GAMES WITHOUT BORDERS: LOCATION AND TRANSCULTURALITY IN THE LATVIAN VIDEO GAME *THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL*

Mg. translat., Mg. hum. **Madara Stāde**
University of Latvia, Latvia

Abstract

This article examines the interplay and fusion of different cultural references in the construction of game worlds through the example of the Latvian video game *The Case of the Golden Idol* and its two expansions, *The Spider of Lanka* and *The Lemurian Vampire*. The examined games were developed by the Latvian game studio *Color Gray Games* and represent one of the most successful exploits of Latvian video game developers on a global scale. Since video games are one of the fastest-growing segments of the entertainment industry, developing methodological approaches to the study of video games is beneficial for actualising the existing theories in new topics and environments. The study is centred around a qualitative content analysis, which employs a combination of postclassical narratology, semiotics and intercontextual theory of hybridity. Research findings show that cultural mixing in the game is achieved through different strategies, such as evoking associations through familiar-sounding place names (e.g., Albion, Aquitan and Lanka) or mixing real cultural realia with fictional elements to create new, fictional societies and environments (e.g., by blending elements of Baltic-German manor house interior into the Britain-inspired environment of the main game). However, these strategies are not applied consistently and vary between the main game and the DLCs. The author also suggests a more comparative approach in the future to uncover more detailed systems of connection between game worlds and cultural inspirations, as well as points out the potential gains of depicting local settings in greater detail.

Keywords: *video games, game worlds, cultural hybridity, postclassical narratology, semiotics*.

Culture Crossroads
Volume 33, 2026, https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.564

ISSN 2500-9974

CULTURE
CROSSROADS

Introduction

As one of the fastest-growing branches of the entertainment industry, which is already larger than the music and film industries combined [Forbes 2023][1], video games are becoming the topic of an increasingly heated debate regarding the nature of art and the place of digital entertainment in it [Bourgonjon et al. 2017]. Various studies and monographs have examined the artistic and narrative potential of video games [e.g., Jones 2008; Clarke & Mitchell 2013; Karhulahti 2015] to explore the appeal of immersive, interactive forms of storytelling over more conventional, linear genres, such as literature.

Nowadays, Latvian video games freely participate in the overall industry development, albeit as a relatively small part of the total number of titles or revenue [Dumbere 2023]. One such game series, *The Case of the Golden Idol*, which was created by the independent Latvian game developer *Color Gray Games*, has earned critical acclaim and a steady fan base on a global scale [e.g., Parkin 2022; Ong 2022], even though its popularity in Latvia is not as widespread. In 2023, the developer released two expansions (or DLCs, downloadable content) to the game, *The Spider of Lanka* and *The Lemurian Vampire*, which supplemented the core plot and environment of the game. This was followed by a standalone sequel *The Rise of the Golden Idol* in 2024 and four of its own DLCs in 2025, providing a consistent flow of new content since the publishing of the original game. This makes the given video game series a suitable object for academic research, especially within the context of Latvian digital storytelling trends and their place in the global entertainment industry.

This article examines various elements of cultural interplay in the world-building and design of the first game of the series, *The Case of the Golden Idol*, and its expansions, *The Spider of Lanka* and *The Lemurian Vampire*. The second instalment, *The Rise of the Golden Idol*, and its DLCs are not included in this study, as they are narratively separate works, though set in the same imagined world. The use of transcultural elements in the game, as well as the potential reasons and strategies for their application are analysed. Structurally, the article first addresses the methodological possibilities and challenges for analysing transculturality and cultural hybridity in video games by clarifying key terms and theories pertaining to questions of cultural hybridity, narrative analysis and semiotics for game studies. The research is primarily based on qualitative content analysis of *The Case of the Golden Idol* (including both DLCs), with additional commentary from an interview with the developers Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš to better understand their motivations for combining elements of various cultures in the game. The second part of the paper is dedicated

[1] In 2024, the global video games market value reached 184.3 billion US dollars [Newzoo 2024; Gamesindustry 2024].

to discussion of research findings, employing the examined theories in practice. It is followed by conclusions and a list of sources.

Studying transculturality in game worlds: challenges and methodology

Digital games have come a long way since their two-dimensional inception in the 1950s to the vibrant works of the 21st century, and nowadays immersion and empathy play an increasingly important role in the player's experience [Cerny 2020]. Similar to literature or cinema, a video game's narrative unfolds in a fictional environment, i.e., a game world, which is governed by specific rules that determine the way players will interact with the game [Ryan 2009]. In the case of independent (or *indie*) games – a category that includes *The Case of the Golden Idol* – the decisions regarding the makeup of a game world depend almost solely on the developers; this includes the mix and ratio of different cultural elements and references that the player will come across during gameplay, as well as altering or combining real-life spaces and locations into fictional ones in a process called ludoforming [Aarseth 2019]. When asked about their decision of mixing vastly varying locations and cultural elements in the game, in addition to using English as its main language, the developers of *The Case of the Golden Idol* used the term "cosmopolitan" to describe their approach[2]. They felt that a local (i.e. Latvian) setting would not align well with the game's aim of reaching a global audience in order to gain success and it was decided to place the events of the main game in Albion – a fictional, Britain-inspired country. The DLCs, on the other hand, draw inspiration from various locations in the Indian Ocean Region, alluding to historical and colonial contexts.

