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CHAPTER 8

From Global to National: Mapping the Trajectory of the South African Video Game Industry

Rachel Lara van der Merwe

Introduction

More often than not, video games elicit for the general public ideas about passivity, escapist entertainment, anti-social behaviour, or senseless violence. The video game is not often considered as a valuable asset to society, let alone as a medium that might provide communities with a voice. However, with the successful release and reception of both mainstream and indie games such as *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018); *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) and *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), game developers have been demonstrating that the video game can indeed be an expressive medium—that it *can* have a voice. As video games play an increasingly significant role in the construction and performance of various cultural identities, the video game will join the

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likes of the novel and the film in playing a role in the development and communication of the voice of a nation. The video game can be instrumental in expressing and exploring national identity, both internally to a national community and externally to foreign nationals. For post-colonial nations of the Global South, the project of developing a national imaginary is particularly significant. The perceptions held of an emerging nation, by citizens and foreigners alike, can impact a country's economic and political standing on the global stage. Furthermore, national imaginaries of the Global South must directly challenge and supplant the vestiges of the colonial and imperial imaginary, a difficult endeavour when the very borders of the nation were likely devised through the process of colonisation.

This chapter examines the existing research on the relationship between video games and national identity before turning to analyse whether video games are being used as a productive tool for national identity building within South Africa, to develop a coherent, post-apartheid identity, representative of the people and not simply of the state (Butler 2009; Hart 2014; Shoup and Holmes 2014). The data suggest that while South African game developers are up-and-coming on a global stage, they are currently not designing games with content that reflects or references the South African nation in any direct way. Using critical media industry studies as a framework, the chapter suggests that the model in operation is one that seeks to exist on a global scale before venturing to produce nationally specific content.

Analysing the Literature

The concepts of national print culture and national cinema have long been established in academia (Anderson 2006; Brennan 1990; Said 1994), but searching for the terms 'national' or 'national identity' and 'video game' or 'national video game culture' in most academic databases turns up a scant number of responses. Currently in the literature, most research focuses on the development of national video game industries or the relationship between video games and civic engagement, while research addressing the relationship between video games and national identity remains minimal. But what is meant by the relation between national identity and video games? Building upon the well-established body of work around the concepts of the nation, national print culture, and

national cinema I explore the applicability of these concepts to the video industry.

Benedict Anderson famously defines the nation as an 'imagined political community… conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (2006, p. 6). National identity is fundamentally a social and political production, one that is not identified by its geographic borders or the etchings on a map but rather by its intangible consciousness. Anderson traces the formation of national consciousness back to the emergence of print capitalism, while other writers have pushed this statement further and asserted that it wasn't simply any narrative or print medium but specifically the novel that advanced the notion of national consciousness. Timothy Brennan states that:

> Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role. And the rise of European nationalism coincides especially with one form of literature—the novel. (1990, p. 49)

With the advent of the twentieth century, however, the novel lost some of its unifying power to the newly developed media of cinema and even television. As Stuart Hall observes, cinema is a space in which cultural identity can be constructed and not simply reflected (2000, p. 714). Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, echoes similar thoughts when he posits that cinema and television play an active role in 're-programming popular memory': 'People are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been' (in Cahiers du Cinéma 1975, p. 25). Recalling Ernest Renan's suggestion that the nation includes 'possession in common of a rich legacy of memories' (1990, p. 19), it follows that cinema therefore can play a significant role in the development of national memory and consciousness. National cinema furthermore becomes a space to think about the contestation of ideas regarding national identity and a space within which to consider questions of production, distribution, discourse and publics.

