

Conference Paper

Framing Islamic History through Interactive Game (Case Study: Ibn Battuta Games)

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Abstract

Media in various platforms have a significant role in constructing the paradigm of Islam in society. Unfortunately, unbalanced justification by the media tends to cause misconceptions about the Islamic concept, especially in America and Europe. This justification then is often used as a base in constructing the narrative of a game. Moreover, they seem to exploit these justifications in a more apparent manner than other forms of media. In the digital age, video games transform to be one of mainstream media that shapes our comprehension and understanding of the world by constructing, conveying and iterating various representations. Therefore, video game referred as the most potential and effective media to convey positive values to users. "Ibn Battuta" game developed as an interactive media that offer different point of view about Islam, to differentiate it with the other games in general. By exposing Ibn Battuta as one of the Muslim figures who made a glorious milestone in history of science. Ibn Battuta is known as an adventurer, merchant and inspirational figure by spreading the values of Islam to most areas of coastal Asia. The game reveals the travel records of Ibn Battuta in the first half of the 14th century, which also reveals the wide scope of the Muslim life at that time. This paper is based primarily on qualitative research and content analysis. The methodology used for content analysis involves playing the whole Ibn Battuta games while taking notes and screenshots of relevant visual signifiers, recording the narrative and analysing the structure of gameplay. Through Ibn Battuta games, the symbolic and ideological dimensions of in-game representational history related to Islam has been analysed from different perspectives. Immersive worlds as given environments in this game, which may be explored in a nonlinear way by players - include history, artifacts and objects - allow users to learn about the history of Islam by exploring the environment and its objects in a relatively open-ended way.

Keywords: Islamic history, interactive game, the structure

1. Introduction

Game becomes an interesting phenomenon not only because of its ability to create a fantasy world, but also its potential to be learning media for various activities in the form of simulation game. The development of game is not only about entertainment

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value but also as a media that improve user's knowledge and skill in every aspect. For example; military exercise simulation, flight simulation or other simulation of profession. In the global game phenomenon we can see such a rich imagination sphere.

Nowadays we offered various games that only focus in popular theme with shallow meaning and interesting graphical elements. Those games developed to purchase economical value and sometimes do not provide good values in society. Among popular themed games domination, historical themed game seems to be potential media to familiarize the with cultural and religious values. In the digital age, video games transform to be one of mainstream media that shapes our comprehension and understanding of the world by constructing, conveying and iterating various representations.

Ibn Battuta game is RPG genre (Role Playing Game) developed by local game developer, which designed in detail way, including narration idea, characterizations, game play and audio visual elements that based on journey of Ibn Battuta. This game featuring not only standard features of RPG, also there are society theories, geography, and history during 14th century. The characters, social arrangements, building form and also map used in the game based on the history of Ibn Battuta, taken from various resources.

The presence of Ibn Battuta games was encouraged by awareness that everything can be learned in a different way through game, including history of Ibn Battuta. Ibn Battuta was a medieval berber Muslim traveler and scholar, who is widely recognised as one of the greatest travelers of all time. He is known for his extensive travels, accounts of which were published in the *Rihla* ("Journey"). Over a period of thirty years, Ibn Battuta visited most of the known Islamic world as well as many non-Muslim lands. His journeys included trips to North Africa, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and China. Ibn Battuta mainly traveled to countries with Muslim governments in the areas inside the black border marking the *Dar al-Islam*. Beyond that, Muslim traders had already ventured out into China, Indonesia and further, and had established small Muslim communities in many regions of the world. Ibn Battuta would seldom be far from fellow Muslims on his travels, and he would get benefit from the charity and hospitality offered by Muslim travelers and pilgrims.

Ibn Battuta was one of the Muslim figures who made a glorious milestone in history of science. Ibn Battuta was an adventurer, merchant and inspirational figure by spreading the values of Islam to most areas of coastal Asia. Ibn Battuta was a great adventurer in the Era of Islam since he conducting exploration through land and sea includes eastern Europe, Middle East, Africa, India, Indo-Pacific and China. It makes Ibn Battuta became one of the great explorers recorded by history. Unfortunately, unbalanced justification by the media tend to cause misconceptions about the Islamic concept, especially in exposing Islamic figures that eligible to be role model for the

youth. In the history of Ibn Battuta found an exemplary story, the greatness of Islamic culture in the 14th century and the social system and trade along the route, including Asia and Indonesia. Ibn Battuta game which developed by local game developer try expose the golden era of Islam by adapting the adventure of Ibn Battuta into an interactive adventure games.

Ibn Battuta game presents one of the biggest world traveller that gives big influence in world history -especially in geography, trading and religion -. As a game with historical theme, there are some efforts to reconstruct the classical Ibn Battuta's journey. One thing to be considered, virtual commodity in game aspect open the possibility of shifting values in the narration and visual elements of Ibn Battuta games. When journey of Ibn Battuta reconstructed through the narration and visual elements, the value and accuracy of history potentially changed. It happens as the results of interaction built between the game player and the game itself that makes the game player being the character of the history, so that the narration of the history can be tricked in this game. Besides, the aspect of present also influences the narration that becomes the essence of the game.