The internationalised approach described above is at variance with the growing trend of producing translocal video games, in which specific, often peripheral locations are used to represent the local culture to a global audience [Eklund et al. 2024]. An exemplary case of this is the elevated interest in Slavic settings in video games, described at length, e.g., by Jaroslav Švelch and Jan Houška [Švelch & Houška 2025]. They underscore the phenomenon of "dual allegiance" in translocal games, as they rely on global markets but depend on local institutions and networks, including state funding [ibid.; Takhteyev 2012]. By contrast, *The Case of the Golden Idol* exhibits no such dual allegiance, since the funding offered by the Latvian state for video

[2] From an interview with Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš (5 November 2024, personal archive); Anthropologist Steven Vertovec defines cosmopolitanism as "a kind of xenophilia, or penchant for diversity" [Vertovec 2020: 64], which highlights the enriching qualities of cultural interconnectedness and aligns with the main idea that the developers tried to convey when explaining their creative choices regarding the references to cultures and locations in the game.

game development is comparatively sparse[3]. Thus, rather than feeling compelled to depict a Latvian-themed game world, the developers turned to the more universally known British environment, even if some of the themes in the game still maintain a connection to Latvian historical, cultural and social contexts. However, due to this choice, the analysis of the game poses another question – that of cultural hybridity.

As pointed out by Marwan Kraidy, when examining cultural hybridity in popular culture, one must remain wary of the risks of hybridity "being just a descriptive term for mixing cultures in media" [Kraidy 2002: 317], when in fact it aims to describe the underlying political and economic power structures that continue to exist in a seemingly progressive combination of cultural elements. The question of location, language and culture in *The Case of the Golden Idol* can raise the same question, especially when reflecting on the global, economic considerations of the game and how these considerations affected the selection and mixing of cultural elements in the game: "Based on a "customer-as-king" cliché arguing in favor of the alleged benefits of transnational capitalism to the world population, hybridity is enlisted as a natural dimension of global strategic marketing, predicated on conquering diverse niche markets" [ibid.: 328]. Although Kraidy warns of the risks of uneven transcultural relations in such scenarios – the eradication of smaller cultures and cultural imperialism, – he points out that hybridity is an inevitability, and thus it should rather be evaluated whether hybridity fulfils its progressive potential by being a "meaningful heuristic within intercultural and international communication" [ibid.: 332]. Thus, he proposes the intercontextual theory of hybridity, which abandons simplistic, generalised characterisations of transcultural practices and instead focuses on separate cases and the social, political, historical, economic, etc. motivations for each case of cultural mixing. Rather than trying to define the advantages or shortcomings of hybridity, Kraidy states that the reasons and gains from such mixing, as well as the modes of implementation should be studied [ibid.: 334]; each combination is unique and should be viewed as such.

An illustrative example is Mia Consalvo's research of hybrid culture in Japanese American console games, where she concludes that, contrary to usual expectations, the generally dominant American culture has given way to new, Japanese of pan-Asian inspirations in console video game content [Consalvo 2006]. This exemplifies Kraidy's idea of each case as a set of unique, unpredictable circumstances – even when predictably dominant cultures are involved. Consalvo also argues that "it is foolish if not dangerous to determine with any authority the 'essential' or 'fundamental'

[3] So far, there have only been discussions regarding such initiatives and all financial support programmes are aimed at digital solutions in general, meaning that game developers would have to compete with representatives of other industries for funding [e.g., Business.gov.lv].

national qualities that may be found in games", as these cultural references are adapted to the needs of the game itself and there is no guarantee that the players around the globe would read them the same way [ibid.: 127]. This provides a more defined set objectives to the analysis of transcultural elements in *The Case of the Golden Idol* as well, namely, to (a) avoid viewing cultural references as authentic representations, and (b) search for underlying hierarchies and motivations to interpret fictional allusions to different cultures. However, additional theoretical perspectives would help understand the cultural hybridity in terms of world building for games in particular – a task where narratology and semiotics can prove useful.