Video games, unlike the novel and cinema, do not appeal to the same type of mass audience, but the video game industry outperforms many other media entertainment sectors, and video games increase in popularity, year after year. Simultaneously the available *types* of games continue to diversify, inspiring interest and engagement from wider demographics. Popular video games are adapted into films, such as the *Tomb Raider*

franchise (various developers) and the recent World of Warcraft movie *Warcraft* (2016). Video game characters also show up in other public spaces, such as the Pokemon characters that have been used to promote businesses in conjunction with the popular smartphone AR game *Pokemon Go* (Niantic, 2016). Due to the mechanical distinctions in how the forms of video games, cinema and literature convey narrative, video games may foster national identity formation in fundamentally different ways to how fictional literature and cinema have contributed to such cultural development. But if we consider how rapidly the video game industry is growing and its larger impact on society, it is paramount that we begin to investigate how and in what ways video games may play a role in the process of shaping national identity. We can begin to address this question by considering the different types of communities and cultures that form around video games. Martin Hand and Karenza Moore write:

> Digital gaming may be seen as both embedded within existing socio-cultural frameworks (as 'cultural artefacts'), and as enabling novel articulations of community and identity to emerge (as forms of 'culture'). Digital gaming represents a distinct cultural form, which at once problematizes current understandings of community and identity, and allows us to explore emerging patterns of community and identity formation. (2006, p. 11)

They suggest three types of gaming communities, which in turn give rise to different cultural formations: (1) communities of presence, that is, in-person gatherings at conventions and events centred on gaming; (2) imagined communities, 'the ways in which gamers actively construct images of community through the use of material artefacts and symbolic devices, especially where the members of the community never actually meet' (p. 4); and (3) virtual communities, that is, communities developed within specific virtual spaces. Their concept of the imagined game community is a helpful means by which to consider how games can actively construct culture. However, we should not think that such games only operate within specific gaming communities. Adrienne Shaw points out that a focus on gaming culture obscures the many ways that games influence culture at large. She writes:

> Defining gaming culture as something distinct and separate from a constructed mainstream culture encourages us to only study those who identify as gamers, rather than more dispersed gaming. That is, we should look at

> *video games in culture* rather than games as culture. Video games permeate education, mobile technologies, museum displays, social functions, family interactions, and workplaces. They are played by many if not all ages, genders, sexualities, races, religions, and nationalities. (2010, p. 416, emphasis added)

Recognising the ways in which video games permeate mainstream culture, game developers have begun to use the simulative nature of gaming to build games that introduce players to particular cultural formations or communities. For instance, *Never Alone* (*Kisima Ingitchuna*; Upper One Games, 2014) is a popular collaboration between game developers and Alaskan Native storytellers that immerses players in Iñupiaq lore. Australian Aboriginal communities have taken a similar approach using video games (Wyeld et al. 2009), and several Middle Eastern game developers have been crafting games for cultivating Islamic and/or Arab identity—a focus on internal community building rather than external outreach (Šisler 2016). On the continent of Africa, Cameroonian developer Kiro'o released *Aurion: Legend of the Kori-Odan* (2016), which has been described as the first action-oriented game based on African mythology (Matroos 2016). However, there are also a number of Kenyan game developers who have developed more rudimentary games drawing on African mythology (Callus and Potter 2017).

In addition to these more culturally oriented forms of identity development, there are specific cases in which video games are being utilised in correlation with national identity. Several game developers within Kenya have also developed more nationally oriented role playing games (RPGs) and first-person shooters. These are set in rural Kenyan villages or within a version of the capital Nairobi, and these games directly engage local concerns (Callus and Potter 2017). Perhaps the most well-known nationally oriented video game is the Polish franchise, *The Witcher* (CD Projekt), built on Slavic mythology (Ivan n.d.) and Polish Romanticism (Schreiber 2017). There is also a long history of collaboration between the U.S. Armed Forces and video game developers, throughout which the U.S. military has funded and used first-person shooters for training purposes, culminating in the creation of *America's Army*, a game series explicitly produced by the U.S. Army for recruitment.

Henry Jenkins (2006) has written about the role that the Chinese 'Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games' (MMORPG) *Fantasy Westward Journey* have played in shaping patriotism within the country.

