

The Britishness of ‘British Games’

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how ‘British games’ function in the space of national identity, in relation to the concept of Britishness (the quality of being, or being seen to be, British in some manner). This topic is timely at present, following the referendum vote to leave the European Union in June 2016, and the consequent heated debate in the UK around nationalist sentiment and national reimagination. For scholars working in Game Studies, such a situation raises questions about what role games play in discussions of this kind. In recent years, video games have shown an increasing capacity to make political interventions, and games like *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) and *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014) have passed comment on politically-charged issues such as immigration, and conflict. Interventions can also be more subtle, through forms of representation which reflect (or elide) diversity, incorporate moral frameworks, afford alternative histories or convey ideologies. In tension with such creative work, government policy has much to say about games, through the way their production is supported, the way they are regulated, and the extent to which recognition is accorded to them as things which produce symbolic meaning and experience, things which are more than ‘merely games’. And, alongside these considerations, games are also played, and it is through this activity that meaning is made.

What contribution, then, do games make to a sense of British identity? The connection between national identity and media forms is well-rehearsed, not least in Benedict Anderson’s seminal work (1983/2006), which proposed that consumption of a national *media* works to constitute a national *community* of values and ideas. So are there such things as ‘British games’, and what are they? How are they selected, who performs that selection, and how do competing pressures affect the outcome? To address such questions is to attempt to understand something of the way in which games matter in contemporary society; to understand how this functions for Britain helps us to understand how it might function for other countries, under other national ideologies. It is also to highlight the specific contribution that games make *as games*, rather than as generic media texts. For example, much has been written on British (and other national) cinema (e.g. Higson 2011; Hill 2016), so are games distinct from film in their contribution to national identity? To say yes here is then 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. Thus this paper seeks to draw out the specificity of

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games as much as their conformity to pre-existing conceptions of the relationship of media and identity. In doing so, it contributes to discussions of British games framed within the field of local game studies (e.g. Gazzard 2013; Wade 2016).

The paper opens with an analysis of ‘British’ games through the lens of government cultural policy, and the way that ideas of Britishness are reflected through the promotion of games as part of the creative industries, and as an element of the exercise of cultural diplomacy – so-called ‘soft power’. I examine how policy around games has emerged in relation to film policy, which has shaped significant aspects of the approach to games, and how these policy approaches both reflect and create tensions between different elements of Britishness, through a desire to promote both industry and culture, and through inconsistent usage of terms like culture and creativity. I then discuss the relationship between the national and the global, and reflect upon the difficulties of identifying games with a specific national address within a global marketplace: how do ‘British games’ address the ‘British nation’? I draw upon the example of *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room 2015) to demonstrate how games might do so, here through a strongly presented sense of nostalgia.

The paper moves on to draw upon the idea of the local as a way to understand the complexity and plurality of Britishness in and around games, informed not only by regulation and policy, but also by processes of localisation, which interact with governmental power to help define limitations on the imagined community of the nation. This idea of the local also offers further insight into British identity, as a nation comprising more than one country and thus, as with many nations, the product of a collection of strongly expressed internal cultures. I conclude, finally, by touching on the concept of hybridity in order to reject an essentialised idea of Britishness in games, and instead accept a discursive and fluid conception of national identity which can incorporate and respect many different ways in which games might be British. This is a complexity which arises from a series of productive tensions, in which games play a critical role through their capacity to present, represent, and allow personal engagement with, Britishness.

BIO

Nick Webber is Associate Director of the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research. His research focuses on (video)games, cultural history and identity. Along with exploring the idea of culturally ‘British’ games, his current work investigates the impact of online games and virtual worlds on history and historical practice, and in collaboration with colleague Dima Saber, the use of video games by non-state actors in the Middle East. He was lead author on the Gaming Global report, which made the case for the inclusion of games in the British Council’s arts programme.

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