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Towards a “Filipino” Video Game

Teaching Filipino Culture and Identity for Video Game Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the author’s experiences of teaching the Filipino module of a multidisciplinary video game development class as a case study in teaching Filipino culture and identity as an element of video game development. A preliminary definition of “Filipino video game” as having Filipino narratives and subject matter, made by Filipino video game developers, and catering to a Filipino audience, is proposed. The realities and limitations of video game development and the video game market in the Philippines is also

discussed to show how the dominance of Western video game industry, in terms of the dominance of outsource work for Filipino video game developers and the dominance of non-Filipino video games played by Filipino players, has hindered the development of original Filipino video games. Using four Filipino video games as primary texts discussed in class, students were exposed to Filipino-made video games, and shown how these games use Filipino history, culture, and politics as source material for their narrative and design. Issues of how video games can be used to self-exoticization, and the use of propaganda is discussed, and also how video games can be used to confront and reimagine Filipinoness. The paper ends with a discussion of a student-made game titled *Alibatas*, a game that aims to teach *baybayin*, a neglected native writing system in the Philippines as a demonstration of how students can make a Filipino video game. The paper then shows the importance of student-made games, and the role that the academe plays in the critical understanding of Filipino video games, and in defining Filipino culture and identity.

Keywords:

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

“INTRODUCTION TO GAMES AND GAME DESIGN I”

My 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 housed by the Department of Information Systems & Computer Science (DISCS) for computer science students, the aim of the class is to introduce to the students the basics of designing a video game with a more literary and philosophical focus, and it is taught by an instructor from the English, Filipino, and Philosophy Departments, along with one from DISCS. I was assigned to teach the Filipino module for this course twice in the first semester of academic year AY

2015-2016, and in the first semester of AY 2017-2018. The final group project was a game pitch by a group of five or more students of their video game idea that they developed during the semester. The aim of the course was to teach the basics of video game design by not just copying Western or Japanese video game ideas and design. The aim of the Filipino module of the course was to encourage and inspire the students to use their Filipino culture and identity as part of their final project.

But what makes a game “Filipino” as opposed to an American or Japanese video game? This is a difficult question to formulate for the course because of the dangers of essentialism and nativism. But in a world of multinational video game development where homogeneity and Western narratives dominate, it is important for 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.

What came next in the course was my attempt to define “Filipino culture” or “Filipinoness”, and then determine how this can be used in video games by Filipino video games developers. Throughout the module, existing Filipino video games were used as case studies on how this “Filipinoness” was defined, and what students can learn from these Filipino video games. But this essay is also a reflection on how video games studies and the teaching of video game design can be used for critical discourse of national cultures and identities. Though most video game theory and criticism has focused on the postmodern and posthuman tendencies of video game culture, the theories related to national cultures and discourse must not be forgotten, as most video game audiences are still constrained by national boundaries and policies.

Lesson 1: A Working Definition of “Filipino Video Games”

To teach the use of “Filipino culture” and “Filipinoness” in making video games, one must pose the question: what is a Filipino video game? And connected to this is another: what is Filipino culture

and identity? These questions were asked to the students in the very first lesson of the Filipino module. The second question, “What is Filipino culture and identity” would be the most difficult to answer. In his book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams makes a concise history of the word “culture”. Williams notes that “culture” has two different senses. On the one hand, “culture” is used in the similar way to “civilization” to connote a universal development of human history. On the other hand, there is a sense of “culture” that is particular to a nation or people, hence different nations and peoples have different cultures (Williams 2015, 49-54).

