

Games as Travel Guides: A Look at Meaningful Downloadable Content and Its Connection to Locational Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss the surging phenomenon of games placing more focus on locational context to create stories and play concepts as well as collaboration with local businesses. The latest trend of distributing exclusive downloadable content (DLC) at location-specific events acts as an incentive for gamers to travel locally or overseas. Such strategies help to promote traffic for places both from an environmental perspective and from a cultural perspective. The paper therefore will identify various opportunities of how content development could make an impact on a larger economic scale on the gaming industry, the tourism industry, and local businesses.

Keywords

Downloadable content, digital distribution, promotional content, reverse product placement, spatial narrative, story placement, video game marketing, video game tourism

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the gaming industry has been evolving rapidly thanks to technologies which impacted content creation and gaming ecosystems. Traditionally, digital games were distributed as single finished products in retail stores, in addition to expansion packs¹ with new side stories and features that were released to prolong the life cycle of the titles. Compared to the last generation, current games see a trend towards online distribution of episodic, work-in-progress downloadable content (DLC)² with a complex chain of services using various methods of monetization systems, such as annual/monthly subscriptions, free-to-play, microtransactions, season passes which ultimately push further as franchises.

DLC then became fragmented and even detached from the original story of a game, provided that basic premises, such as characters or trademarked gameplay, could be applied in never-ending universes and crossovers. It has since significantly diversified the distribution mode and business model for today's games. Gregor White and Nicola Searle (2013) regard DLC as an example of cross-fertilization of business models in the game sector. In other terms, it is a derivative of "Single Content Multiple Usage" (Capcom 2016); and "IP Axis" strategies (Bandai Namco 2015) as emphasized by game publishers

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Capcom and Bandai Namco respectively. Gamers are paying for a complete collection of digital catalogues, application themes, additional levels, maps, mods, boosters and other peripherals that once were included in one retailer's bundle.

To motivate players, versatile and sophisticated content are required in return for the money and time that they invest within and outside the game. Within the game is the demand of enlightening experiences associated to the gameworld, meticulous narratives, backstories of the characters and the significance of their actions. Outside the game is assimilation and synchronization of virtual and real worlds in terms of social activities, food, sports, exploration of actual spaces, through which the design of the two worlds is inspiring each other. State-of-art game marketing and promotional content allows players to extend their attention and experience beyond the game in two main ways: one is to directly link the game environment to real-world locations, the other is to link the game content to a specific culture rooted in a real-world location.

ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE: ALIGNMENT OF WORLDS

In most media productions, the fictional space is usually designed simply as a backdrop without much consideration for audiences to carry over their experiences into the real world. Thanks to the interactive gameplay, the game space is often scrutinized by enthusiastic fans who try to map it onto a real location. Under this spirit, developers would blog about those exotic places in their behind-the-scenes field trips, which further intrigue gamers to search for more background information on the locations and possibly get inspiration for their own game-themed itinerary.

One great example in this regard is *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012), a game where players could glide across the sand dunes. During the game development, the team had a site visit to Pismo Beach near Southern California (Lowensohn 2013). Through online research, fans would know that other places, including the Tottori Sand Dunes in Japan and Dune du Pilat in France ("Real Life Journey" 2011), share similar terrain features. Similarly in *Never Alone* (Upper One 2014), players are informed with the plight and importance of preserving the indigenous cultures in Alaska (Martens 2014), whereas in *Firewatch* (Campo Santo 2016), players get to explore the Shoshone National Forest, of which the lookouts are modelled after Yosemite National Park and other natural regions in the United States ("Firewatch Reference: Inside Fire Lookout Towers" 2016).

In another instance, gamers who played *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (Naughty Dog 2016) would notice the web address www.bangkokthetravelguide.com displayed on the flip side of the "Bangkok Travel Guide" pamphlet which is scattered in the game environment (see **Figure 1**) and expect to access additional content at the website, only to find out disappointedly that the link is not a valid address. A Reddit user then acquired the domain for amusement and re-directed to the thread about the issue³. Although fans, particularly from Bangkok, were enthusiastic at the potential use of the web domain (e.g., a real travel guide or fictional travel agency paying tribute to the series), the link was later removed from the game environment upon the game's next update patch by Naughty Dog. The anecdote thus reveals an opportunity raised by game fans but missed by the developer.

