Thoughts on kitsch and games

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INTRODUCTION

In current research on the Greek video game dev community, a specific concept kept resurfacing, raising new concerns about the relationship between Greek culture, local video game production, and local creative identity- the concept of kitsch. Through semi-structured interviews with Greek game devs and in-game cultural tropes analysis, the goal was to examine how local creators express their national identity through their games and how they could express a modernized version of it-or, at least, a version that does not necessarily include himatia and Doric columns. During these interviews, one concept seemed pervasive: "Greek creators are kitsch.". The present paper reflects on kitsch and its conditions attached to the video game industry to understand how a community of creators like the one in Greece converse with this concept.

DEFINING KITSCH

What do we mean by kitsch? Is kitsch something that offends our aesthetic taste? Greenberg defines kitsch as:

"Popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc." (1939, p. 9)

Kitsch is the opposite of avant-garde art, the result of a mass demand on behalf of the lower classes during the industrial era, for a culture that can be easily consumed and could express the collective experience. As Greenberg states, kitsch arose because of urbanization and the working class, who, as they became literate, lacked the leisure time and skills to approach high art critically. Kitsch provided the solution: massively produced products that imitate culture, using well-known formulas, structures, and mechanics, reflecting easily consumed false sentiments. Kitsch offers what Greenberg will refer to as the "reflected effect"- a satisfaction of human needs in a direct, effortless way. Kitsch includes the reflected effect when avant-garde art provokes it (p.15).

KITSCH AND VIDEO GAMES

In video game studies, kitsch is a concept that occasionally appears in the bibliography, but its meaning lacks consistency. In "Katamari Damacy: Nostalgia and Kitsch" (Hutchinson, 2019), kitsch has been identified with the concept of Otherness and weirdness. *Katamari Damacy* (Keita Takahashi, 2004) was a well-known Japanese game full of traditional tropes, weird characters, and visual cultural references. In contrast to other Japanese titles like the Mario franchise (Nintendo, 1985), it was never adjusted or localized for the Western audience and, thus, became a symbol of the "Japanese kitsch".

For Bogost (2009), kitsch relates to mimetic art, to shameless sentimentality, but with a high-end production value. Comparing kitsch to the paintings of Thomas Kinkade, Bogost presents examples of games (specifically time-management games) to drive home one specific idea: kitsch in games can be found in these moments where brutal sentimentality is present but in a well-executed way. Bogost seems to target specific game genres, such as casual and social games, rather than specific game examples, avoiding any attempt to macro-analyze the phenomenon, as Brian Schrank does.

Schrank (2014) mentions that video games are media that a) procedurally produce a pretense of freedom, motivating players to behave most efficiently, and that b) is highly dependent on the experience offered by "flow." (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Under this perspective, games are designed to be understood by everyone, promoting specific terms of engagement, and enforcing predetermined conventions. Games, in other words, are kitsch. On the other hand, art games aiming to challenge these forms and disrupt the players' experience by destroying the fourth wall of video games can be considered anti-kitsch.

KITSCH AND THE GREEK (VIDEO GAME) CULTURE

"Been raised with a cult aesthetic, it is difficult to produce something that does not come off as kitsch."

"I would be thrilled to see a Greek company release a game based on Greek culture without being kitsch."

During interviews, game developers referred to what we can call the Greek kitsch. Greek kitsch historically emerged through the conditions of modernization of Greek society. The massive consumption of goods, the ever-increasing need to serve thousands of tourists in search of the Greek myth, the canned Greek spirit offered in large quantities, in different sizes and shapes, the rise of a new-folk art promoting a fake nostalgia of the rural life, were only some of these conditions (Kambouridis et al., 1989). Mainly focused on Greek history and mythology, the Greek kitsch became synonymous with fascism and propaganda (Raftopoulos, 1989, p. 68).

"Many creators are afraid to use Greek historical tropes, not to be characterized as fascists."

So, what happens when the culture does not "make you feel special," to paraphrase Adam Phillip's quote (2013, xv)? Instead becomes a mashup of poor recycled concepts with dangerous connotations. The recent past of the Greek game dev scene (approx.2008-2018) reveals a turn towards international creative standards and a pursuit to address an international audience without any national colors. Even though this transition from national to international game products is common in small local communities, it is without a doubt that Greek developers had another demon to fight.

Kitsch is not only about bad taste and easily consumable art but also about pretense and fake value. Schrank's theory was very perceptive in terms of allocating video games as a medium in the kitsch spectrum but neglects the parameter of pretense, and to talk about pretense requires some sense of originality and authenticity.

Greek game developers refused to embrace a canned past. Unlike Schrank, they unacknowledged the concept of false value, of replicating an ideology that for decades identified Greek culture with miniatures of the Parthenon and the glory of ancient gods, investing in an internal occurring of the "reflected effect."

Now, the Greek game scene has entered a new era in which we can detect different ways of telling the same story, hints of re-invention of Greek culture (figure 1), and maybe we are finally witnessing a new-Greek anti-kitsch movement.
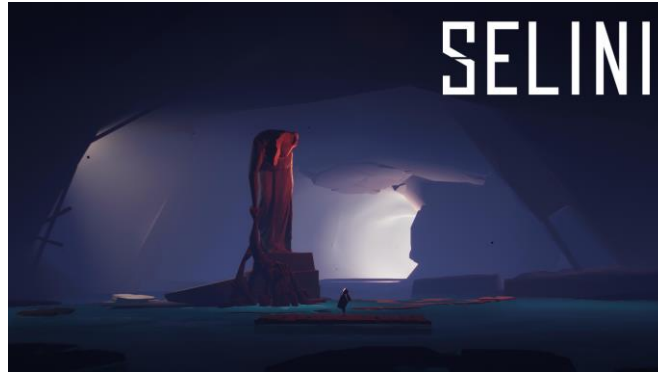
Figure 1: Screenshot from *Selini* (Cymban, in production)

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