Towards a "Filipino" Video Game: Teaching Filipino Identity and Culture for Video Game Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to outline the challenges of teaching Filipino identity and culture in the creation of Filipino video games. In mainstream games, Filipinoness is used to cater to an international audience while the dominance of foreign-made games and the limitations of the Philippine market creates a difficult situation for Filipino developers to make Filipino video games for Filipinos. Using a method based on teaching literature and creative writing, four Filipino video games is discussed in the classroom to show students how these games use Filipino history, culture, and politics as source material for their narrative and design. The paper ends with a discussion of a student-made game and how the academe can contribute in the critical understanding about Filipino video games and in defining Filipino identity and culture.

Keywords:

Philippines, Filipino video games, Filipino identity and culture, teaching video games

"INTRODUCTION TO GAMES AND GAME DESIGN I"

The Ateneo de Manila University offers an interdisciplinary game design course with the course catalogue number CS179.15A and titled *Introduction to Games and Game Design I*. Though it is a course by the Department of Information Systems & Computer Science (DISCS) for its Computer Science students, it was designed with a more literary and philosophical focus as it is taught with an instructor each from the English, Filipino, and Philosophy Departments along with one from DISCS. I was assigned to teach this course twice—in the 1st semester of AY 2015-2016 and in the 1st semester of AY 2017-2018. The experience of teaching this course has given me an opportunity to think of ways to teach the students—who are mostly exposed to Western and Japanese video games—on how to use their Filipino identity in making video games as part of their course requirements.

But what makes a game Filipino as opposed to an American or Japanese video game? This is a difficult question to pose because of the dangers of essentialism and nativism posed by such nationalistic distinctions. But in a world of multinational video game development where homogeniety and Western narratives dominate, creating a space— especially in the academe—for students and future game developers to imagine video games as a means of expression that is closer to their own experiences is very important. What comes next is an attempt at how "Filipinoness" is used in video games by Filipino video games developers, how this "Filipinoness" is defined by these games, and what students can learn from them.

VIDEO GAMES ON/IN THE PHILIPPINES

The "Filipinoness" of a video game can be approached in three ways. First, the use in video games of characters, settings, visual design, sound, and narratives that are Filipino and portray experiences from a Filipino perspective. Second, the developers

and programmers of video games who are Filipino by blood and citizenship. Lastly, the Filipino players who play video games frequently and the games that exert a heavy influence on popular consciousness. This is obviously a variation of M.H. Abrams formulation of the differing aspects of interpreting a literary work by focusing on 1) the social and political milieu of the literary work, 2) the author or creator of the literary work, and 3) the audience of a literay work (Abrams 1953, 6-7). I would like to use this framework from Abrams as a way to think about Filipino video games as creative works that, though it can be played and appreciated without any prior knowledge about the Philippines, acknowldeges its Filipinoness.

Firstly, how does a video game use Filipino identity and culture as source material? If a game has characters, settings, visual and audio design, and narratives about the Philippines, can it be considered Filipino? Though *Front Mission 3* has a story arc with Filipino characters and that is set in the Philippines and various fighting games like the *Soul Caliber* and *Tekken* series have some Filipino or Philippine inspired characters, one can argue that these games are not Filipino video games because of issues of cultural appropriation (Barreiro Jr. 2015). More precisely, these video games use of multinational and multiethnic characters, settings, and narratives reflect the multinational and transnational nature of video game production and consumption. To appeal to a wider international audience, video games need to appropriate non-Western cultures within their games. This attempt at appropriating Filipino material in a video game is commendable for giving Filipinos space in their games. But I would like to believe that a Filipino video game developer would approach and handle the topic of Filipino identity, culture, and history in a video game with greater sensitivity as this is closer to his/her experience.

Secondly, is a video game "Filipino" if it is made by Filipino developers or a studio based in the Philippines? What if this game—made by Filipino developers and Philippine-based studio—is not made for a Filipino audience and has no content about or related to the Philippines, can it still be called Filipino? Ubisoft has recently opened a studio in the Philippines as a supplementary studio that contributes to the development of Ubisoft's main franchises like *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2019). One couldn't argue that *Assassin's Creed: Origin* is a Filipino video game just because a studio in the Philippines with Filipino workers worked on part of the game. In this way, creative freedom to experiment in terms of narrative content, along with video game design, would be important for Filipino developers to create video games that represent their experiences.