Narratology is an often-used theory for analysing video game content, as it contains multiple solutions that can be adjusted for such purposes. For example, the narratological notion of heteroglossia or intertextuality can help locate other bodies of text, including cultural references, that have influenced the development of the narrative structure of a video game [Kristeva 1980; Sekste 2013: 191]. The postclassical branch of narratology, which is more inclusive towards various media outside of conventional literature, offers the possible worlds theory, which originated in the domains of modal logic and philosophy and was later adapted for narratological purposes by Marie-Laure Ryan [Ryan & Bell 2019]. According to the theory, just as two or more separate scenarios (or *worlds*) may exist in real life, so does the division between the physical reality and the game environment represent two worlds as well. As Ryan points out, the code serves as a mediator that processes a player's real-life inputs and projects them on a screen (e.g., jumping, shooting a rifle, cooking a meal etc.). "Thanks to these visualizations, which function as props in a game of make-believe," she concludes, "players block out their physical environment and become immersed in the game world" [Ryan 2009: 166]. Video game and narrative design researcher Antonio J. Planells de la Maza reinforces this viewpoint, by stating that the fictional worlds within video games "contribute in a critical way to the current cultural imagination of contemporary society" [de la Maza 2017: 4]. This notion is crucial for analysing transculturality in video games, as it allows for the existence of alternate realities, where two or more cultural codes coexist in one space to no surprise of surrounding characters, and, as a result, this becomes acceptable and understandable to the players, who immerse themselves in these worlds as well. This is reinforced by the previously examined research by Mia Consalvo on Japanese American console games, where she concludes – by using the example of *Final Fantasy X* – that in game culture, geography and real cultural boundaries lose their importance and players are largely unperturbed by the mixing or merging of various cultural references in the game world [Consalvo 2006]. In a more general sense, this phenomenon may illustrate the possible benefits of presenting players with culturally diverse game worlds to promote more inclusive attitudes in real-life scenarios.

Another theory, which aligns with the objectives of this study, is semiotics. Although there has been a multitude of interpretations and schools of thought within the general field of semiotics, this article concentrates on the original trichotomy of semiotic signs – symbol, icon and index – defined by Charles Sanders Peirce [Short, 2007; Chandler 2017] and the branch on social semiotics, represented by, e.g., Theo van Leeuwen [e.g. van Leeuwen 2005].

The type of semiotic sign that is instrumental to this study is the index. Daniel Chandler, who has reformulated Peirce's theories on several occasions, summarises the index sign as a direct, causal connection [Chandler 2017: 41]. For example, smoke is an index for a fire; in a similar way a signature or handwriting points towards a certain person. Following the same logic, a person's appearance (including clothing, hairstyle) and customs may indicate which culture they belong to; the environment, such as nature and architecture, is an index for geographic location. People decode countless such indexes every day, by making causal connections between them and what they denote, and the same process of reference transfers to the decoding of game worlds. Thus, every time a connection between an object, feature or action and a culture is made in the qualitative content analysis of *The Case of the Golden Idol*, it is the result of an indexical interpretation.

However, to avoid oversimplified interpretations of index signs, various contexts and readings of the sign should be considered. Social semiotics serves as a bridge between simply locating culture-related indexes in the game and acknowledging the broader implications of intercontextual hybridity that these indexes signify. Social semiotics acknowledges that each game can be viewed as a text, and as such, is always connected to social discourses that exist "in the social-cultural landscape of their time" [Pérez-Latorre et al. 2016: 590]. One sign can mean different things in different cultures and discourses, or it can transcend cultures and illustrate similar experiences that different groups of people have experienced over the course of history or in various parts of the world. In addition, different social discourses can co-exist and contradict each other at one time or within one space. In their case study of the horror survival game *The Last of Us*, Óliver Pérez-Latorre et al. examined the friction of two such conflicting social discourses – anticapitalism and neoliberalism – within the game's narrative and mechanics. The postapocalyptic, urban scenery evokes a feeling of capitalism's futility in the face of a zombie pandemic and promotes the idea of cooperation over individualism to overcome it, whereas the importance of material resources during gameplay and the morally ambiguous ending of the game promotes individualism and consumption [ibid.: 600]. The overview of intercontextual hybridity indicates, that the same divide of semiotic meaning can happen when decoding mixed cultural references as well, as they can contradict each other or have different meanings depending on the cultural background of the players.

To summarise, the theoretical outline in this chapter helps answer different questions pertaining to the same task of analysing transcultural elements in the game world of *The Case of the Golden Idol*. The intercontextual theory of hybridity addresses the reasons *why* the elements of various cultures are mixed by inviting one to look past universal definitions of hybridity and to examine the unique social, economic and historical reasons for each case of such cultural mixing. Narratology and semiotics, on the other hand, help reveal *how* cultural mixing occurs in the game and *what* are the potentially shifting meanings of each cultural element.

