

Game production in Greece: What we have learnt so far

Elina Roinioti

Panteion University
elina.roinioti@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Video games can be approached as a sociopolitical and cultural kaleidoscope through which we can detect traces of our shared collective memory (Švelch 2021; Šisler 2013), of our socio-cultural traditions and finally, as cultural artifacts produced by symbol creators (Hesmondhalgh, 2019,9), through which we can analyze “how the local connects with higher-order economic, cultural and political structures” (Liboriussen and Martin 2016). Examples coming from the Japanese, Mexican or Arabic games communities, teach us how locality can overcome global tensions in creative production. Cultural tropes like in-game depictions of Latin American culture (e.g., Day of the Dead) (Penix-Tadsen, 2016,147), or repetitive narrative themes, like homesickness and family values (Hutchinson, 2019,28) found in Japanese games (Hutchinson, 2019,28), provide a rich field for critical research.

The present research negotiates critical matters of cultural production by carefully examining a specific local game community. Greece is a country not known for the video game production, although Greek mythology has a significant presence in contemporary game industry.

The Greek game developer’s community is a typical indie community. Small but measurable in size, the community consists of different kinds of creative groups among which we can find game studios, freelancers working together, temporary teams participating in game jams and community events. As is common in the field, the Greek community is a community of practice (Wegner 2001). However, unlike other countries, there aren’t any AAA studios operating in Greece.

RESEARCH

The focus was to examine a) how Greek game developers place themselves in the global market, in terms of translocality (Appadurai, 1996; Carpentier, 2007), b) under which socioeconomical circumstances, Greek video games are being produced and c) whether and under what conditions, Greek game developers use their games to project their local identity. How historically, Greek audiovisual policies have influenced local game production, was also an important parameter. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Greek game developers (N=30) and representatives from national and international organizations. Archival research in Greek legislation and game/pc magazines was central to compose the “portrait” of the co-called “Greek video game”.

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What was quite clear even from the first interviews, was that due to broader historical and socioeconomic conditions and a consequent lack of documentation of the past, the collective memory of the local game community, was extremely short-sighted. Interviews were confined to the recent game production, with the exception of Darkfall Online, a subscription based MMOPRG, self-published by Aventurine, a Greek company operated from 2003-2012 in Athens.

Our findings, highlighted two game production periods in Greece.

The invisible video game production and the first creators

The period from the military dictatorship (1967-1974) to early 2000, was a period of authoritarian restrictions and strong contradictions.

Greek legislations from the Royal Decree of 1971 to 2002, highlight the fact that the production and consumption of video games in Greece was legally treated as the back door of gambling, and therefore, required severe legal restrictions. Specifically, the failure of the law to legally distinguish online gambling from an online game world, the gambler from a gamer, led to a general ban on all electronic and online games, in all public places. This Law was officially repealed in 2011, under the pressure of the EU and the stakeholders of the local game community of the time (Roinioti, 2020).

Interesting and contradictive enough, during the same period of excessive restrictions, Greek software developers were experimenting with games, exchanging floppy disks, advice, and reviews. Game and pc-orientated magazines like Pixel and PC Games, played the role of a community manager: providing tips for games, fixing bugs, organizing haiku competitions, receiving, and reviewing games from their readers and highlighting the best of them. Greek games like “Tart” for pc and Amiga, or the adventure game “Ten Challenges or Ten steps towards glory”, were among the first Greek pc games published by Spin Software. Chicken Invaders (1999), Conspiracies (2003) or Erevos (2001) are some of the games that followed. With very few exceptions, most of these games aimed entirely at the local market- using Greek titles and texts, tropes from different aspects of Greek history (Greek revolution, Fall of Constantinople, ancient Greek history), and references from traditional or modern life (in-game items like coffee pots or hints about local football politics).

Aventurine and the internationalism of the Greek game production

During our research, we realized that an important threshold was the operation of Aventurine (2003-2012), developer of Darkfall Online. Darkfall was the biggest international game production in Greece. Acting as a market disruptor, Aventurine had brought together all the local experts while at the same time, their game was highly popular- an important proof of value for today’s game developers.

The characteristics of today’s local game production also changed. Video games are no longer produced for local consumption but aimed at an international audience. This new generation of game developers rarely draw inspiration from the Greek culture- a concept of culture ideologically confined to mythology and ancient history, treated either as a worn-out trope and cliché, or as a theme disturbingly adjacent to nationalist references. On the other hand, how Greek game developers place themselves in the global industry differs accordingly. For studios that have already published titles, global industry assembles to a “huge lake full of big fishes in which you are a small little fish, trying to survive”. For other creators that work in specific game sectors like serious games, VR or online escape rooms, niche markets are probably the most viable solution for an indie developer. Niche markets provide the opportunity to indie

developers to build their audience, be more authentic and why not, partially avoid all the big fishes in the pond.

Finally, and compared to the previous period, the Greek government has introduced a cash rebate (2017) and tax credit scheme (2019) for funding local video game projects. According to official stakeholders we interviewed, this initiative is a formal state recognition of game developers as creators, entitled to receive public funding (Roinioti, 2020). A proof that the political and economical environment has somehow shifted positively.

Researching local indie communities is a multifaceted procedure that includes not only the present context and future projections, but even more, the past and shared memories. This ongoing research aims to analyze the different phases of game production in Greece from a political, economic, and cultural point of view.

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