For a formerly colonized country like the Philippines, these two competing senses of “culture” remains relevant. As a former colony of Spain and the United States, most of what is now considered mainstream “Filipino culture” is a product of nearly 400 years of Western colonization. The majority of Filipinos are Roman Catholic, a result of nearly three centuries Spanish colonization. English remains an official language of the state, and is a medium of instruction in schools and universities, a result of American imperialism from 1899-1946. On the surface, the Philippines seems to have embraced Western culture, which is pervasive around the world. On the other hand, there is also a recognition that Philippine culture, though heavily Westernized, is also unique and different as a consequence of this particular history of colonization. And even within this entity that is the “Republic of the Philippines” there exists a multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural population that is competing with the “official nationalism” espoused by the state. Although Roman Catholicism is the major religion, different Christian sects prosper while Islam is dominant in some parts of the Philippines, especially on Mindanao Island. Dozens of ethnic groups that for centuries have resisted Spanish and American colonization are slowly being integrated into the world economic system by means of the Philippine state bureaucracy and global capitalism. There are at least a dozen languages that are spoken and printed outside

the dominant English language, including the Tagalog language, which is the basis of the Filipino national language.

But going into such theoretical questions immediately might have hindered the students’ creative ideas. So, for the first lesson, I focused on the question: what is a Filipino video game? Ideally, a Filipino video game that 1) is a video game made by Filipino video game developers; Filipino by heritage or citizenship; 2) uses Filipino characters, settings, visual design, sound, and narratives that are Filipino and portray experiences from a Filipino perspective, and 3) is made to be played by Filipinos. This is my appropriation 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 literary 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, acknowledges being culturally-rooted to the Philippines and centered on Filipino experience and point of view. But this definition of Filipino video games immediately highlights the difficult reality of video game development in the Philippines, and the consumption and habits of Filipino players.

Firstly, are there Filipino video game developers and companies? Alvin Juban, president of the Game Developers Association of the Philippines (GDAP), notes that the majority of video game developers in the Philippines do outsource work for major video game development companies that are outside the Philippines (Gawad Alternatibo). Some major international video game companies have even opened their own studios in the Philippines. For example, Ubisoft has recently opened a studio in the Philippines as a supplementary studio that contributes to the development of Ubisoft’s main franchises, such as *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft 2019). *Assassin’s Creed: Origin* can’t be defined as a Filipino video game just because a studio in the Philippines with

Filipino workers worked on part of the game. There are Filipino video game developers, but they are not making video games for a Filipino audience about Filipino culture and identity. The realities of the video game industry in the Philippines hampers the creation of original Filipino video games, as most of the expertise and labor in the Philippines caters for a market and an industry that is outside the Philippines.

Secondly, are there video games that use Filipino identity and culture as source material? Some video games made outside of the Philippines do have characters, settings, visual and audio designs, and narratives from and about the Philippines. For example, *Front Mission 3* has a story arc with Filipino characters, and has missions set in the Philippines. Also, various fighting games such as the *Soulcalibur* and the *Tekken* series have some Filipino or Philippine-inspired characters (Barreiro Jr. 2015). These video games can't be defined as Filipino video games because of issues of cultural appropriation, as these games were made by Japanese video game developers. More precisely, the use of these video games that feature 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 designers need to appropriate non-Western cultures within their games. This attempt at appropriating Filipino cultural material in a video game is commendable for giving Filipino culture a space in their games. However, 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.

Lastly, what are the video games played by Filipinos? Ideally, Filipinos should play video games that are made by Filipinos and that have Filipino characters, stories, and settings. However, just as films shown in the Philippines are dominated by Hollywood films, video games played by Filipinos are also 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 and are accessible only by 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 new 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). Recently, mobile games, which are mostly free-to-play with in-app purchases, have grown in popularity in the Philippines because of the low cost for the Filipino gamer. Filipinos reportedly spent \$572 million on video games in 2019 (Elliott 2020).

To summarize, Filipino video game developers are not focused on making video games about Filipino culture and identity for a Filipino audience, and Filipino players are not predominantly playing Filipino-made video games. This situation has created a precarious situation for Filipino video game developers. However, there have been attempts to create video games about the Philippines, made by Filipinos, aimed at a Filipino audience. An early attempt at making a Filipino video game was made by Anino Entertainment when they developed and published 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 on creating free-to-play mobile games for the international market (Anino 2019).