Transcultural inspirations in the world-building of *The Case of the Golden Idol*

As defined by the creators themselves, *The Case of the Golden Idol* is a mystery and detective game, which contains both scientific and supernatural elements: "We wanted the magic system to be actually based on some kind of rational principle or logic, which could be figured out and used by the characters."[4] Story-wise, the main source of inspiration for the game was the novel *Foucault's Pendulum* by Umberto Eco, which presents a satirical depiction of esotericism and occult societies. The developers wished to cultivate a similar scepticism and uncertainty towards the supernatural in their video game, stating that they "found the novel's idea of an occult, invented conspiracy fun and [...] assumed it would also work well in the game."[5]

The plot of *The Case of the Golden Idol* revolves around a mysterious, magical artefact, which gives its wielder various supernatural powers depending on the mode of its use (e.g. the idol can manipulate such aspects as the laws of physics and aging). The idol is discovered by two men during an expedition to Monkey Paw Island, and one of then, Albert Cloudsley, kills his companion to keep the valuable artefact for himself. After remaining in the family for two generations, the idol is suddenly stolen. The task of the player is to follow the idol's journey as it changes hands, is obtained by a cult and eventually involved in a plot to overthrow the King. The narrative evolves through a series of scenes frozen in time, that the player needs to navigate to find clues and guess the true scenario of the event.

The visual design of the game was created by Ernests Kļaviņš, an acclaimed artist and illustrator with extensive experience in the field. According to Kļaviņš, the pixel-art aesthetic of the game was deliberately chosen to elicit "a sense of nostalgia for fans of the classic point-and-click adventure games of the nineties" [Playstack 2022]. The general nostalgia that the nineties video games evoke in players can be intercontextualised with the situation of the 1990's entertainment industry in Latvia,

4 From an interview with Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš (5 November 2024, personal archive); translated by the author.

5 Ibid.; translated by the author.

specifically. Having previously remained behind the Iron Curtain until shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union, Latvia did not experience the dynamic development of the 1980s Western video game market described, for example, by Steven Kent in *The Ultimate History of Video Games, Volume 1* [Kent 2001][6]. Thus, it could be argued that, in some ways, the 1990s videogames were a more novel and transformative experience for players in Latvia and the post-Soviet countries than it was for players in regions that were more familiar with the preceding array of games. Consequently, the nostalgia to which the developers refer in the interview has several layers of meaning depending on the specific culture and socio-political context through which it is examined.

Other inspirations for the game's art style include French illustrator Gustave Doré and English painter William Hogarth; by combining Doré's grotesque, intimidating scenes with Hogarth's traditional compositions the developers hoped to create a unique, expressive visual identity for the game [Playstack 2022].

Figure 1. Comparison of the poisoning scene in Act 2 of *The Case of the Golden Idol* [Color Gray Games 2022] (above) and William Hogarth's painting *Marriage A-la-Mode: 6, The Lady's Death,* (1743) (below).

6 This does not imply the absence of video games in the USSR – in fact, arcade games gained notable popularity among Soviet players during the 1980s; rather, the conception of the games officially available in the USSR was different, often more educational, as illustrated by *Tetris*, for example [Fedorov 2015].

Thus, the multiple cultural layers (English, French and Latvian) and time periods (present-day, 1990s and 18th century) that are at play in the game's visual design create a puzzle of their own, in which players of different cultural backgrounds can find familiar elements based on previous knowledge and associations. This illustrates the process described by Marwan Kraidy in the previous chapter: hybrid entertainment products are created due to the need to globalise for economic gain and to simultaneously address various niche markets.

Transcultural and hybrid elements can also be found in the design of the game world. As mentioned before, instead of a real-life location or one resembling Latvia, *The Case of the Golden Idol* is set in the fictional land of Albion, styled after England, to appeal to a wider audience[7]. However, not all aspects of the game world are entirely removed from the Latvian culture context. The most curious mixing of Latvian and British aesthetic indexes can be found in the indoor scenes of the game. There are several events that transpire in manor houses, where the interior design is visibly more reminiscent of the Baltic-German manor tradition than the classical English manor house. Some of the most visible indexes of this visual transculturalism are the curved ceilings and the blue-and-white glazed masonry stove in the Chapter 2 poisoning scene (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. A screenshot from Act 2, *The Case of the Golden Idol* [Color Gray Games 2022]. The blue-and-white masonry stove on the left side of the picture is strongly reminiscent of Latvian manor houses; there is no tradition of such stoves in England.