Lastly, what are the video games played by Filipinos? Ideally, Filipinos would play video games that are made by Filipinos and that has Filipino character, stories, and settings. But like how films shown in the Philippines is dominated by Hollywood films, so too are video games played by Filipinos dominated by foreign-made video games. This can be explained by the limited market for video games in the Philippines as video games remain expensive, accessible only for the middle and upper classes. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, a family of five in the Philippines needs P10,481 (around US$205) to live decently (Jaymalin 2019). For context, a video game disc costs at least P1,000 (roughly US$20) and a 500 gigabyte PlayStation 4 has a suggested price of P17,700 (around US$347) (Sony Playstation 2019).

This situation has created a precarious position for Filipino video game developers. Filipino video game developers are talented and creative as can be seen by how Ubisoft is willing to establish a studio in the Philippines. And there have been attempts to create video games about the Philippines, made by Filipinos, aimed at a Filipino audience. Anino Entertainment developed and published in 2003 the isometric role-playing game *Anito: Defend a Land Enraged* (Anino Entertainment 2003). Though the game won

some awards and is credited as being the first mainstream Filipino video game, it wasn't enough to sustain Anino Entertainment to continue creating Filipino video games for Filipinos. Anino would eventually be merged with a Thai video game studio in 2014 and is now focused in creating free-to-play mobile games for the international market (Anino 2019).

It is only recently that more Filipino studios and developers have started to develop more video games that are about the Philippines and have Filipino characters and stories. Filipino video game developers can now use Steam, for computers, and Google Play and Apple Appstore, for mobile, as platforms to quickly and easily release their games inside and outside the Philippines without the need to find a publisher in each territory. Crowd funding platforms have also been used to appeal directly to fans and audiences for support and alternative sources of funding to supplement traditional sources of investment for video game studios. It is this context—thinking about video game development outside the mainstream—that the module that I developed in AY 2017-2018 aimed to do.

ON FOUR FILIPINO VIDEO GAMES
To help students reflect about video games in the context of the Philippines, I discussed four Filipino video games developed in the Philippines. This approach is similar to what I use for my literature and creative writing classes. In creative writing, the discussion of classical or canonical literary works is used to create a baseline knowledge for the students on literary technique and themes that cen be models for their own literary works. This was also done in CS179.15A using Filipino video games to give the students 1) a sense of history of Filipino video games and what has already been done, 2) an idea of how "Filipinoness" was used in games in terms of narrative and design, and 3) to learn from the successes and failures of these games in using Filipino identity and culture.

The four Filipino video games that were discussed in four weeks were the already mentioned *Anito: Defend a Land Enraged*, *Nightfall: Escape* (Zeenoh Games 2016), *Political Animals* (Squeaky Wheel 2016), and *Duterte: Fighting Crime 2* (Tatay Games 2016). All these games are of different genres and deal with different aspects of Philippine culture.

Anito: Defend a Land Enraged is set in Maroka, a fictional island in Asia, after the arrival of the Senastille in the 16th century (Figure 1). The players can choose between the siblings Agila and Maya, the children of Datu Maktan, a chieftain of the Mangatiwala tribe. The story of the game revolves around the mystery of Datu Maktan's disappearance. The players would also have to fight Philippine mythological creatures like the *tikbalang* to progress through the story. Maroka is an allegory for the Philippines and the Senastille are the fictionalized version of the Spanish who arrived and colonized the Philippines.

Figure 1: Agila talks to a non-player character inside a house in *Anito: Defend a Land Enraged* (Gamespot n.d.).