Recently, more Filipino studios and developers have started to develop video games that are about the Philippines and have Filipino characters and stories. Filipino video game developers can now use Steam for personal 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 for a publisher in each territory. Other platforms, such as

itch.io, have also been useful for independent developers to upload and share their work. Crowdfunding platforms have also been used to appeal directly to fans and audiences for support and as an alternative source of funding to supplement traditional sources of investment capital for video game studios. Most Filipino video game developers, therefore, are making video games outside of the mainstream of big video game companies. And it is this context—video game development outside the mainstream—that the module that I developed in AY 2017-2018 aimed to develop with the students.

Lesson 2: Four Filipino Video Games

To help students reflect on video games in the context of the Philippines, I discussed four Filipino video games developed in the Philippines by Filipino video game developers. This is similar to the approach 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 can be models for their own literary works. In CS179.15A, the four example Filipino video games were used as primary texts or case studies for discussion to give the students: 1) a sense of history of Filipino video games and what has already been done, 2) an idea of how “Filipino culture” or “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 culture and identity. Lessons learned from the discussion should be reflected in the game designs and narratives in their final project.

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). These games all have different genres, and deal with different aspects of Philippine culture and identity.

Discussions of the games began, firstly, with a playthrough of a portion of the game and a formalistic analysis of the game was made. The genres, game designs and mechanics, narratives, characters, settings, and themes that the games use were discussed. From these preliminary details of the games, discussion of Philippine culture, identity, and politics can be expanded depending on the issues and themes related to the game.

The first two games use Philippine mythology, folklore, and history as the basis for their design and narrative. The first game discussed was *Anito: Defend a Land Enraged*, a 3D point-and-click isometric role-playing game (RPG). It is set in Maroka, a fictional island in Asia, after the arrival of the Senastille in the 16th century (Figure 1). 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 and other fantastical occurrences happening all over the island. To progress through the story, players also have to fight Philippine mythological creatures, such as the *tikbalang*, a creature with the head of a horse and a body of a human. Maroka can be read as an allegory for the Philippines, and the Senastille are the fictionalized version of the Spanish who arrived and colonized the Philippines. Although *Anito* uses mechanics of Western RPGs, it was able to adapt a Filipino narrative into a Western video game genre.



Figure 1: Agila, one of two playable characters, encounters a non-player character inside a house in *Anito: Defend a Land Enraged* (GameSpot n.d.).

The second game discussed in class also dealt with Philippine history and mythology. *Nightfall: Escape* is a first-person survival horror game set in the province of Ilocos, Philippines. The player takes on the role of Ara Cruz, a journalist who is investigating disappearances in an abandoned mansion. The game uses environmental puzzles to convey its nationalist imagery and historical references. Like *Anito*, players also encounter creatures inspired by Philippine mythology—the *aswang*, a man-eating creature; the *manananggal*, a woman who can transform into a winged creature during the night; the *batibat*, a creature that can cause sleep paralysis to its victims, 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: Bestiary entry for the paring pugot in *Nightfall: Escape* explaining the historical roots of the monster (screenshot by author).

Issues of creative license and the importance of accuracy and faithfulness of these games in the use of Philippine mythology and history is highlighted during the discussion of *Anito* and *Nightfall: Escape*. Jema Pamintuan, in her essay, “Anito: Paglalaro sa Lunan ng mga Arketipo at Laylayan [Anito: Playing with Space of Archetypes and the Periphery],” commends the use in *Anito* as the archetype of Philippine epic heroes, and indigenous material culture in creating its gamescape. However, Pamintuan has also noted that the game’s use of its Philippine influences can also lead to self-exoticization because, although it was made for a Filipino audience, its success hinged on its commercial success in the international market, and an exotic setting and non-Western characters helped differentiate it from the competition (Pamintuan 2009, 94).

