

## Research Article

# Player Immersion Through Aesthetic Elements of Video Games: a Case Study in “A Space for the Unbound”

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## Abstract.

“A Space for the Unbound” is an example of a successful Indonesian game in the international market and has won numerous awards from diverse gaming events worldwide. This study aims to answer how this game can create player immersion which can form emotional bonds with its users so that other Indonesian game developers can replicate it. The research employs phenomenological methods as part of the qualitative research method to gain an in-depth understanding of the research object. The findings show that the game is a complex medium that effectively touches the emotions of its audience by stimulating emotional responses, particularly that of nostalgia. A comprehensive understanding of the theme culture and translated audio-visually, narrative, and ludic is crucial in creating an immersive experience that emotionally connects players with the adapted culture to develop a sense of nostalgia.

**Keywords:** video games, emotional bond, Indonesian game, aesthetic

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## 1. Introduction

Video games represent the perfect fusion of spoken media, technology, and art, with the capacity to affect millions of people. This storytelling medium is considered cutting-edge as it seamlessly integrates narrative and gameplay, generating a wide range of themes that serve as the foundation for a unique gaming experience. Some video games focus on specific cultural topics and build their aesthetic elements, such as their visuals, plots, and gameplay around those themes. A great example is the Indonesian video game called “A Space for The Unbound”, which draws inspiration from Indonesian culture in the 1990s and has won numerous international gaming competitions. It was developed independently by Mojiken Studio and distributed by Toge Production, the game tells the story of two teenagers living in the Indonesian suburbs in the 1990s and their encounters with supernatural mysteries. At the Tokyo Game Show 2022 international



event, the game competed against other AAA international games in the Future Division category and earned notable recognition [1].

Even though there are many game development studios in Indonesia, only a few have been able to successfully represent the country's culture while delivering immersive gaming experiences, as demonstrated by "A Space for The Unbound". For this reason, the game has gained popularity in both domestic and international markets. However, the gaming industry in Indonesia faces a challenge due to a lack of factual data, which is critical in aiding the development of those involved in the gaming industry. It will also assist them in overcoming the challenges that come from a fast-evolving technologically based industry. This data provides valuable information for developing adequate game knowledge through high-quality research, ultimately elevating the caliber of competing human resources within the industry [2].

## 1.1. Video Game Aesthetic Elements

The three components of aesthetics are the aesthetic object, the aesthetic subject, and the aesthetic value [3]. There are similarities between the aesthetic components in video games and the aesthetic components in general. Video games, like other complex media, have three distinct aesthetic components, namely ludic, audiovisual, and narrative. The audiovisual aesthetic components consist of visual style, image content, sound design, music, and voice acting, along with spatial viewpoints. Ludic, on the other hand, encompasses all potential player interactions, mechanical games, and video game objectives, including the interaction and enjoyment derived from the gameplay. Lastly, a narrative aesthetic describes how a narrative strategy works and the game's story. Elements such as non-linear tales and the facilitation of "direct access" to the subjectivity of story characters are examples of such tactics [4].

## 1.2. Immersive

When someone plays video games, they may feel engaged or involved, which is known as immersion. Depending on their level of participation, the player may experience different levels of immersion. The more time and effort a player put into playing the game, the more immersed they may feel. The most basic level of immersion is when the player invests time and effort into playing the game. The next level is when the player concentrates intensely on the game and becomes emotionally committed. The

deepest level of immersion is when the player feels like they are truly present in the game. This is determined by how they feel while playing [5].

## 2. Methods and Equipment

### 2.1. Methods

In this study, the phenomenological method is employed. This research method involves an interpretative study that seeks to comprehend an experience had by a single person or cluster of people who had experienced a specific phenomenon. It focuses on the similarities noticed when experiencing an event and draws a generalization from them. Information is gathered from each person who has had a specific experience, and a composite account of their intrinsic experiences is created that explains “what” and “how” they felt [6].

#### 2.1.1. Data Collection

This study utilizes the phenomenological method. This interpretative study aims to understand the experience of a single person or group of people who have experienced a particular phenomenon by focusing on the similarities they noticed during the event and drawing generalizations from them. Information will be collected from each person who has had this specific experience, and a composite account of their intrinsic experiences will be created to explain “what” and “how” they felt. The study will involve sampling six individuals, including players, game creators, game reporters, and art curators. This sample consists of players who have already played and finished the game; they came from the same era used in the game and newer players who don't live in that era. Some players live in the Surabaya region and are familiar with the game's location, while others aren't. Game creators in this sample are directly (director, artist, writer) and indirectly involved in the game's development, and all came from different cities in Indonesia, like Jakarta, Malang, and Surabaya. All these diversities are needed to create a preliminary understanding of how the game affects players from various backgrounds.