Nightfall: Escape also deals with Philippine history and mythology. It is a first-person survival horror game set in the province of Ilocos, Philippines. The player takes the role of Ara Cruz, a journalist, who is investigating disappearances in an abandoned mansion. Like *Anito*, players encounter creatures inspired by Philippine mythology— *aswang*, *manananggal*, *batibat* and others. The player would have to unravel a mystery that dates back to 1896 during the time of the Philippine Revolution against Spain.
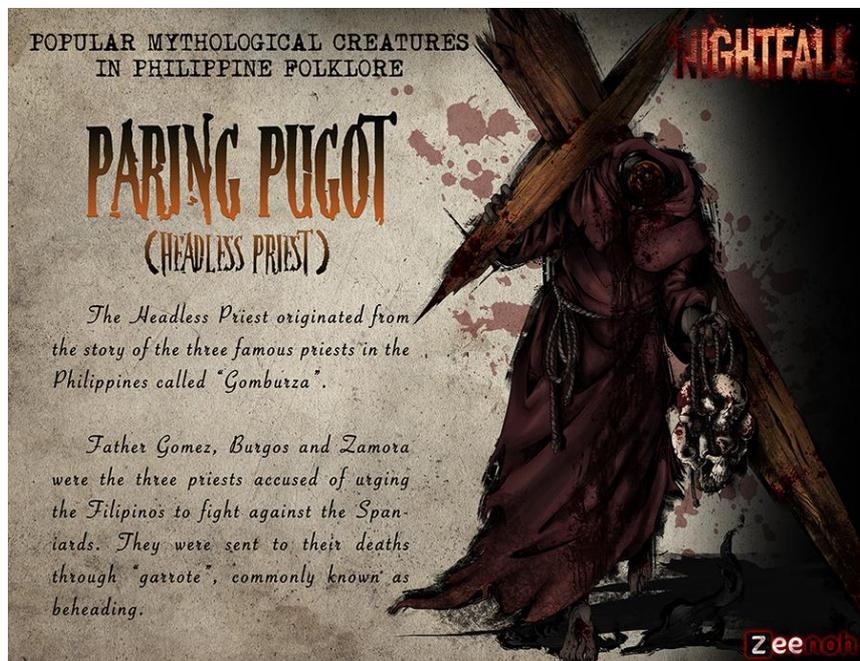

Figure 2: A promotional image of *Nightfall: Escape* explaining the historical roots of the headless priest (Aguspina 2015).

During the discussion of these games, the students would be reflect on the importance accuracy and faithfulness of these games in the use of Philippine mythology and history. A lecture on Philippine precolonial and colonial society was done to assess

this. Jema Pamintuan, in her essay "Anito: Paglalaro sa Lunan ng mga Arketipo at Laylayan" (Anito: Playing with Space of Archtypes and Margins), commends the use of the archtype of Philippine epic heroes and the use of indigenous material culture in creating the gamescape of *Anito*. But Pamintuan has also noted that the game's use of its Philippine influences also lead to exotization because, though it was made for a Filipino audience, its success hinged at the commercial success in the international market and an exotic setting and non-Western characters helped differentiate it from the competition (Pamintuan 2009, 94). *Nightfall: Escape* was less successful in capturing Philippine history and mythology. An example is the game's use of a headless priest to represent the three Filipino priests collectively known as Gomburza (Figure 2). The Gomburza are Fathers Gomez, Burgos, and Zamora, Filipino priests who were executed in 1872 after being falsely accused of conspiracy against the Spanish colonial government. The use of the headless priest to represent the Gomburza is historically inaccurate because the Gomburza were executed by garrote, a device that strangles its victims but doesn't behead them. Also, using the Gomburza as a historical reference for an enemy in the game is inconsistent to their image as martyrs who inspired the Philippine Revolution of 1896.

Students would be aware of the possibilities and the limits of how *Anito* and *Nightfall: Escape* handled the themes of Philippine history and mythology. Questions can be posed to the students in terms of how to brainstorm and think about any possible premise for a video game. How faithful can the developers be in representing history and mythology? How can developers balance being creative with being faithful and respectful to the source material? How can a video game balance the advocacy of representing Philippine culture but avoiding the pitfalls of self-exotization?

The next two games directly deal with Philippine politics. *Political Animals* is a turn-based strategy game that uses anthropomorpic animals campaigning to become the president of a country. As noted by Ian Bogost in *Persuasive Games*, strategy games like *Political Animals* aren't really about democracy but about electioneering use abstract systems to capture and quantify the inner workings of political electioneering (Bogost 2007, 91). In the case of *Political Animals*, the game captures through its mechanics the political culture of democracy in the Philippines. For example, the game highlights the personality-based politics of the Philippines when the player chooses a character in the beginning of a game. The player needs to consider the kind of personality and abilities that the character has and plan a strategy based on these abilities. The game also emphasizes the importance of money in launching and maintaining a campaign. Nearly all actions need money and the player must acquire money by any means necessary. Lastly, the game also gives events that the player/character needs to act on—events based on real Philippine experiences of giving favors, accepting bribes, and strengthening patronage (Figure 3).

Figure 3: The player in *Political Animals* must decide whether to accept a bribe and win the favor of a patron or reject it and win the trust of voters.

The last game, *Duterte: Fighting Crime 2* is a free-to-play arcade-style shooter for Android and iOS. The player takes the role of President Rodrigo Duterte as he prowls the streets at night to fight criminals (Figure 4). Released during the Philippine presidential elections in 2016, the game is an endorsement of Duterte and his campaign against drugs and crime. The game depicts Duterte as a hero/vigilante who uses violence to quell crime. But in the context of rampant human rights violations and extrajudicial killings, the game is a tool in spreading the violent ideology of the Philippine drug war.