Furthermore, in China, during the 1990s and early 2000s, commercial game developers produced a number of games with explicitly anti-Japanese sentiments and Chinese patriotic values, and after 2005, the state government began sponsoring their own patriotic games (Nie 2013). However, as Iskander Zulkarnain (2014) argues, most games that might shape national identity formation are more likely to function as a form of banal nationalism, a term originally developed by Michael Billig to refer to the small everyday things that all contribute to our sense of national belonging. Zulkarnain uses the Indonesian MMORPG *Nusantara Online* (2011) as an illustration of a game that uses 'software mechanism, visual representation, narrative construction, and genre… to create an immersive setting in which a player's nationalistic experience is both "open-ended" and "programmed"' (2014, p. 33). Zulkarnain calls this playable nationalism.

But, most of the literature concerned with video games and the nation is primarily concerned with the video game *industry*. Without a functioning, stable video game industry, it is quite difficult to even consider producing or exporting a video game that also functions as a cultural vehicle. In Mark J.P. Wolf's introduction to the edited volume *Video Games Around the World* (2015), he details the three-levelled infrastructure necessary in order to establish a successful video game industry:

> (1) 'Basic needs such as access to electrical power, verbal and visual literacy, and lifestyles that include leisure time for gameplay' (p. 3); (2) 'A certain amount of technology, technological know-how, and access to a system of game distribution and marketing' (p. 4); and (3) 'Game designers, developers, programmers, and other professional staff, corporate structures to stabilize and maintain an industry, the necessary investment capital, and a large enough user base to make larger-scale productions financially feasible' (p. 5).

Any emerging local video game industry, throughout this process, must contend with other established global video game industries, notably those of the U.S. and Japan. Wolf notes that, 'In almost all cases, the entry of foreign imports preceded indigenous video game production, establishing conventions and audience expectations that shaped the country's domestic video game industry and its output' (2015, p. 6). This resembles the same struggle that emerging national film and television industries have had because 'the importation of Hollywood cinema and American television programming was cheaper and easier than producing film and television programs domestically' (Wolf 2015, p. 6). This analysis is

reflected in such works as those of John Banks and Stuart Cunningham on Australia (2016a, b), Adrienne Shaw in India (2016), James Portnow et al. in Brazil (2016), and Vit Šisler's work in Syria (2016).

Studying the development and struggle of these industries is a complicated endeavour that requires attentiveness to historical context, shifting political dynamics, the flow of transnational and intra-national money and the interests and desires of the various communities involved, among other things. Here the tools of critical media industry studies prove useful. Critical media industry studies 'emphasizes the complex interplay of economic and cultural forces' (Havens et al. 2009, p. 235) in the analysis of how media industries operate within society. Being attentive to the intersection between culture and industry allows us to consider how processes of national identity formation may occur through the establishment of national exporting industries without requiring 'content' to evaluate. In this study, I emulate the exploratory work of the aforementioned researchers, performing what Havens et al. (2009) describe as a helicopter style study at the industry level.

Methodology

As a helicopter study, this research draws from a number of different types of sources to provide a general overview of the current state of the video game industry in South Africa. First, I obtained general statistical data about the video game industry from Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) South Africa's latest annual Entertainment and Media Outlook for the nation (see Myburgh 2018). Second, I aggregated journalistic coverage of the industry to obtain insights from those who have been researching and analysing the industry as it has developed. With a lack of scholarly work on the South African industry, the research of journalists becomes a valuable resource upon which we as scholars can begin to develop our own, more meticulous work. Third, I investigated whom the main game developers in South Africa are, asking what they are making and what kind of engagement these games have. I gauged who the main game developers are from my research inquiry, taking notes of the games and developers most frequently mentioned in articles, but also from spending time observing South African gaming forums such as S.A. Gamer. Once I had collected a list of games and developers, I did a textual analysis of the related websites, gathering basic descriptive data while also being attentive to the language used by each developer to describe him or herself and the products. I was

particularly attentive to the presence of any nationally oriented language implemented. Furthermore, I procured data from the gaming platform Steam to evaluate the relative success of the aforementioned games.