On the other hand, *Nightfall: Escape* had more problems in capturing Philippine history and mythology. An example is the game's use of the *paring pugot* (headless priest) to refer to the three Filipino priests collectively known as Gomburza (Figure 2). The Gomburza is a portmanteau of the names of Fathers Gomez, Burgos, and Zamora, Filipino priests who were executed in 1872 after being falsely accused of conspiracy against the Spanish colonial government, and are considered by Filipinos as national heroes. The mention of the Gomburza in the *paring pugot* can be confusing or ambiguous, depending on the audience. A Filipino player can understand, depending on his/her understanding of Philippine history, that the *paring pugot* does not represent the Gomburza, but rather represents the enemies of the Gomburza, the Spanish friars. However, a non-Filipino player may be confused, and conclude that the *paring pugot* represents the Gomburza. The non-Filipino player may think: the *paring pugot* is an enemy in the game, therefore the Gomburza are bad.

Through the discussions and lectures, students were made aware of the possibilities and the limits of how *Anito* and *Nightfall: Escape* handled the themes of Philippine history and mythology. Both *Anito* and *Nightfall: Escape* are successful examples of Filipino video games that followed and replicated well-established genres, such as the RPG and survival horror. But translating the context of the culture that inspired a video game is the most difficult aspect in creating a game, next to actually coding and designing the game. The students' final projects were then put to the test concerning the use of Philippine culture and history. Were the projects faithful, if not earnest, in representing Philippine culture and identity? Were they able to balance being creative in the narrative and game design of their proposal, with being faithful to, and respectful of, their source material? Did they avoid the pitfalls of self-exoticization?

The next two games discussed in the module directly dealt with Philippine politics as topics and themes. The third game is *Political Animals*, a turn-based strategy game that uses

anthropomorphic 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 and the use of abstract systems to capture and quantify the inner workings of political electioneering (Bogost 2007, 91). In the case of *Political Animals*, the game captures the political culture of democracy in the Philippines through its mechanics. For example, the game highlights the personality-based politics of the Philippines when the player chooses a character at the beginning of a game. The player needs to consider the kind of personality and abilities that the character has, and plan a strategy to win based on these abilities. The game also emphasizes the importance of money in launching and maintaining an election campaign. Nearly all actions need money, and the player must acquire money by any means possible, either by honestly earning the trust of people or by accepting bribes and strengthening the patronage of criminals and other powerful figures (Figure 3).

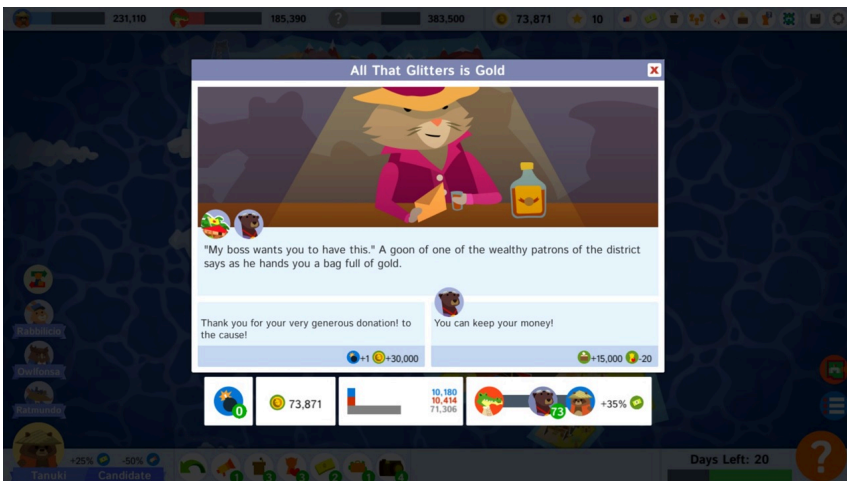


Figure 3: The player in *Political Animals* must decide whether to accept a bribe and win the favor of a patron, or reject it and win the trust of voters (screenshot by author).

The last game discussed in the module, *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 becomes a propaganda tool to spread the violent ideology of the Philippine drug war (Cerda 2021).