### 2.1.2. Data Analysis

In this study, the data analysis procedure comprises of three sections which are as follows; firstly, the practice of descriptive analysis aims to illustrate the cultural essence displayed in “A Space for tThe Unbound” aesthetic elements. Secondly, the interpretive analysis is designed to identify the nostalgic undertones that arise when a player interacts with an unrestricted game. Finally, the evaluation phase of the analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between cultural essences, the sensation of play, and nostalgia.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The term immersion is commonly used in discussions about video games. The degree to which players are drawn into the game is a sign that the aim of creating a gaming experience has been successful. In addition to requiring the player to invest time and effort, immersion also results in the player’s attention being captured, resulting in an emotional connection with the game they are playing. At the highest level of immersion, the player experiences a feeling of presence or being present in the game. Previous research by Wulansari on immersion in persuasive games found that immersion produces more intense emotions, personal experiences, and empathy. However, further research is necessary to determine how immersion is related to video game elements [7]. This research will provide insight into how the aesthetic elements of the “A Space for The Unbound” video game can evoke a player’s immersion.

Pixel art serves as the primary language as the visual aesthetics in the video game “A Space for The Unbound”. This style is a product of retro gaming culture and is utilized to tell a story and create a unique gaming experience. Pixel art is an art form used in gaming that is created through the use of constraints. These low-resolution images have a distinct style that resembles a colored box. Before the discovery of CDs in the mid-1990s, pixel art was the only option for computer graphics in digital games for consoles and home computers [8 Grahn]. The study conducted on pixel art’s presentation of object details revealed that it encourages players to instinctively fill in the gaps with their imagination. This direct and automatic participation results in profound gaming experiences that can be compared to games with realistic rendering (Figure 1).

‘A Space for The Unbound’ is a story-driven game about two teenagers, Atma and Raya, where the players can roam to a fictional Indonesian sub-urban city in the 1990s

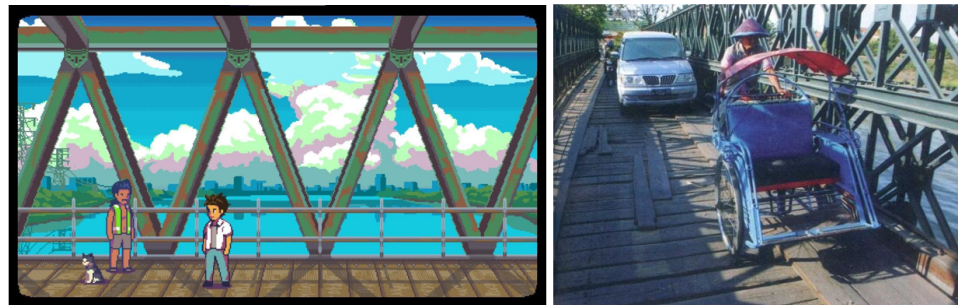


**Figure 1:** Pixel art in “A Space for the Unbound”. Source: Mojiken Studio.

era and interact with people (and cats) in that city to unveil the mysteries behind the story. The game is an adventure based on side-scrolling mechanics with puzzle solving and mini-game elements to progress through the game, where hints can be found by interacting with NPC and items scattered along the journey. Dimas Novan Delviano, the director of ‘A Space for The Unbound’, stated that the visual aesthetic of anime, particularly Makoto Shinkai’s work, incorporates references to the real world, has a significant impact on the game’s setting. Compared to the original, the location’s appearance is altered to become more vibrant. Setiya Budi considered the design of the characters, the depiction of the settings, and the position of the people’s homes to be highly familiar and reminiscent of his previous home. He can quickly identify the distinctive real live location based on the features presented in the pixel art style’s restriction of the delivery of visual detail and the variations in the portrayal in the game “A Space for The Unbound.”

The game was created in response to the desire to reproduce the phenomenon of anime pilgrimages or Seichi Junrei in Indonesia. In the otaku subculture, this phenomenon happens when people attempt to visit a location that serves as the setting for an anime, which is based on locations in the real world [9]. All sets in “A Space for The Unbound” based on a real location in Surabaya, mashed up with cultural artifacts related to 90’s culture, creating an imaginary Indonesian 90’s suburban city where Atma and Raya’s adventure takes place. For instance, the bridge connecting Atma Basecamp and the residential area is based on “jembatan ijo,” a known old iron truss bridge in Surabaya and its surroundings (Figure 2); the bridge where Raya waits for Atma was

based on “jembatan Merr.” The residential area is based on typical 90’s residential area layouts and house designs, which can be found in most of the Indonesian residential areas built around that time. This causes the familiarity that one experiences when exploring the realm of “A Space for The Unbound.”



**Figure 2:** Jembatan Ijo in the game and in real life. Source: Mojiken Studio, [jawatimuran.wordpress.com](http://jawatimuran.wordpress.com).