In addition to noting the numerical data provided by Steam about specific games, I investigated the types of conversations taking place around a selection of these games. For this portion of the study, I built a digital tool to crawl video game forums and extract all posts related to the selected games. For this study, I chose IGN and Gamespot, two of the most popular and widely frequented international video game forums that also use a more standard forum structure, making it simpler to automate the data extraction process. Using Steam's data, I then narrowed my list of SA games to the most popular games, choosing only one from each developer: *Broforce* (Freelive Games, 2015), *Stasis* (The Brotherhood, 2015), *Desktop Dungeons* (QCF Design, 2010) and *Viscera Cleanup Detail* (RuneStorm, 2015). Despite its low ratings, I also included *Tyd Wag Vir Niemand* (Skobbejak Games, 2017) as an example of an Afrikaans game.

This approach is a digital research method commonly used within disciplines such as Information Science. Using programming language Python and the Python module Scrapy, I wrote code for a series of what are called 'spiders' (because they crawl over the Web and capture data). For each game and for each forum, I constructed a pair of spiders. The first spider crawled over the search results for the designated video game and, for every listed result, extracted the thread title, the author of the post that mentioned the game and the URL for that post into a comma separated values (CSV) file. The second spider, using the data in this CSV file, crawled over all posts at each listed URL and extracted the content of each post, each post's author and the date and time of each post. These data were also placed within a CSV file. Due to the unique structure and code of each website, the spiders do not automatically work for any website, but rather are carefully designed to read the particular websites in question. The code shows the spider exactly where to look on a page in order to collect the correct data. This process enables a researcher to gather and organise large quantities of qualitative data quickly.

Following extraction, I cleaned the data and removed any duplicates using Excel functions. Furthermore, I sorted the data into three categories. The first category of data included posts from threads whose titles mentioned the pertinent video game, which meant the entire thread's conversation referenced the game. The second category included data from posts that mentioned the video game but were not part of a thread

directly referencing the game. Most posts from the second set included the quoted material to which the poster was responding, thus maintaining the necessary context for the purpose of coding. When context was not provided in the immediate quote, the linked URL in the data set offered a quick means by which to situate a post. The final category included data with no reference whatsoever to the video game, that is those extraneous posts harvested alongside the useful data. The data in this latter category were removed from the data set. The data from the first two categories were imported into Dedoose, a mixed-method coding software. I then reviewed every post coding for positive and negative value statements about the game, for neutral references to the game, for expressions of curiosity or interest and for any mention of South Africa.

Findings

Every year, PricewaterhouseCoopers South Africa releases a substantial report on the creative industries in the country. Their research study on the South African video game industry reveals that traditional gaming revenue (PC/console) in the country continues to be the largest on the continent of Africa (R3.0 billion/roughly US$200 million in 2017). However, in correlation with global patterns, the social/casual gaming market has overtaken the traditional sector though without diverting its revenue due to distinct user demographics. In 2017, R759 million (roughly US$55 million) was spent on console games; R654 million (roughly US$48 million) on PC games and R1,584 million (approximately US$115 million) on social/casual games. The success of the social/casual gaming market is largely attributed to the greater accessibility of smartphones within South Africa and the relatively affordable cost of mobile games. Both traditional and mobile markets continue to grow steadily, with total revenue estimated to double by 2022, though physical sales are dropping and digital sales increasing. Video game revenue remains more lucrative than other media industries in the nation, such as cinema and music, though other sectors such as magazines and TV/video bring in more revenue.

Sergey Galyonkin, a game developer, collects and analyses data from Steam as part of the SteamSpy project. He found that in September of 2017, approximately 600,281 South Africans used the platform (0.23% of total users and 0.24% of total games) and that these users, on average, played for 26:55 minutes over two-week time spans. The average user owns 25 Steam games. From August 2017, the top-selling games on

Steam for South Africans were: *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (PUBG Corporation, 2017), *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013), *Magicka* (Arrowhead Game Studios, 2011), *Portal 2* (Valve Corporation, 2011), *Team Fortress Classic* (Valve Corporation, 1999) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) (Staff Writer 2017)—all popular games on the global market.

