robot" who controls large tech companies and the opposite is the West representing "human" (Morley and Robins, 1995). For example, the evil ship owned by a Japanese company in *Alien* (1979).

In these 21st-century cyberpunk games, we can see similar elements reflecting Techno-Orientalism. For instance, in *CP2077*, the biggest villain is a family-run Japanese company: Arasaka. The company's main operations include corporate securities, top-quality banking, and arms production. It is one of the most influential companies in the world of *CP2077* and wields great wealth and power.

In *CP2077*, East Asians, especially Japaneses, were described as the top class of this dystopia, living in the wealthiest area of the Night City, symbolized by robots and samurai, which represent the loss of self and personality, compared with the white society which symbolizes so-called liberal modernity (Rivera, 2014). For example, in the player's final showdown,

the opponent is Adam Smasher whose whole body was transformed by his employer, Arasaka Co, and looks like a robot.

In summary, through the analysis of the visual elements, characters, and plots of cyberpunk games, on the one hand, the Oriental cityscape and the Oriental characters with high technology reflect the Western vision of technological development in the Farsome novelty. Different fromthe commonly East. On the other hand, the depiction of Oriental characters mastering high-tech in the game is often negative or antagonistic, which reflects the fear and slander of technological development in the Far East. These two points, combined together, clearly embody the ideology of Techno-Orientalism.

Strategy for Selling

The third feature of oriental elements in contemporary cyberpunk games is to sell the unknown with the known, which means building innovation on imitation or homage to genre conventions. As globalization promotes the circulation of popular culture worldwide, to win the global market, game makers tend to repeat the 'classical' visual styles so that audience's awareness of a certain genre can be interpellated. Not surprisingly, this kind of audience can be considered as the audience of a niche market, which has been fans of science fiction or cyberpunk already and is happy to explore the sources of these elements.

Besides, for the relatively average gamers, the mixed oriental futuristic styles can be of some novelty. Different from the commonly used western fantasy theme or space sci-fi, the cultural hybridity of cyberpunk style embodies a post-modern aesthetic that criticizes consumerism through narrative while in approve of it visually. The oriental elements in cyberpunk games sometimes approximate a theme park that could be an exotic landscape to global audiences, even including East Asian gamers. After the collage and pastiche, those elements are highly decontextualized and become unfamiliar to their original belongers. As Shu-mei Shih illustrated in her work (2007), the formation of all world cultures is based on the decontextualization of the local culture. Here what has been decontextualized is not only the oriental elements themselves, but the use of them in classical genre forms back to the 1980s. Although the analysis of historical Orientalism before the foundational moment of cyberpunk fiction or cinema has shown the influence of Asia threat theory at that time, the video games after the Millennium treat those elements more like genre conventions that can be used as marketing strategies. In such a flurry of parodies, the denotation of the signs has been mediated and thus displaced and separated from their history.

This evaluation of cyberpunk culture represents a shared mechanism behind the production and reproduction of popular culture in the 21st century. Just like the use of high concepts in Hollywood blockbusters, the oriental elements function quite the same role in contemporary cyberpunk games after simplification and decontextualization, which has been seen as access to a global market.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the cyborgs and synthesizers, once a visualization of horror towards techno-dystopia, have become 'techno-cool' and

a kind of post-human in cyberpunk games like *CP2077* or *SRHK*. The mechanical implants are treated in a more positive way as they are helpful and stylish in the gameplay system. Likewise, the hidden concerns about consumerism and transnational capitalism in the context have been gradually suppressed, while the individual freedom and multiculturalism of the game characters and players are strengthened in the post-modern cyberpunk city, which makes the cyberpunk genre merging with contemporary youth and popular culture in a self-expressive way. Not only limited to the changing attitude towards oriental elements, the whole cyberpunk genre has been modified in its components to meet the needs of new players. In summary, the global market has played an important role in shaping the representation of the cyberpunk genre in games.

CONCLUSION

"Cyberpunk" as a genre of science fiction in the 1980s, has been a hybrid cultural field with transnational multiculturalism. The oriental elements found in these six games are currently used as cyberpunk-related elements to shape the cyberpunk world or to help players identify game features for sale and marketing. Admittedly, the creation and subsequent sale of games in a globalized context will make these localized visual elements gradually strip themselves of their original context and become a theme park-like landscape. However, we believe that even these elements that are out of their original contexts will, to a certain extent, influence players to solidify stereotypes of the cultures or people represented by these visual symbols, for they already have consensus on what concepts they are represented.

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