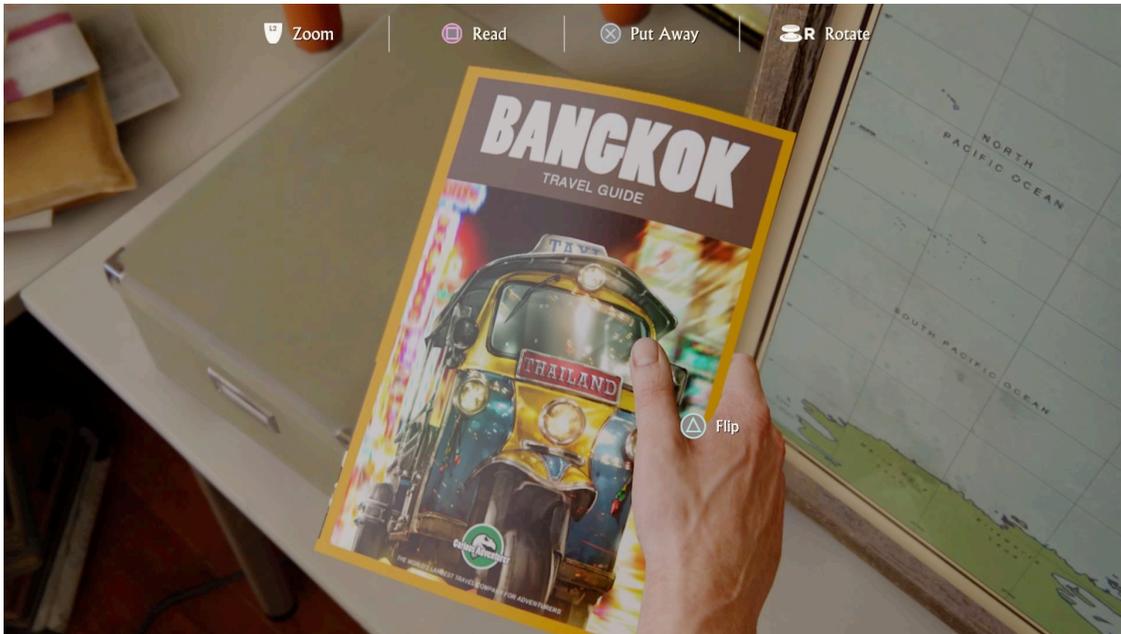


Figure 1: A screenshot of the playable character interacting with a travel guide from *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: ALIGNMENT OF EXPERIENCE

For fantasy games, it is crucial to have the total freedom to craft the game space without having to mirror a real-world environment entirely. Moreover, if the game space resembles a real-world location too much, it is hard for the game to appeal for players from other regions. A cultural approach that links some lower-level in-game activities to certain real-world culture is a great alternative to an environmental approach. The implementation can be catered to audiences from different regions, whereas the core gaming content remains the same. To complement the game-themed promotion events, a great variety of creative service, goods and even tailor-made content will be created, including thematic food menus, limited edition souvenirs, pop-up displays, free special quests and items downloads.

The cultural promotion model has become very mature in Japan, where manga, anime and game industries are dominant in the culture. There is also better accessibility and support by private companies and local policies like the “Cool Japan Fund”⁴ to promote different types of tourism with creative content. For example, local anime (*Gotōji Anime*) *Tamako Market* (*Tamako Māketto*) helped motivate more visitors to “pilgrimage” to the Usagiyama Shopping Street in Kyoto. Similarly, tourists flocked to the city of Hirosaki in Aomori Prefecture for the beautiful scenery introduced in *Flying Witch* (*Furaingu Uitchi*), where *Encouragement of Climb* (*Yama no Susume*) raised people’s interest in hiking activities. Conventionally, mascots or characters are used to attract awareness of a place, but now games would allow more seamless, deeper immersion and dynamic reverse product and story placement⁵. Even premises of game companies become gamers’ tourist landmarks where you can find flagship stores and cafes (e.g. Square Enix Artnia, Capcom Bar).