At the moment, the key game developers in South Africa appear to be Free Lives, The Brotherhood, QCF Design, Thoopid, Skobbejak and RuneStorm. Of these six studios, four are based in Cape Town. Skobbejak is based in Johannesburg, and RuneStorm's specific location is undisclosed. The Free Lives studio employs 11 (mostly young white) individuals and is best known for a game called *Broforce* (2015; available through Steam, Humble and PS4). Free Lives has won several awards and been featured at prominent gaming festivals worldwide, including SXSW, A MAZE Germany and Minecon. On Steam, *Broforce* has a Metacritic Score of 83 and is rated 'Overwhelmingly Positive' because 96% of the 24,710 user reviews for this game are positive. Ironically, the game, which is described as a celebration of 1980s action films, is saturated with patriotic *United States* paramilitary imagery—not what you would imagine from a South African collective.

The second most prominent South African game developer is The Brotherhood, unsurprisingly a partnership between brothers. Though The Brotherhood is much smaller in size than Free Lives, their game *Stasis* (2015) has also received impressive global recognition. *Stasis* is a horror adventure game set on a supposedly abandoned spacecraft. Available for PC/Mac, the game has been translated into eight languages and won Game of the Year from AdventurerGamers.com among many other accolades. Both *Stasis* and their subsequent release *Cayne* (2017), also set on the creepy spaceship, received strong positive feedback on platforms like Steam. On Steam, *Stasis* has a Metacritic score of 79 and is rated 'Mostly Positive' due to 78% of the 715 user reviews for this game being positive.

Another critically acclaimed game studio is QCF Design (QCF stands for Quarter Circle Forward). QCF currently has five individuals on staff and six collaborators. The company is best known for *Desktop Dungeons* (2010; PC/Mac/iOS/Android), a single-player strategy/puzzler game in which you must fight your way through a series of dungeons. The game won an award for Excellence in Design at the 2011 Independent Games Festival, and it scored an 82 Metacritic Score. It is rated 'Very Positive' on Steam with 90% of the 832 user reviews reporting a positive experience.

Skobbejak Games, based in Johannesburg, is another developer duo. Their first game, *Vapour* (2015), is experimental horror but unlike The Brotherhood's games, received mostly negative feedback on platforms like Steam and did not seem to receive critical recognition or acclaim at a national or global level. Following *Vapour* and another game *'n Verlore Verstand* (Afrikaans for 'A Lost Mind'), the company proposed on Steam Greenlight an abstract adventure game, *Tyd wag vir Niemand (*Afrikaans for 'Time Waits for Nobody') set in Antarctica. That game was greenlit and released earlier this year (2017) with a better response (rated 'Mostly Positive' with 75% of the 20 user reviews as positive) yet with relatively low engagement and no Metacritic score.

Beyond console and desktop video games, developer Thoopid focuses on games for mobile devices because, as their website notes, 'globally mobile is re-shaping the way people connect on the move'. Their *Snailboy* games, while not award-winning, have received positive recognition from global publications such as *IGN*, *PocketGamer*, *Adobe* and *CNN*, especially for their beautiful graphics. Another Cape Town software studio, Maxxor, is also mobile focused and, besides its business-oriented mobile applications, runs an independent game studio that has released a multiplayer online strategy game called *Moonbase* (2012). The success of this game is unclear due to lack of data.

Finally, RuneStorm, a three-person team, began by developing mods for existing games such as *Doom* (id Software, 1993) and *Quake* (id Software, 1996), winning awards for their mods at the Unreal Tournaments. Subsequently, they shifted to developing their own games: *Rooks Keep* (2014), an arena-based, melee combat game, and *Viscera Cleanup Detail* (2015), where players take on the role of a space-station janitor cleaning up after horror events. Both *Viscera Cleanup Detail* and *Broforce* made the top five trending games on SteamSpy (the Steam analytics platform) within weeks of release (Usmani 2016, 'First Class', para. 8). None of the aforementioned games are about or reference South Africa in any direct way, beyond utilising SA voice actors.

