

Creating and Evaluating “*Making Beshbarmak*”: Games on Traditional Cuisine of Central Asia

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Central Asian culture is built around rituals. Sharing food, collective gatherings, and play are central components of cultural upbringing and community formation in the region (McNamara and Surina 2005; Sahadeo and Zanca 2007). With the growing Central Asian diaspora worldwide, elements of community and shared rituals can erode through assimilation into more individualistic host cultures (Bhugra and Becker 2005). This process is a natural consequence of globalization and need not be resisted. Instead, honoring cultural identities and preserving cultural traditions may strengthen one’s well-being and help others learn about Central Asian heritage through play.

In this ongoing research, we developed a computer-based video game, “*Making Beshbarmak*”, on Central Asian food rituals, specifically meat preparation and hosting. The game walks the player through a step-by-step journey of preparing and serving beshbarmak, a traditional meat-based dish in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Throughout the game, the player is introduced to traditional design patterns and elements, such as oyu, as well as historical facts about the region and food-specific terms in the Kazakh language. We demonstrated and playtested the game with children and families of Kazakh and Kyrgyz descent, and the results have shown promise and interest in preserving cultural heritage and in learning outcomes among youth (Kobenova and Kaiymova 2024).

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In this extended abstract, we present findings from a demonstration of “*Making Beshbarmak*” to a wider audience, specifically North American populations unfamiliar with Central Asian culture. We hypothesized that “*Making Beshbarmak*” would benefit not only audiences familiar with Central Asian culture but also those interested in learning more about it through games. To evaluate this, we conducted a playtest study with ten participants (N=10), who were English-speaking individuals from North America with little to no prior exposure to Central Asian culture. With this evaluation, we wanted to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Do games about Central Asian culture increase cultural curiosity among unfamiliar audiences?

RQ2: What are the learning outcomes and linguistic retention from playing such games?

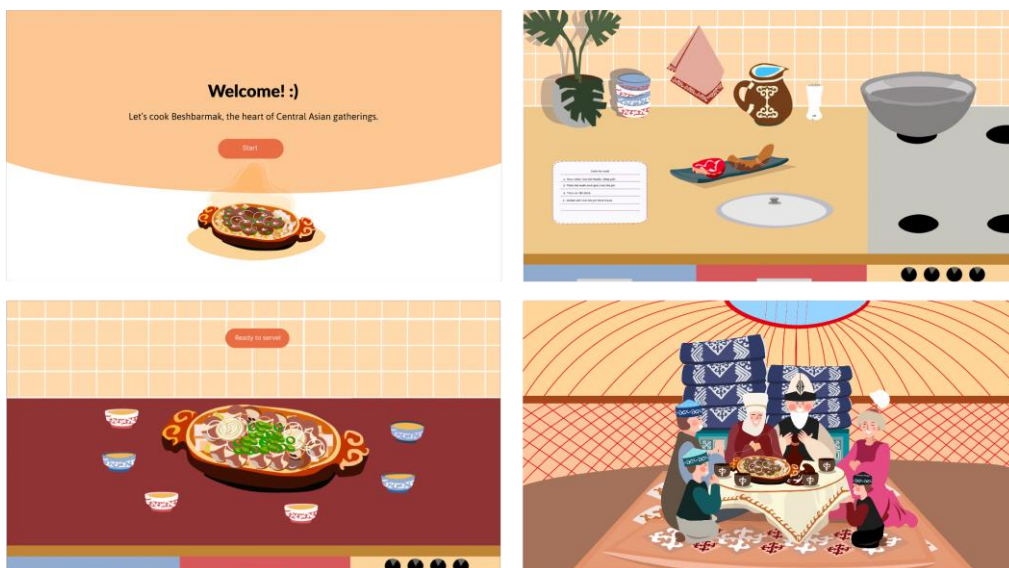


Figure 1: Game snippets from “*Making Beshbarmak*”.

Our methodology was based on a structured playtesting evaluation (Choi et al. 2016; Quinn et al. 2013) and included mixed-methods pre-experience and post-experience surveys (see Appendix for questions). Participants were recruited through university announcements and community platforms. Each study lasted about 20-30 minutes. We used qualitative observations during the playtest and triangulated our findings using thematic analysis (Lochmiller 2021).