Figure 4: President Duterte shooting a criminal in *Duterte: Fighting Crime 2*.

The two games handle politics very differently through game design. For *Political Animals*, it attempts to capture a complex and honest portrayal of Philippine politics through its game design without directly supporting or criticizing any politician or poltical party. On the other hand, the simple design of *Duterte: Fighting Crime 2*, where the player cannot but kill the criminals that he encounters captures the "kill or be killed" logic of the Philippine drug war. With these two games, the students would be exposed to concepts like "patronage politics" and "extrajudicial killings" as part of Philippine political reality and both games offer questions to students about the role of politics in video games and the role of video games in politics. Can the politization of video games be towards a strengthening of humanist and democratic values instead of violence and the deterioration of social and political discourse? How can the students make a game

that is both ethical in its handling of themes and critical of dominant social structures that perpetuates violence and misinformation?

STUDENT-MADE VIDEO GAMES AND THE ACADEME

Students can learn from previous games on how to avoid exoticizing the Philippines, creating honest portrayals of Philippine life and culture, and being aware of the ideological and ethical power of video games to influence popular discourse. Students will then become aware that making Filipino video games entails not just a basic understanding of programming but a broad foundation on the humanities and social sciences. Video game developers need to be storytellers, world builders, political analysts, and amatuer historians especially if they intend to create video games that captures Philippine culture, history, mythology, and politics. Video games can promote Philippine culture within and outside the Philippines but it can also be used to push for violent ideologies and be a tool of political propaganda. Students need to be aware and be conscious of the positive and negative impact of video games as a new art form.

The creation of video games in the university would give students an opportunity to experiment and make games that advocates for a deeper understanding and dissimination of knowledge about the Philippines and be a testing ground for what a Filipino video game can be without the pressures of market demands. An example is a video game made by Dominic Tristan D. Margarejo, Carlos Enrique P. Nava, and Anton Nikolai R. Tangan for their senior project as BS Computer Science majors. They created *Alibatas*, a puzzle adventure game that would introduce the player to baybayin, a precolonial Philippine writing system common among the Tagalogs of the Philippines but would be disused after the imposition of Spanish colonialism. Players would play as Matthew Talino and Christina Tamad, two students who need to solve puzzles to save their school from a magical curse. The aim of the game is to teach the players how to write and read baybayin in the form of puzzle challenges (Figure 5).
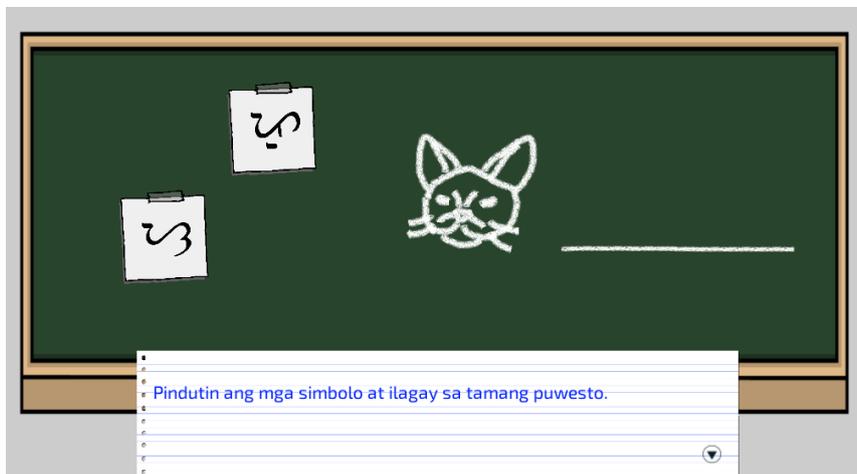

Figure 5: A puzzle in *Alibatas* on how to write *pusa* (cat) in baybayin.

With the help of student-made games like *Alibatas*, Filipino video games can forge a different path from the mainstream. It is here that ideas about "Filipinoness" can be transformed into a game that Filipinos, and even non-Filipinos, can experience. Again, "Filipinoness" is a contested identity. But it is through cultural and creative works like video games that this fluid idea is fleshed out and would help Filipino players think and understand what being Filipino is. Distributing these games outside the academe would be the next challenge. But it is my hope that, like literature, theater, and film that came before, video games would contribute in redefining Filipino identity and culture.

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