During the data scrape, of the five selected games, queries about *Broforce* returned the most data. After duplicates were removed, the spider pulled 3783 rows of data, that is, 3783 individual posts, from the IGN forum. The filtered data included 20 posts from threads with titles that explicitly mentioned *Broforce* and 190 posts mentioning *Broforce* from non-game specific threads. From Gamespot, the spider extracted 1046 unique rows of data, which I filtered down into 188 posts from thread

titles explicitly mentioning *Broforce* and 28 posts mentioning *Broforce* from general threads. Some 92 of these posts referred to the game with positive value statements or recommended the game. Another 59 of these posts criticised the game in some form, while 51 posts mentioned the game in neutral terms, and 18 posts expressed interest or curiosity about the game. Many of the posts expressing critique were specifically in relation to the PlayStation port of the original game, namely, when the developer converted the game from desktop to PS, players reported a loss in aesthetic quality and time lags. Thus, the critique often addressed a specific technical issue rather than the game itself, though significant critique of the game itself also exists. In addition, through the discussion, I discovered that *Broforce* had been promoted by popular YouTube blogger PewDiePie, which contributed to its greater visibility compared to the other games in my study.

The game that returned the second largest quantity of data was *Desktop Dungeons*. After duplicates were removed, the spider pulled 7430 rows of data from the IGN forum. The filtered data included 8 posts from threads with titles explicitly mentioning the game and 91 posts mentioning the game within general threads. The spider for Gamespot returned no posts, indicating that the game had not been discussed on these forums. The large disparity between the initial data set and filtered data set can be accounted for by the appearance of posts referencing desktops and dungeons in relation to other games that had to be removed. A total of 17 of the posts referred to the game with positive value statements or recommended the game. One of the posts criticised the game. A further 13 posts mentioned the game in neutral terms, and 1 post expressed interest or curiosity about the game.

Viscera Cleanup Detail returned a much lower quantity of data. After duplicates were removed, the spider pulled 11 rows of data from the IGN forum and 6 rows of data from the Gamespot forum. For both forums, the game was not mentioned in any thread title, so all data pertains to posts that mentioned the game within general threads. Overall, three of the posts referred to the game with positive value statements or recommended the game, two of the posts criticised the game, while three posts mentioned the game in neutral terms. Only one post expressed interest or curiosity about the game. The final two games were never mentioned on either forum. Upon initial analysis of posts mentioning ‘Stasis’, it became clear that all references were to the common noun form of ‘stasis’ rather

than the proper noun—the title of the game. Thus, all extracted data were discarded as irrelevant. *Tyd Wag Vir Niemand* never returned any data.

None of the games were ever mentioned in reference to South Africa in any form. Most of the conversations surrounding these games resembled what one would expect around any popular game. While some people thoroughly enjoyed a game, others would express strong negative feelings towards the game, and others would express indifference. In addition, many of the neutral posts belong to a category of post in which forum participants would post lengthy lists of either all the games in their inventory, or a comprehensive list of games on sale or temporarily free that month.

Discussion

From the research findings, it appears that the South African video game industry is following a similar path to other emerging media industries that must compete on the global market. Essentially, what we see, in reality, is not quite a *South African* video game industry, but a branch of the global market that South Africans are participating within, whether as developers or as players. My initial observation is a speculation based on what little data is available: South Africans aren't playing 'South African' games. Statistics indicate that South Africans *are* playing video games, and at a higher rate than one might expect from a country where many private residences cannot afford broadband Internet. As the PwC report highlights, many South Africans are spending as much money on video games as they do on other entertainment media, such as movies and music (Myburgh 2018). The sales figures from Steam further support the fact that South Africans are primarily playing foreign games, which isn't surprising considering the lack of compelling 'South African' games and the general prominence of global media in the nation. Second, I suggest that South African game developers are making games largely for an international audience. Of the games mentioned above, none of them utilise a narrative or procedural logic that references South African culture. Usmani writes:

> Well-known South African games as they exist today, like *Broforce*, *Toxic Bunny* and *Desktop Dungeons* have an understated South African quality that is in contrast to the games developed in Nigeria and Kenya where locally

> created games are so culturally specific they couldn't exist anywhere else. (2016, 'The Born-Free Generation', para. 18)