7 From an interview with Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš (5 November 2024, personal archive).

The tradition of intricate, often highly decorative masonry stoves in Latvian manors stretches back as far as the 15th century [Ose 2015]. As architecture historian Samuel Edgerton notes, masonry stoves have long been an integral part of houses and manors in the Northern parts of Continental Europe, including Sweden, Austria and Germany (and, by extension, Latvia), "whereas, in the British Isles, for some peculiar reason, this continental heating improvement was resisted. The great open fireplace, with all its inherent operational evils was retained in the English house" [Edgerton 1961: 20]. Therefore, British manors have a different layout and aesthetic, often with individual, open fireplaces in several rooms – something that is pointedly absent in the manor design in *The Case of the Golden Idol*. The developers did not remark on this detail as fully deliberate but rather implied that the inclusion of the stove in one of the scenes was an implicit, automatic decision[8]. In this instance, it is important to remember Mia Consalvo's caution in the previous chapter on determining any *essential* national qualities in games. The presence of Latvian manor elements in the game does not directly convey Latvian (or more precisely, Baltic-German) culture, and most players will probably not perceive them as such either. In fact, they might even view these details as decorative innovations that have no link to any real cultures. Instead, the example of the stove or curved ceilings is important because it implicitly reflects the cultural and visual space which the creators themselves are familiar with and thus recreate in their works.

In terms of heteroglossia, there are several references to famous works of mystery and horror. Although the previously mentioned novel by Umberto Eco represents a general inspiration for the game, there are location-specific intertextual connections, as well. Perhaps the most illustrative is the mention of the Monkey Paw Island, where the golden idol is first discovered in the game. The name of the location refers to the famous horror short story *The Monkey's Paw* written by William W. Jacobs in 1902. In the story, there is also a magical, albeit cursed, object (a mummified monkey's paw) that is brought to England from India. The paw grants three wishes, but at the cost of dire consequences [Jacobs 1902/1911]. In the game, Monkey Paw Island is inhabited by an imaginary nation called the Lemurians, which appears to be inspired by various Indian Ocean cultures. Thus, one can see how notions of the exotic Other represented by Jacobs are adapted and transformed for the game world.

[8] From an interview with Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš (5 November 2024, personal archive).

The introduction of Lemurians in Chapter 3 creates a broader cultural scope, which reaches outside of the European-inspired environment of the game. The use of an existing name of the mythical continent Lemuria, which allegedly used to be located in the Indian Ocean, [Ramaswamy 1999] aligns with the creators' choice of not mentioning any nation outright, but at the same time provides a sufficient associative link to India and its surrounding islands. In order to avoid a direct, arguably caricatured reproduction of cultures, the developers have chosen to add certain elements of Australian aboriginal culture to the image of Lemurians, most notably, through their use of boomerangs. This blending of regionally adjacent cultures mirrors the previous example of the Albionian manor house, where existing insular and continental architectural practices were merged. As later clarified in the expansions, Monkey Paw Island, the origin of the golden idol, is located in the fictional region of Lemuria; this creates an interconnected system of cultures and locations within the game, which is further elaborated in the expansions.

The first expansion, *The Spider of Lanka*, delves even deeper into the imaginary civilizations that are connected to the golden idol. However, a curious pattern also emerges: the further the game's events shift away from Albion, the more frequently existing realia are used in world building – this was previously exemplified by the mention of the existing, albeit mythical, notion of Lemuria. The setting of the expansion is the island of Lanka, yet another mythical location, this time from the epic of Ramayana. In the epic, Lanka is depicted as a fortified island-city with towers and forts [Griffith (trans.) 1874: 1507]. This serves as a further index towards cultures inhabiting the Indian subcontinent and reinforces the cultural references given in the main game. The three kingdoms that the in-game island is divided into – Jaffna, Vijaya and Gamini – have a stronger connection to the real world; Jaffna and Vijayawada are existing cities in Sri Lanka and Andhra Pradesh, respectively, whereas Gamini is a common Sri-Lankan given name. The rulers of these kingdoms are called Raja, a real-life title for Indian princes and kings. This illustrates how differing levels of obscurity are used in terms of transcultural and hybrid elements in the game and how the approach of mixing cultural references has changed throughout the locations in the game world. The content analysis shows that Albion is more fictionalised whereas Lemuria and Lanka contain more real-life realia. The difference may be explained by the East-West opposition and the level of familiarity of that the developers have with various culture contexts – familiar locations may require a higher level of abstraction than foreign ones in order to feel fictional. However, a comparativist approach would be beneficial to study this assumption in more detail, potentially examining several fictional game worlds and comparing the levels of cultural abstraction in them.

Figure 3. The visual design of the Indian-inspired Lanka and the Raja's court in *The Spider of Lanka* [Color Gray Games 2023].

Figure 4. An investigation pane from *The Spider of Lanka*, showing various weapons – a katar blade, circular chakram throwing knives and a talwar sabre – originating from various regions of India [Color Gray Games 2023]. The original names of the weapons have been retained.