When history becomes the main reference in developing this game, there are efforts to represent space and time that we cannot seize in our life today. History and cultural elements are borrowed to be applied in the game. But the virtual commodity provides various fantasy factors, so in the historical game we find that everything real and artificial blended. Visual elements -both element that have and do not have any reference- attend to form a new space that we can only find in virtual world.

2. Role Playing Game (RPG) in Computer Games

Computer game is not a tool or technology, but a result of the process equipment and technology that is played by the players. Equipment and technology is a medium for presenting the game. One feature that makes computer game interesting is its responsiveness. Responsiveness is vital in a game interaction. Computers able to respond the player's desire very quickly in a variety ways.

A role-playing game (RPG) is a game in which each participant assumes the role of a character, generally in a fantasy or science fiction setting that can interact within the game's imaginary world. MMORPG (Massively Multiuser Online Role Playing Game) is a Role Playing Game genre development which has facilities in large quantities multiplayer, where players can play with each other simultaneously in the virtual world. MMORPG differs from a regular computer role playing game because its environment is perpetual. People log in, join the game, take on their role and leave whenever they wish, but the game continues.

As one of the RPG genre game. Game puts the player as Ibn Battuta himself and determines its journey through a non-linear story. Players can travel to places traveled and visited by Ibn Battuta, even though player would not experience a trip in accordance to the historical record. Players can freely try some adventures, trades and battles to fight Non Player Character in the game.

3. Representing Historical Aspect in the Game

Historical aspect in the game represents the past events that we cannot seize in the real life, and the truth cannot be confirmed accurately in the form of simulation. In the other side, the term of history refers to the representation of the past. A figure that attend with vast complexity and multidimensional. In this case, history is separate and partial. There are efforts to change the content, thus tends to the present point of view. There is no set of representation that present proportional past events ([5]: 331-332).

Representation defined as an action of represent something through something else beyond him, typically as a sign or symbol. Representation emerged as a central term in the critical appraisal of history. There are two contrary opinions on this. The first opinion states that an accurate understanding of past events can be achieved through an effort of doing accountable research. While other opinion state that effort of presenting the past is reflection of dynamic and subjective present condition, so that the condition cannot bridge the gap between the past with its representation. History fused into a point of view of parties concerned. In writing the history of structuralism, the focus will shift to the narrative agreement exploration and its influence, or a speculative history ([5]: 333-335).

In the same way, the simulation is often used to define the game that sets it apart from other narrative forms such as movies or television, which allows the conditional speculation or representation. Simulation defined as the process of creating something through the models that have no real reference. Thus, enabling people to make supernatural, illusive and imaginary object become something real ([9]: 155). Baudrillard explain that simulation creates a living space that opposed to reality. Through the power of simulation, a false reality can be produced in such a way that replacing the actual reality. The signs in the simulation is not a sign reflect reality but rather an effort of covering-up or even manipulating the actual reality.

Umberto eco in ([9]: 59) mentioned that simulacrum is replication, copy or imitation of past elements that presented in current context as nostalgia. Simulacra pattern offered by Eco seem more inclined to representation. This means that, simulacra carried by Eco, at least has a past referral. Even when reality presented loses its contact, but within the limits of imagination still deal with the real condition as referral to be presented in current situation.

This pattern is different from the understanding offered by Baudrillard. In understanding simulacra, Baudrillard seems to be more radical than Umberto Eco. For Baudrillard, there is significant difference between representation and simulation. Something can be categorized as simulation as long as it is contrary to simulation. If representation tends to make reality beyond itself as reference, simulation is otherwise. Simulation does not refer to anything beyond, but makes itself as reference. This concept offered by Baudrillard is supported by Deleuze who mentioned that simulacrum is a reversal of representation process, instead of a sign has an iconic relation to reality as the reference, it precisely destroys those icons. Deviation from reality beyond itself as a reference is the vital strength in the simulacrum. Thus, representation is not a significant factor in building the world of hyper reality. But simulation that plays an important role in creating hyper reality.

Huizinga traces this expansive notion of play across various cultural sectors, and although he offers a number of compelling definitions of the term, his most succinct is worth recalling. "Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life" (Huizinga, 1938: 78 in ([5]: 329)). Huizinga's definition covers many possibilities, which is a good thing considering the rich genealogy that historical computer games draw upon. Board games, role playing games, re-enactments, and simulations have all contributed to the formation of historical computer games generally, with a number of more specific references informing the development of particular titles. Wargames (regardless of platform) have arguably had the most influence on historical computer games, particularly because they tend to be event-oriented and historically specific in their references.

In the Wargames Handbook mentioned that wargame is an attempt to get a jump on the future by obtaining a better understanding of the past. A wargame is a combination of "game," history and science. A wargame usually combines a map, playing pieces representing historical personages or military units and a set of rules telling user what user can or cannot do with them. The object of any wargame (historical or otherwise) is to enable the player to recreate a specific event and, more importantly, to be able to explore what might have been if the player decides to do things differently. (Dunnigan, 2003 in ([5]: 329)).