Monster Hunter: A case from Japan

The Japanese action role-playing game (ARPG) *Monster Hunter* (Capcom 2004-2016) is the third most popular franchise developed by Capcom, after the top-grossing survival-horror game *Biohazard* (also known as *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996-2017) outside Japan) and the classic *Street Fighter* (Capcom 1987-2016). The series, with 33 titles released since 2004, had accumulated 36 million unit sales globally as of March 2016. The latest installment *Monster Hunter X (Cross)* sold 3.3 million units within the Asian region (Capcom 2016a). The game is especially popular in Japan thanks to the peer effect enabled both through the multi-playing mode and creative design of locational content.

Instead of telling a rich story with cinematics and quests arched against a narrative arc, the game presents an open, naturalistic environment where players hunt monsters and experience village life. The fantasy environment is constituted with a strong flavor of traditional elements from various cultures. Players can “eat” cuisines ranging from Asian dumplings and fried rice to Western cheese fondue. The most iconic village is the *Yukumo Mura* since its appearance in *Monster Hunter Portable 3rd*, which was modelled after Japanese-style hot spring areas. Like in the real world, in these recreational bathing areas the player character could perform silly deeds — singing, dancing, drinking sake, playing with rubber ducks alone or with other players — that have no impact on the gameplay. The game thus recreates moments where the subtlety of daily life makes players feel at ease. This design echoes with the concept of “omotenashi”, which means hospitality from the Japanese philosophy.

A notable location, Chiko Mura (*Cheeko Sands* in the English version), is populated by Airou and Meraru⁶ (*Felynes* and *Melanyx*) in *Monster Hunter 4* and *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* where fans easily associate the place with several cat islands in Japan.

To keep players motivated, free downloadable contents were released periodically via the online server. Contents included new event quests, challenge quests, Otomo (*Palicoes*, the feline companions), item packs, and extras. These contents were usually related to other manga, games, magazines, food and apparel. Upon the release of *Monster Hunter Portable 3rd* on PlayStation Portable (PSP), Capcom attempted a novel approach that created the most successful buzz by transforming Shibu Onsen in Nagano — a hot spring resort — into the in-game location Yukumo Village. The “Monster Hunter Festival” event attracted more than 10,000 visitors during a low season at its first launch (Capcom 2016b). The festival gained support from local inns, transport facilities, tourist associations and other cooperatives. After the release of *Monster Hunter 3 (Tri) G* on Nintendo 3DS, the game company collaborated even more proactively with more brands and businesses focusing on locational highlights. On the other side of the business, Universal Studios Japan (USJ) opened the “Monster Hunter the Real” seasonal attraction since 2012, of which the latest fifth version was part of the “Universal Cool Japan 2016” campaign. Related events included exhibits of life-size flagship monsters, the village area, carnival game booths, a “Real Gathering Hall” for both experienced gamers and visitors unfamiliar with the game to play together. Most importantly, players who already have a copy of the game on their 3DS can download exclusive content on the spot, which greatly motivated existing fans to visit the site. The same promotional strategy was used by other local attractions and businesses, such as the theme park Namco Namja Town which is popular for themed dining and 7-Elevens Japan-wide that also offers DLC via the in-store Wi-Fi services. Under such a promotional strategy, a gamer’s experience can be summarized in **Figure 2**.

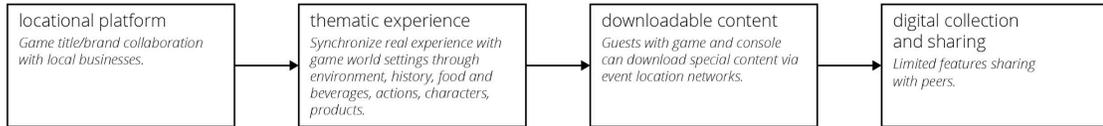


Figure 2: A gamer’s experience at a designated place accessing exclusive downloadable content amid a location-based game promotion.

The example of *Monster Hunter* demonstrates that games are interlinked with other industries and their content that can be value additions through brand extension. While the promotional content typically takes the forms of books, movies and toys, its range could extend to the catering, fashion, tourism, transport industries and other products or services.