The narration of “A Space for The Unbound” features a direct or indirect storytelling and significantly adopts Indonesian culture. The direct narrative is tied to the main story path and is presented through character interaction and the game’s story path. However, stories are frequently unrelated to the main plotline and are indirectly delivered through relics or side characters. The story is delivered through free exploration that the player will progressively learn about as the game progresses. The walking simulator subgenre emphasizes unrestricted exploration, allowing the player to freely explore and progress through the game’s stages. The illusion of freedom and exploration is created by the roaming mechanics, where the player needs to trigger something first to progress to the next stage of the game. It can be an interaction with a specific NPC or item placed somewhere in the gameplay area. All games are always restricted by the gameplay area, but the combination of linearity of the main storyline and side quests give the player a choice to progress directly through the main story or explore other options outside the main story. Players’ comprehension of the “A Space for The Unbound” world and its events is improved by their exploration and engagement throughout the game.

The life dynamics of the story can often be observed in the day-to-day activities of the in-game society. For example, the issue of adolescence is a crucial requirement for this game. However, some stories accurately portray bullying and everyday social interactions, family dynamics, and financial difficulties at home. Besides spoken narration, the game’s landscape is decorated with cultural relics that have their own unique stories and histories. For instance, there is a *kentongan* (Figure 3) a form of slit drum alarm, typically made of bamboo, which are periodically struck by night watch in Javanese cities and



**Figure 3:** (a) Security post (b) local residents reading newspaper (c) kentongan. Source: Mojiken Studio with alteration by author.

villages alike. A *kentongan* may be struck with differing rhythmic pattern to indicate different warning such as fire or thieves. There is also signage that reads “closed due to residents’ activity”, often used to block the road for wedding ceremonies or other public activities using public roads as a venue. In Indonesia, it’s common to use for public roads for to be temporarily closed by residents various activities on special occasions such as wedding receptions, while , in this game, the signage is used to block certain areas until a certain stage of story development. These two artifacts are not openly described, but their background and purpose are narratively complemented by the world of “A Space for The Unbound.” The game features numerous other comparable artifacts with related purposes, which combine to form a complicated universe with a realistic setting.

To create a sense that each NPC has their own personal life and isn’t just a supporting character that has no other purpose than to assist the protagonists, each NPC is given a unique narrative that is delivered in conjunction with the design of the environment. The player can learn about each NPC’s back story through interaction and dialog as the game progresses. At the same time, players also build comprehension of the world where the story is happening (Figure 4). Artifacts that are frequently seen in everyday Indonesian society and other elements are also implemented. This approach gives the impression that each NPC is a member of the local population who goes about their daily lives as usual (Figure 5).



**Figure 4:** NPC complaining about kids nowadays attitude. Source: Mojiken Studio.



**Figure 5:** visual details on NPC personal activity. Source: Mojiken Studio.

The world of “A Space for The Unbound” is delivered directly and indirectly through coherent visuals, narration, and ludic elements in the game. The player experiences and absorbs this information in every interaction with each aesthetic element as the adventure progresses. Every aspect of Indonesian culture presented is translated visually or narratively and absorbed voluntarily by the players while they enjoy the “believable” world of the game. The developers’ attention to detail and comprehension of the culture used to develop the game creates a mood that allows the player to establish a connection with the game and gives them a “sense of presence” within it.



The game “A Space for The Unbound” successfully delivers immersive cultural content through video game aesthetic elements, offering alternative methods of development for the Indonesian gaming industry. It provides a platform for Indonesian developers to learn how to present their cultural content in video games, which can be a powerful medium to pass on cultural knowledge to the younger, digitally savvy generation. Adapting to modern challenges is inevitable for Indonesian culture and video games as cultural products to remain relevant and sustainable. Cultural transformation is an intercultural dialogue between native and foreign cultures triggered by globalization, resulting in new cultures with the uniqueness of both native and foreign cultures. Historical orders are one of the reasons for cultural transformation caused by the destruction of value systems, cultural contradictions, and the incoherence and inconsistency of cultural devices. Therefore, efforts are needed to find cultural formats and figures that can answer these challenges accordingly [10].

#### 4. Conclusion

“A Space for The Unbound” is a video game that has been advertised as having an Indonesian cultural setting from the 1990s, and it has won multiple prizes and recognition on a global scale in a variety of gaming competitions, both domestically and internationally. Although there are many reasons for this game’s success, the main one is that it successfully evokes nostalgia through its gameplay, audio, visual, and narrative elements. External cultural adaptation cannot be accomplished by simply attaching the culture to the needs of a pragmatic cultural *apriori* without an understanding of cultural concepts and thinking that is for the adaptation. The game’s ability to successfully evoke the impression or environment of the 1990s through its narrative, ludic, or gameplay and visual elements has allowed it to evoke nostalgia in its players. This is because the game incorporates much information through environmental design and NPC narration. These particulars give the game’s world a living aura that connects the desired atmosphere with the player and gives the user a sense of being in the game whilst playing. These are what create player immersion in “A Space for The Unbound.” This method can be the key to future sustainable cultural adaptation in popular digital entertainment platforms such as games, both for industry and cultures.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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