Rather South African games seem to be constructed to appeal to a broad global demographic. On the SA Gamer forum, one member 'Wyvern' wrote of the games *Stasis* and *Cayne,* 'Both have south african voice actors. So it's for sure made by south africans but I don't think it has a real south african feel' (2017a, post #12). In reference to the games *Desktop Dungeons* and *Viscera Cleanup Detail*, user Buffel similarly wrote, 'I can't really say that they feel South African. I assume they were aimed more at an international audience' (2017, post #9). Usmani echoes these observations stating that, 'As of now, games that reflect South African culture are in short supply' and he quotes Ruan Gates who remarks that 'I don't think there's been a truly South African game yet, a game that everyone here played' (2016, para. 6). In addition, my review of game discussions on international forums indicates that users are not aware of the games' origins nor associate the games in any way with SA.

On the other hand, the Steam statistics and my review of these discussions do reveal that several South African games *have* been quite successful in the global market. Though some users expressed strong negative opinions about *Broforce* (usually related to the PS4 port of the game, not the original desktop version), praise for the game dominated discussions and the Steam reviews indicate the 'Overwhelming Positive' reaction that the game has had. *Desktop Dungeons* received little criticism and primarily praise. Though *Stasis* was not discussed on IGN or Gamespot, the positive reviews and ratings on Steam indicate its own wide success. When feedback was neither explicitly positive nor negative, these games were still being discussed, expanding their visibility within the global market.

Based on the literature, this focus on the international market makes sense considering the current legal and economic context for South African game developers. By focusing on international markets rather than the SA market, these mostly tiny game developers stand a greater chance of success. In order for a truly national industry to emerge, the SA industry must first develop financial stability and economic purchase at the global level because a national audience would unlikely generate sufficient revenue to support the expensive needs of game developers attempting to make high production value games that can compete with mainstream titles.

In addition, the industry needs to find support from the SA government. Not only does the government not provide reasonable financial

support[1] to the industry as other nations do (such as the UK and its UK Games Fund), but the existing legal system actually discourages innovation in this area. Nicholas Hall is a SA digital entertainment lawyer, member of the Video Game Bar Association, and the founder of IESA, Interactive Entertainment South Africa, which is a non-profit lobby group for the video game industry. Hall has been instrumental in identifying and publicly addressing several of these concerns, which he partially attributes to the fact that the government has not determined under which department the gaming industry falls (Alfreds 2016). This state of uncertainty and lack of thoughtful government oversight has meant several things for the industry. Some examples include the fact that the gaming industry has no protection under the Copyright Act. In addition, if new games do not undergo the expensive and time-consuming process of classification, game developers face a criminal sanction of imprisonment. This legal implication has caused many game developers to release their games in other nations where they do not need to get classified. Furthermore, if game developers wish to sell their games on platforms like Steam or Google Play, the Exchange Control Regulations require that the developers pay a portion of their revenue to the South African Reserve Bank. This has led some companies to seek incorporation outside of SA. Thus, generally speaking, the country is currently not supportive of its video gaming industry, despite the fact that it is one of the largest growing entertainment industries.

So, there are South Africans who want to make fantastic games, including those who have expressed interest in making more 'South African' games, and there are South Africans who are spending a significant amount of money *purchasing* video games. If these two groups could be brought together so that South Africans could be selling to South Africans, then not only would an actual South African national video game industry exist, but the South African gaming community could have a significant role in shaping South African national identity.

What could close that gap? First, as I have already noted, significant government deregulation or legal reform needs to occur, and with the establishment of IESA, this might finally be underway. Second, the industry needs to continue to establish itself globally to provide a stable revenue stream to support its more nationally oriented endeavours. Third, funding is a serious concern for players. While smartphones have become more

[1] Apparently, government rebates are available but difficult to obtain (Usmani 2016).

ubiquitous in South Africa, other gaming technology remains expensive, and even for those who have access to the necessary technology, the cost for high speed internet access subsequently limits access.