4. Ibn Battuta Representation in the Game

Ibn Battuta games is a RPG simulation game, where player play as Ibn Battuta on his adventure exploring land or sea. Through this game, players will indirectly learn about the history of Islamic civilization of the areas visited by Ibn Battuta. This game presents



Figure 1: Avatar of Ibn Battuta.

data and facts related to the history of his journey. Artifacts, inscriptions, sagas, characters and historical events are presented in this game. Research into various historical locations conducted to see the original form of artifacts that can be reconstructed into two-dimensional game's graphic. As the result, the graphic in Ibn Battuta game is a reconstruction of real objects that found through the physical artifacts tracking such as buildings, ships, map, and geographical condition. Even the location and geographical contour are developed exactly the same to the existing things those days.

5. Character

Player will play the role (Role Playing) as the character of Ibn Battuta. Began his adventures with Hajj depart from Morocco to Mecca by land and finally explore the ocean from Europe east to China. The game is focused on sea exploration and trade, where player play as a captain. The character of Ibn Battuta is presented as a man with Middle-East figure type, equipped with its clothing and attributes.

After a few scenes of Hajj journey from Morocco to Mecca, then the game will be focused on the exploration of the sea. In this case the character of Ibn Battuta will lead a merchant ship that will stop by from one area to another.

Players will control a ship in a simulation. In this case the ship can be upgraded to improve the speed, endurance and cargo capacity. Ship design vary due to historical references obtained by the developer. The presence of nonlinear history concept, players do not have to use the same kind of boat as in the historical record, but players can choose the type of boat that suit their needs.

6. Space and Environments

Some environment elements showed in Ibn Battuta game are:



Figure 2: Ship preparation scene.



Figure 3: Ship customization.

1. Architecture and civil buildings, such as City Wonder, ward/pavilion, palace, people's houses, arches, outdoor, ship yard, lighting, substation, barn, and bridges.
2. Natural features such as trees, plants, rocks, rivers, waterfalls, swamps, lakes, dll.

Each environment elements in this game developed based on the physical evidence of the real artifacts. Thus visual elements are made as closely as possible to the situation of the 14th century.

When entering specific regions, it will be shown evidence of the greatness of Islamic civilization in that era. Accompanied by the detailed explanation of an area, building, system of government and so on. From these explanations, players will learn a lot about the greatness of Islamic civilization through a fun and challenging game.



Figure 4: Ship control and movement.



Figure 5: Geographical and building representation.

7. Game Challenge and Non-historical Aspect

One of the challenges that will be encountered as a seaman is pirates. In this game there will be a simulation of a war against pirates. Although it is not written in the history of Ibn Battuta, however narration of pirates in this game is designed to get the challenge aspect. Besides history, another aspect that is exposed in this game is trade. Each region (port) has a special commodity and specific needs, so that the player can perform simulated trading to make a profit. From this profit the players can upgrade the ship and pay for their journey.



Figure 6: Geographical and building representation.



Figure 7: Geographical and building representation.

8. Conclusions and Suggestions

8.1. Framing Islam in Ibn Battuta Game

The aim of Ibn Battuta game development is to represent history through interactive multimedia. In Ibn Battuta games, through the player character, players are positioned to experience a piece of historical events in 14th century which the players are focused on completing the various missions that are related to fragment events in Ibn Battuta's journey. Because of this game represent the nonlinear history, the narrative becomes very dependent on which route is selected by the players and climactic factors they face. Players are not trading on the real history, but running over the course of history



Figure 8: Battle Scene.



Figure 9: Trading scene.

that built by himself. Thus, the history Ibn Battuta become an artificial, constructed by each player as a result of interaction with the game.

Islamic aspect contained in the game can be indirectly learned by the players, both through narrative and visual messages. Players will understand the center of Islamic civilization in the 14th century, the system of government, historic buildings, important figures and historic sites that passed on throughout the game, which includes North Africa up to Asia and China. Through this game the player will get a history lesson - Islam in particular - which in turn has the potential to reintroduce the great figures of Islam.

Effort to frame the Ibn Battuta's journey through the game developer's point of view is the foundation for guiding the player's perception of the Ibn Battuta's representation.

Frame analysis used by game developer to determine the keys of the theme in the history of Ibn Batutta and Islam. Artificial history in the game does not show the journey of Ibn Batutta in the whole and unified format, but an excerpt of Ibn Batutta history and culture that are considered important and has selling power.

History-themed game like Ibn Batutta game is like a trip through the debris of the past and a combination of various aspects of aesthetic and imagination that can be accepted by the ability of the human mind. Game developer intentionally combines fiction and reality elements in order to present a world that can fulfill the desire of the player in time traveling, exploring Ibn Batutta and 14th century virtual world that probably has existed only in our imagination when we read the history books of Ibn Batutta.

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