Figure 4: President Duterte shooting a criminal in *Duterte: Fighting Crime 2* (screenshot by author).

Each of these last two games tackle politics very differently through their game design. *Political Animals* attempts to earnestly and honestly capture an aspect of Philippine politics through its game design without directly supporting or criticizing any politician or political 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 and clearly supports the violent government campaign against crime and drugs. With these two games, the students were 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. The political message of the games that the students pitched for their final project was therefore also scrutinized. What kinds of narratives did the proposed games employ? How did the proposed games portray and represent minorities and marginalized people? Did the proposed game’s design and mechanics give the players freedom and agency to act freely? Are players forced to follow a certain way of thinking?

Game Pitch: Student-made Video Games and the Role of the Academe

By the end of the module, students were expected to incorporate the ideas and problems learned from these four Filipino video games, and how Philippine culture and identity can be incorporated into their own final project. The document for the final project incorporated the following parts: 1) a premise that contains the main narrative, setting, and characters of the game, 2) a game design description that details the genre and game mechanics that the video game would use, and 3) preliminary art work for the characters, and a visual mock-up of how the game would look on screen.

Most of the video games proposed by students for their final projects still reflected the Western and Japanese influence that they had as avid players. They used visual art, music, and narratives that represented Philippine culture and identity, but problems of exoticization were still common in the final projects, especially when the students saw Philippine culture and identity as just window dressing to market a game that was essentially a copy of dominant genres or trends. This was expected, as a four-week module can hardly affect the influence of games that they grew up with. But there were some projects that were able to balance creative concepts and premises with dominant and prevalent ideas of video game design like a puzzle-platformer with characters and

settings based on Filipino food or a fantasy first-person shooter set in the slum of Manila, Philippines.

In the end, most of the final projects of CS179.5A were just documents that described a game. To better demonstrate how a Filipino video game can be made in an academic setting, I would like to discuss 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. Margarejo, Nava, and Tangan were students enrolled in CS179.5A during the first semester of AY 2017-2018. They asked me to become a Filipino subject matter expert and member of their panel for the thesis that they were writing about the creation and testing of a video game titled *Alibatas*. Although *Alibatas* was not originally a final project proposed in their CS179.5A class, their project still embodied the ideas that they learned on how to make a video game using Filipino culture and identity.

Alibatas is a puzzle adventure game that introduces the player to *baybayin*, a precolonial syllabic writing system common among the Tagalogs of the Philippines, but would become disused after the imposition of Spanish colonialism. Players take the role of Matthew or Matt Talino and Christina or Tina Tamad, two students who need to save their school after a spirit has cursed the school because the students have lost an appreciation of their history and culture. Matt and Tina must learn *baybayin* to solve puzzles that involve writing in *baybayin*. The aim of the game is to teach the players how to write and read *baybayin* by way of these puzzles (Figure 5 and 6).



Figure 5: A puzzle in *Alibatas* how to write a kurlit/kudlit on a baybayin symbol (Margarejo, Nava, and Tangan 2019, 30).

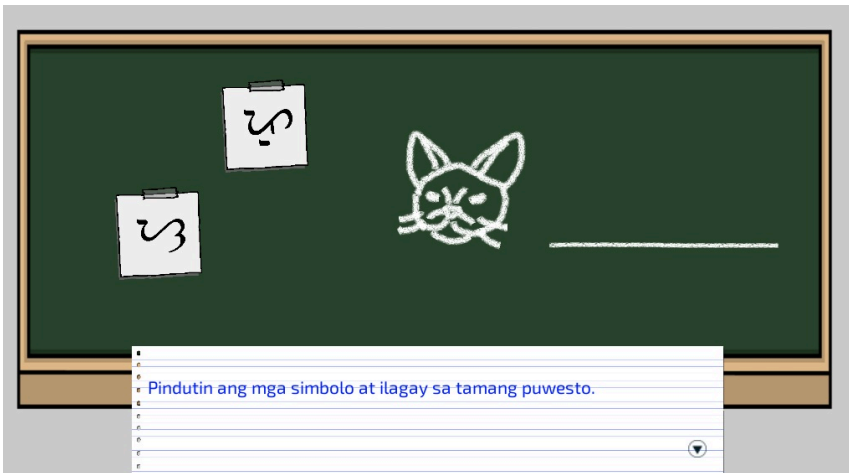


Figure 6: A puzzle in *Alibatas* on how to write pusa (cat in Tagalog) in baybayin (Margarejo, Nava, and Tangan 2019, 33).