The Indian-inspired geographical and cultural references to Lanka are complemented by a distinct visual design of characters and the city itself, all of which also show strong influences of the Indian culture. The steep pyramids of the city allude to the Southern regions of the Indian subcontinent, as does the attire of the characters. Various objects such as clothing and weapons in the Lankan characters' inventory, e.g., chakram throwing blades, katar knives and talwar sabres, are also indexes that point towards the cultural inspirations of the fictional region. These objects are mostly devoid of abstraction – they are not renamed and closely follow the visual appearance of their real-life counterparts.

Figure 5. A real-life katar blade, a chakram throwing knife and a talwar sabre housed in the *Arms and Armor* collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, USA [The Metropolitan Museum of Art].

The first scene of *The Spider of Lanka* creates a stark contrast between the European-inspired characters and the local inhabitants, by depicting an altercation among the two after a game of cards. Satirising colonial attitudes and processes seems to be one of the central tasks of this expansion. The game world's system of nations and cultures has been supplemented for this reason – some characters in the expansion come from Aquitan, modelled after the historical French region of Aquitaine, and the city of Lundenburh in Albion, which draws inspiration from London. Here, another type of cultural referencing is present – one of evocation, where associations with certain real-life locations or countries are created through similar-sounding, yet fictional placenames. However, at the same time all of these diegetic European-type nations share similar colonial ambitions, blurring the lines between them to the point of interchangeability.

The second and last expansion, *The Lemurian Vampire*, is set in Monkey Paw Island and grants the plot a circular structure, as the players witness the events leading directly to the beginning of the main game: the seemingly egalitarian Lemurian society of Monkey Paw Island is visited by two colonists (Albert Cloudsley and Dr. Oberon Geller) who wish to obtain the golden idol. In this DLC, the developers have chosen to diversify the game world and the array of fictional nations even further. Although the culture of the Monkey Paw Island conceptually resembles the island nations of the Indian Ocean, such as the Andamanese, the visual appearance of the islanders themselves is notably diverse, with lighter and darker complexions and hair colour ranging from blonde to dark brown and black. This approach shows how the developers occasionally choose to avoid expected cultural and geographical

references and to distance the game's content from real-life inspirations so as to retain a mixture of realistic and imagined elements.

The everyday clothing, tools and buildings of the islanders are simple, almost primitive in comparison to the other nations of the game; this is juxtaposed with crumbling, futuristic-looking monolithic structures that loom over the island community as a sign of a previous, more technologically advanced civilization that has fallen into ruin. This, along with the depiction of ancient robots later in the plot, gives the game world of the second expansion a post-apocalyptic, science-fiction aspect which is absent from the previous games, but is useful for explaining the origins of the golden idol.

The last expansion continues to depict conflict and cooperation among the various fictional cultures, maintaining intercultural tension in the imagined environment. At the start of the game, a Lankan ship crashes near the island, and the survivors are taken in by the locals. The visiting Lankans attempt to integrate into the Lemurian way of life, and for the most part of the expansion, the players can witness this transcultural exchange, which is not always successful. However, the conflict reaches its pinnacle when the pseudo-English Albionians arrive at the island and steal the golden idol to exploit its powers. This leads to a conclusion that two distinct cultural groups exist within the game: the European-inspired Albionians and Aquitanians, who unite in their colonial ambitions, and the local Lemurians and Lankans, who try to coexist with each other peacefully. Within these two groups transcultural exchanges can take place freely, but when both come face to face, instead of an exchange, the players witness a clash of interests. In a broader sense, it may be assumed that the authors are re-imagining colonial empires and their invasion of other cultures in a satirical yet critical way.

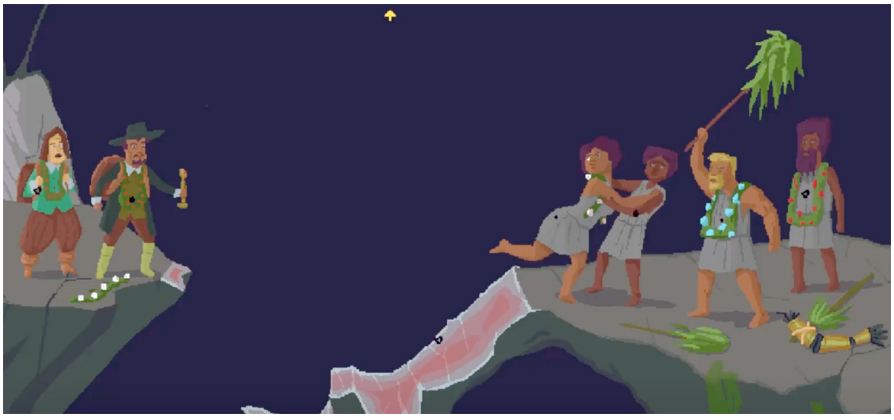

Figure 6. The contrast between Albionian intruders and Lemurian islanders in *The Lemurian Vampire* [Color Gray Games 2023].