In Capcom’s business model that extends the *Monster Hunter* brand (see **Figure 3**), from its single game content originally for the console platform, the brand diversifies its business across the PC platform for avid players, mobile platform for casual players, arcade platform for amusement sites, and the locational platform for targeted marketing with collaborative, promotional content including DLCs. Bandai Namco, another game developer and publisher, takes a different role in the collaboration with Capcom (authorship/ownership) as it operates the Namco Namja Town for the thematic dining experience (related content) (see **Figure 4**).

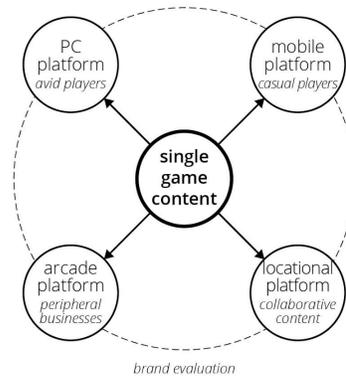


Figure 3: Capcom’s business model on leveraging the *Monster Hunter* brand (Capcom 2015a, 2015b).

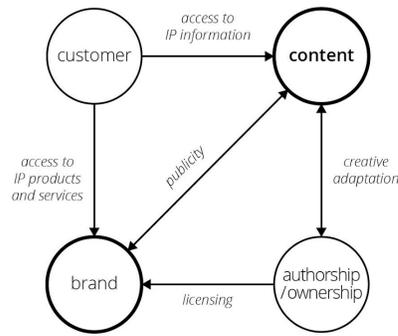


Figure 4: Bandai Namco’s business model (Bandai Namco, 2015).

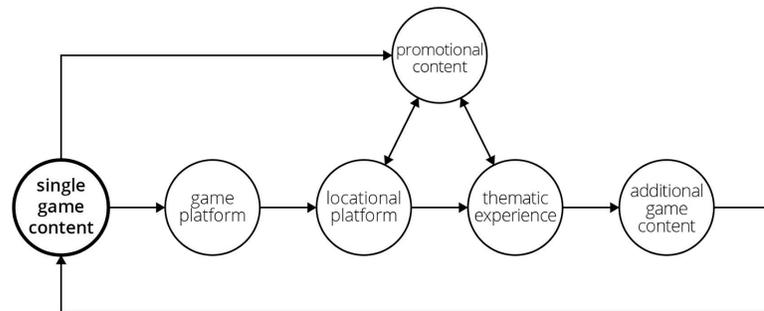


Figure 5: Conceptual framework of designing game content in relation to related content and DLC.

Uncharted 4: A case from Hong Kong

It is certainly more challenging to promote a game in a market like Hong Kong that oftentimes bears no similarity to the geographic environment featured by a game. When there is no tailor-made downloadable content created to target at a local culture, additional content can be used for each promotion event, tying in to fans gathering, shopping, social media and other entertainment activities. As a first attempt, PlayStation Hong Kong promoted *Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End* by organizing a treasure hunting event. The effort was proved to be successful as it attracts attention from local players with all backgrounds and interest levels. The event was announced in social media, including Facebook, Weibo and Twitter, a week before the game’s global launch. The rules were simple, which simulated the nature of the adventure game — interested participants had to solve the given puzzles published in the official website to obtain a hint for the final answer eligible for sweepstakes. A map from different districts in Hong Kong was revealed each day during the 5-day on-site event to let participants find the exact location to solve new puzzles on-site and win limited edition premium. The entire campaign schedule is illustrated in **Figure 6**.