Game industries and communities can also be fostered in a different context—the academy. Pippa Tshabalala, a game developer and lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand notes that:

> It's expensive to develop a game and lack of funding and resources is a major challenge. We also don't have a huge variety of training opportunities here. There are university courses like the one that's been running at Wits for a few years, but it's one of the few and it's very competitive to get in. (Probyn 2015, para. 3)

The course she is referring to is the first actual game design program at a SA university: the BA in Game Design at Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg. At the University of Cape Town, it is possible to do a concentration in Computer Game Design as part of a degree in Computer Science, and there is also a technical school in Cape Town, Friends of Design, which offers a one-year Higher Certificate in Game Graphics and Multimedia Entertainment.

The programme at Wits is the only one to situate gaming within the larger context of the Humanities, providing the type of thoughtful engagement with gaming that one expects from a liberal arts university as opposed to a vocational school. This unique focus at Wits becomes clearer in dialogue with the students, who view game design as an inherent element in the production of culture. A third-year student, Raheel Hassim, explains, 'We need games that unite. Even if I don't sell my games domestically, I still want to make games that are culturally, somehow, South African' (Usmani 2016, 'The Born-Free Generation', para. 2). According to Usmani, this passion for telling locally and culturally relevant stories within SA-produced games 'is a sticking point that comes up again and again over the course of interviews with the Wits students' (2016, 'The Born-Free Generation', para. 3). The question will be whether these students find jobs within the South African industry, and if they cannot find existing positions, will they have the resolve and resources to carve out new spaces?

Finally, it will be valuable for SA gamers and scholars to step back and revisit this question about what, in fact, a South African game *is*. On the SA Gamer forum thread discussing 'South African games', user Wyvern commented, 'I honestly will rather support a game development that

makes something that appeals to the international crowd—that shows them we have amazing game developers as well. I know games like Broforce, Stasis did well enough on Steam to attract a cult following' (2017b, post #26). Wyvern's comment captures an outward-focused perspective of national identity, one in which the focus is on promoting a certain idea of 'South African-ness' to the world. From this perspective, South African games don't need to necessarily *feel* South African in content, but their very existence proves that South Africans can participate in the global economy and can provide meaningful value to the global entertainment industry. On the other hand, as expressed by Wits students, there are those who are determined to make games *for* South Africans to promote and celebrate local culture. This approach reflects a more traditional understanding of nation building.

The Brotherhood, developers of *Stasis* and *Cayne*, actually recently released a game that might fit into this latter category of SA-oriented game. *Beautiful Desolation* (2020), a game that feels like a cross between the films *District 9* (2009) and *Arrival* (2016), takes place, at least partially, in Cape Town, SA. The game's trailer clearly reveals beautiful shots panning over Table Mountain in Cape Town, and the press kit describes a sub-Saharan African post-apocalyptic landscape. Based on the developer's previous successes and the high quality of the trailer, it is reasonable to expect that this game may become the first mainstream SA game to overtly integrate some sense of local culture into its narrative and landscape. However, the dystopian aspects of the game do raise questions about its potential to appeal to national pride.

Conclusion

Video games, in their increasing significance within society, are the newest counterpart to novels and cinema in their ability to help shape and give voice to national identity, both domestically and internationally. Although video games are not currently being utilised as such within South Africa, the potential exists: game developers and players have expressed a desire to create and consume expressly South African games. And the tools to create such games already exist within the burgeoning South African game industry, which can continue to grow if the government provides the necessary support. With the rising popularity of mobile gaming in SA and the country's extensive mobile infrastructure (Brown and Czerniewicz 2010), video games could be an immensely significant means by which to engage

the general public in constructing national identity. The post-apartheid nation is still young, with only a couple of decades since its first democratic national elections, so this project of national formation for South Africa remains pressing and pertinent.

There are many questions yet to be asked and answered about the South African video game industry. While I have established that South Africa has a developing national voice within its video games, I have not addressed whom that voice actually represents. Most of the game developers I discovered were young and white, which suggests that the existing developer community only represents a minority of the greater South African population—not South Africa, the rainbow nation, as Nelson Mandela envisioned the post-apartheid republic. Future studies should investigate who are the South Africans participating in this industry and community and should explore the actual lived experience of gaming. Who has access to the technology and resources needed to participate? And how can the industry become more diverse and accessible to more South Africans and thereby perhaps become more reflective of South African identities in their video game productions.

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