By making *Alibatas*, Margarejo, Nava, and Tangan needed to research the history of *baybayin* and the problems that it faced through its history. The use of baybayin was discontinued during the Spanish colonial era, not just for political but also for practical

reasons. Being more familiar to a phonetic system like the Latin alphabet, early Spanish missionaries found it difficult to write and read *baybayin* because it is an abugida or syllabic system of writing, which means a symbol in *baybayin* connotes a combination of consonant-vowel sounds. Using Figure 5 as an example, the symbol is read as “na.” To change the vowel sound attached to this symbol, a mark called a *kurlit* or *kudlit* is placed above or below the symbol. A mark above would turn the “na” into “ne/ni,” and a mark below would turn it into “no/nu”. In Figure 6, the symbol represents the sound “pa” and by putting a *kudlit* below the “pa” symbol, it can now be read as “pu/po.” If this symbol is followed by the or “sa,” these symbols can now be read as “pusa,” which is the Tagalog word for “cat.”

Using puzzles in the game, players learn to understand the basic rules of writing and reading *baybayin*, as well as being introduced to some symbols. To test if the game can be used as a tool for teaching *baybayin*, Margarejo, Nava, and Tangan conducted a playtest of a prototype of the game with five 9th grade students. They conducted a written pretest and posttest to confirm the baseline knowledge that students had of *baybayin*, and whether the game helped them to learn to read and write *baybayin*. Most of the students were familiar with *baybayin*, as this was discussed in their class, but they were never taught how to read or write it. Four of the five playtested students achieved a perfect score in the test after playing the game. Only one of the students did not achieve a perfect score, but received a higher score compared to a pretest score of 0. This student also experienced a glitch in the game, which hampered his/her experience of the game (Margarejo, Nava, and Tangan 2019, 15-17). Admittedly, the sample size of the playtest was small, but it showed the potential of using video games for educational purposes.

By making *Alibatas*, Margarejo, Nava, and Tangan showed that a video game can be used to teach *baybayin*. But other than that, games like *Alibatas* can help players reflect and engage the history of the colonialization of the Philippines, and be more aware of

what has been lost or changed in Filipino culture by this historical process, and be aware of the subsequent national awakening. With *Alibatas*, *baybayin* is given a new (virtual) space to exert its discursive power. *Baybayin* no longer exists only in old documents, but in digital media such as video games, and this expansion will help *baybayin* reach newer audiences. With *Alibatas*, new research can be done on how to better educate students about *baybayin*, Filipino history, culture, and identity.

With student-made games like *Alibatas*, Filipino video games can forge a different path from mainstream video game development. It is in the academe that ideas about Filipino culture or “Filipinoness” can be transformed into a game that Filipinos and even non-Filipinos can experience. The creation of video games in universities would give students an opportunity to experiment and make games that advocate for a deeper understanding and dissemination of knowledge about the Philippines, and be a testing ground for what a Filipino video game can be without the pressures of market demands. Students don’t need to think about what sells, but rather what needs to be done, what works, and ultimately, why and for whom these video games are made? Again, Filipino culture is a contested idea, however, it is through cultural and creative works like video games that this fluid idea is fleshed out and can help Filipino players think and reflect on what being “Filipino” is, or what “Filipinoness” means for them. Distributing these games outside the academe will be the next challenge. However, it is my hope that, like the academe contribution to the nurturing of Philippine literature, theater, and film, student-made video games will help in the creation of video games that can contribute in the redefining of Filipino culture and identity.

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