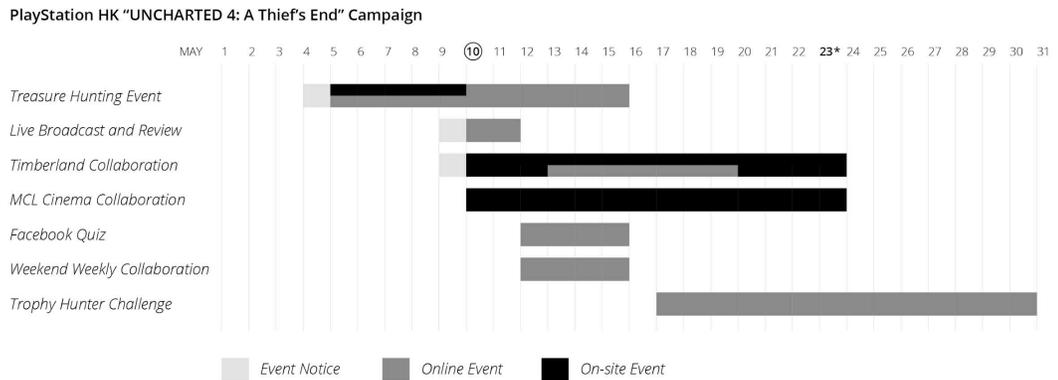


Figure 6: Campaign schedule by PlayStation HK for *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*.

As this type of marketing strategy for video games was unconventional to Hong Kong players, the audience initially were not confident and worried that they would end up empty-handed. Some participants had to travel afar from one district to another. Some others needed assurance so they called friends to join the event and help them solve the puzzles. The puzzles were intended to be more difficult when the number of participants increased due to the limited number of prizes. With the event receiving more exposure as it progressed, early participants started visiting back and new participants got more familiar with the game. The participation peaked on the weekend since more people are available at that time. To keep up the participation level, the questions after the peak day were easier and so it lured many participants to give a shot at the last day of the event. Feedback from Facebook was positive as participants enjoyed the experience⁷.

Game Campaigns in Hong Kong

Game Release Status	Pre-launch	Launch	Post-launch	
Audience	Fans and avid game consumers	Game consumers and other consumers with overlap interests	Game consumers with purchased game copy	General consumers with overlap interests
Related Content	Alternate Reality Games (ARG) or on-site events	Apparel, entertainment, lifestyle products and services	Subscription of platform services	Catering services
Motivation	Real game experience, premium, higher sweepstakes chances (including DLC)	Game trial demo, tie-in promotions, premium, sweepstakes	Digital challenge, sharing with peers, sweepstakes (including DLC)	Thematic experience, tie-in promotions, premium, sweepstakes, special items sales
Challenge	Greater physical challenge	Casual	Greater virtual challenge	Casual (by purchase)

← intact communication via social networks →

Figure 7: Campaign content on each game release phase in Hong Kong.

This case demonstrates an example of the execution curve of game promoting events in Hong Kong. **Figure 7** presents an overview of game promotion design supporting a game launch. By creating small events in the early stage and get local audiences accustomed to the model, more complex events, such as alternate reality games (ARG), eSports, and locational context promotions like in Japan, will become possible.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we attempted to present an informed look at how promotional content is designed to support location-centred game marketing. From the initial findings we summarized two trends of the content design: one is to link the in-game environment to a real world location to motivate fans to travel to the site and local businesses to host game themed tourist activities; the other is to focus on cultural elements of the game so that thematic customer experiences can be created by local businesses without being bound to the one geolocation mirrored in the game. We then demonstrated some of the popular strategies in two cases from Japan and Hong Kong, which could potentially lead to further development of a more comprehensive location-based business model driven by meaningful downloadable contents.

ENDNOTES

1 According to Stenros and Sotamaa (2009, 2), expansion packs “are similar to sequels as they tend to expand the story-world of the game and bring in new systemic elements.”

2 The digital content downloaded online that expands the scope of previously released games, for example, a Ford Mustang available to players of *The Sims* (Edery and Mollick 2009).

3 See https://www.reddit.com/r/uncharted/comments/4invmi/i_just_bought_wwwbangkokthetravelguidecom

4 A public-private fund established in 2013 by the Japanese government and private companies to invest in the development of Japanese products and services at global demand. Catering, fashion, lifestyle, media and tourism industries are eligible for support. See: <https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en>.

5 Reverse product placement is defined as the fictional brands or products from the gameworld being made available in the real world (Edery 2009).

6 Cat-like species that help human hunters.

7 See “PlayStation HK’s Facebook Page.” PlayStation HK (Facebook), May 4, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/PlayStationHK/photos/a.160391780650152.28179.157911314231532/1060404360648885>.

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