To summarise, the DLCs serve as a notable expansion of the game world both, geographically and in terms of variety of cultural inspirations. Despite being shorter than the main game, *The Spider of Lanka* DLC contains a much larger diversity of fictional nations. The portrayal of Lanka as a multicultural melting pot replete with travellers and emissaries provides a suitable setting for the interplay of various cultures, which is brought to a conflict for narrative purposes. However, it is during *The Lemurian Vampire*, i.e., in the most constrained of the game world locations, that these intercultural conflicts gain maximum traction. This confirms that in the examined game, location is a determining factor of how the different cultures and societies within it will react to one another.

Conclusions and future directions

The aim of this paper was to examine various elements of culture mixing and interplay in the world-building and design of *The Case of the Golden Idol*, and its two DLCs. For the analysis, the intercontextual theory of hybridity was chosen, as it targets the motivations and underlying power structures in the use of multiple culture elements in popular entertainment. For the same reason, more specific branches of narratology and semiotics – the multiple worlds theory and social semiotics – were selected. This illustrates how the theoretical focus can be narrowed down to test the optimal theoretical branches for studying game worlds in particular.

The game world of *The Case of the Golden Idol* and its DLCs enables its players to experience a vibrant combination of various cultural references that exist in a highly detailed environment. However, upon closer examination, the approach and strategies for using cultural inspirations and references, such as blending, evocation or the use of real-life realia, are not always consistent in the world-building of the game. The main criterion for this approach variation seems to be the division of East-West, where distant, Eastern-inspired cultures are constructed, using more real-life elements, such as weapons, placenames or titles of nobility. This may be linked to how familiar (or unfamiliar) the developers and players are with different cultures. Widespread knowledge regarding European-inspired details and references allows for a more creative interpretation of these elements, whereas seemingly exotic and more distant locations are more likely to be unfamiliar to a large part of players, who might not be able to notice similar interpretation of cultural references; therefore, existing realia are used instead.

However, to reinforce and clarify these initial findings, a comparative study would be beneficial to appraise the levels of cultural abstraction and pinpoint the use of real-life realia in different game worlds for a more comprehensive overview of this process.

Basing a game world on a diverse array of cultural inspirations has its advantages and potential complications. The depiction of culturally diverse game worlds may contribute to a general openness to a similar diversity in the real world, as illustrated by the example of *Final Fantasy X* [Consalvo 2006]. However, there are also risks of oversimplifying the connections to real-life cultures, resulting in exoticisation and caricature, which could promote an uneven power balance between cultures. A more uniform approach in the strategies of combining cultural references throughout the game may help avoid this issue in the future.

The final conclusion concerns the references in the game world that were consciously or intuitively drawn from the Latvian cultural space. Such details were few and usually deeply contextualised in relation to other (English, global) perspectives, reinforcing the statement made by the developers themselves that they concentrated on other locations for inspiration. However, the existence of such elements, however sparse, in an internationally well-received game points towards the potential of a more translocal approach in the future games, in line with the ongoing tendency in the video games industry of marketing local settings to global audiences.

Acknowledgements

This research is financed by the Recovery and Resilience Facility project *Internal and External Consolidation of the University of Latvia* (No.5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/I/CFLA/007) within the research project *Latvian Diaspora Identity Transformation: Text, Language, Digital Environment*.

Bibliography

Aarseth, E. (2019). Ludoforming: Changing Actual, Historical or Fictional Topographies into Ludic Topologies. In: E. Aarseth, S. Günzel, (eds.), *Ludotopia: Spaces, Places and Territories in Computer Games*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, pp. 127–140.

Bourgonjon, J., Vandermeersche, G., Rutten, K. and Quinten, N. (2017). Perspectives on Video Games as Art. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 19(4).

Business.gov.lv (2025). *Support for digitalization of processes in commercial activities*. Available: https://business.gov.lv/en/support-opportunities/support-for-digitalization (viewed 27.08.2025.)

Cerny, M. (2020). Foreword. In: Kent, S. L., *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, Vol. 2. New York: Crown.

Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: The Basics* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

Clarke, A. and Mitchell, G. (eds.). (2013) *Videogames and Art* (1st ed.). Bristol: Intellect.

Color Gray Games (2022). *The Case of the Golden Idol*. Video game. London: Playstcack.

Color Gray Games (2023). *The Lemurian Vampire*. Video game. London: Playstcack.

Color Gray Games (2023). *The Spider of Lanka*. Video game. London: Playstcack.

Consalvo, M. (2006). Console video games and global corporations: Creating a hybrid culture. *New Media & Society*, 8(1), 117–137.

de la Maza, A., J. (2017) *Possible Worlds in Video Games: From Classic Narrative to Meaningful Actions*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University ETC Press.

Dumbere, L. (2023) Sensacionāla spēle. *Ir*, 5(665), 44.–47. lpp.

Edgerton, S. (1961) Heat and Style: Eighteenth-Century House Warming by Stoves. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 20(1), 20–26.

Eklund, L., Gluzman, R., Jørgensen, K., Kayali, F., Roinioti, E., & Pnueli, V. (2024). Games for the Pluriverse: Exploring the use, opportunities, and problems of drawing from local cultural heritage in video games. *Games and Culture*, 20(8).

Exploding Topics (2024). *How Many Gamers Are There? (New 2024 statistics).* Available: https://explodingtopics.com/blog/number-of-gamers?utm_source=chatgpt.com (viewed 12.01.2025.)

Fedorov, A. (2015). Russia. In: Wolf, M. J. P. (ed.). *Video Games Around the World*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, pp. 439–449.

Forbes (2023). *The Gaming Industry: A Behemoth With Unprecedented Global Reach*. Available: https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesagencycouncil/2023/11/17/the-gaming-industry-a-behemoth-with-unprecedented-global-reach/ (viewed 02.11.2024.)

Gamesindustry (2024). *GamesIndustry.biz presents... The Year In Numbers 2024.* Available: https://www.gamesindustry.biz/gamesindustrybiz-presents-the-year-in-numbers-2024 (viewed 05.01.2025.)

Griffith, R. T. H. (trans.) (1874). *The Rámáyan of Válmíki*. London: Trübner and Co.

Jacobs, W. W. (1902/1911).The Monkey's Paw. In Jacobs W., W. *The Lady of the Barge and Others, Entire Collection*. London: Alan Rodgers Books. [Available at Project Gutenberg].

Jones, D. (2008). Narrative Reformulated: Storytelling in Videogames. *CEA Critic*, 70(3), 20–34.

Karhulahti, V. (2015). An Ontological Theory of Narrative Works: Storygame as Postclassical Literature. *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 7(1), 39–73.

Kent, S., L. (2021). *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon and Beyond: the Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World.* New York: Three Rivers Press.

Kraidy, M., M. (2002). Hybridity in Cultural Globalization. *Communication Theory*, *12*(3), pp. 316–339.

Kristeva, J. (1966/1980). Word, Dialogue and Novel. In J. Kristeva, (ed.) *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, pp. 64–91.

van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing Social Semiotics*. London: Routledge.

Newzoo (2024). *2024 Global Games Market Report*. Free access. Available: https://newzoo.com/resources/trend-reports/newzoos-global-games-market-report-2024-free-version (viewed 05.01.2025.)

Ong, A. (2022). The Case of the Golden Idol review – model murder mystery mayhem. *Eurogamer*. Available: https://www.eurogamer.net/the-case-of-the-golden-idol-review-model-murder-mystery-mayhem (viewed 07.01.2025.)

Ose, I. (2018). Dažas atziņas par 15. gadsimta beigu – 18. gadsimta krāsns keramiku. In: Gundars Kalniņš, (red.) *Cēsu pils raksti II*. Cēsis: Cēsu kultūras un tūrisma centrs, 73.–94. lpp.

Parkin, S. (2022). The Case of the Golden Idol review – delicious Sherlockian murder mystery. *The Guardian*. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/games/2022/nov/12/the-case-of-the-golden-idol-review-delicious-sherlockian-mystery-color-gray-playstack (viewed 07.01.2025.)

Pérez-Latorre, Ó., Oliva, M., & Besalú, R. (2016). Videogame analysis: a social-semiotic approach. *Social Semiotics*, 27(5), 586–603.

Playstack (2022). *An interview with the developers behind The Case of the Golden Idol*. Available: https://playstack.com/blog-color-gray-interview/ (viewed 06.01.2025.)

Ramaswamy, S. (1999). Catastrophic Cartographies: Mapping the Lost Continent of Lemuria. *Representations*, 67, 92–129.

Ryan, M. (2009). From Playfields to Fictional Worlds: A Second Life for Ariosto. *New Literary History*, 40(1), 159–177.

Ryan, M. and Bell, A. (eds.). (2019). *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Sekste, I. (2013). Naratoloģija. In: Kalniņa, I. E.; Vērdiņš, K. (eds.), *Mūsdienu literatūras teorijas*. Rīga: LUFMI.

Short, T., L. (2007). *Peirce's Theory of Signs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Švelch, J., & Houška, J. (2025). Czech Appeal: Why and How National Game Productions Use Local Themes and Settings. *Games and Culture*, https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120251322265

Takhteyev, Y. (2012). *Coding places: Software practice in a South American city*. MIT Press.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Search the Collection*. Available: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search (viewed 26.08.2025.)

Vertovec, S. (2020). Cosmopolitanism. In: Knott, K.; McLoughlin, S. (eds.), *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*. London: Zed Books.