The exploratory findings from our study highlight the potential of “*Making Beshbarmak*” to foster cultural curiosity and cross-cultural engagement among new audiences. Participants demonstrated increased interest in Central Asian culture and cuisine after playing the game, indicating the effectiveness of gamified experiences in sparking curiosity about underrepresented traditions (Figure 2). In particular, participants highlighted the game’s ability to convey cultural knowledge effectively through detailed descriptions of ingredients, traditional tools, and the interactive preparation process. Many appreciated learning about cultural practices through learning flashcards and images of traditional items and environments, such as a yurt. One participant remarked, “*It felt like I was part of preparing a dish, not just reading*

about it.” The game’s visuals, music, and overall ambiance were frequently praised for creating a cozy and immersive environment. Participants described the game as “engaging,” “calming,” and reminiscent of “nostalgic and cozy” games from their childhood. The inclusion of traditional design elements, such as patterned bowls and rugs, enhanced the cultural experience.

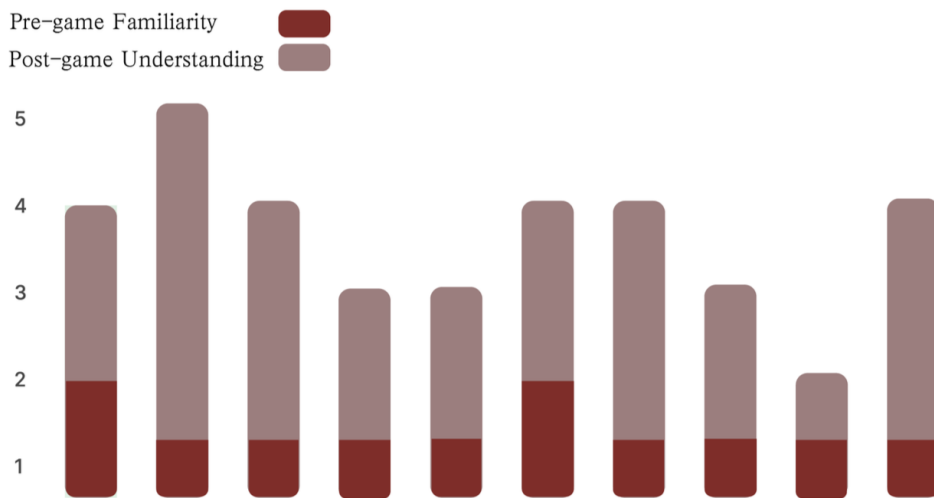


Figure 2: Participants’ pre-play familiarity with Central Asian culture and cuisine (dark bars) and their post-play understanding (light bars).

Our findings suggest promising directions for cultural heritage games in Central Asia. These games contribute not only to diaspora communities but also to those seeking to learn about Central Asian culture and traditions. Often, games about this region are underrepresented in the global communities. For example, in early 2025, when our study was conducted, only three folklore games developed by Kazakh and Kyrgyz developers were available on the online gaming platform Steam: *Iz* (2025), *Qazaq: Son of the Sun* (2024), and *Tuzaq* (2024). Additionally, many East and South Asian food ritual games are represented online, such as *Venba* (2023) and *Nainai’s Recipe* (2021), but little is known about Central Asian food traditions. Access to such games is crucial for representing cultural identities and diasporic traditions within the broader games research and media.

This work contributes to serious games research by demonstrating how gamified experiences can promote cultural narratives. Given the small exploratory sample, our results should be interpreted as preliminary. Future work could explore the game’s impact on larger sample sizes and diverse audiences, expand its interactive features, and assess long-term cultural learning outcomes. Through iterative development, cultural games like “*Making Beshbarmak*” can play a vital role in bridging cultural gaps and elevating underrepresented traditions and narratives.

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APPENDIX

The surveys were conducted in multiple sections and measured several metrics: (1) demographic information, (2) cross-cultural interest, (3) existing knowledge about Central Asia and its cuisine, (4) knowledge of linguistic terms, and (5) feedback from gameplay interaction. We employed a Likert-style questionnaire to measure participants' prior experiences with other cultures and Central Asian cultural contexts.

Section	Question	Response Type
Baseline Cultural Exposure and Interest	How many languages do you speak fluently? Please list all that apply.	Short response
	How frequently do you engage with cultures other than your own? (e.g., through travel, media, food, friends)	Likert 1–5
	How interested are you in exploring other cultures? (e.g., through travel, media, food, friends)	Likert 1–5
	How often do you play video games or gamified learning experiences?	Likert 1–5
Pre-Play Questions	Do you have experience with any Central Asian languages or culture? If yes, please elaborate.	Short response
	How familiar are you with Kazakh cuisine?	Likert 1–5
	Have you ever tried Central Asian cuisine before? If yes, through which sources?	Short response
	Which of the following terms do you recognize? (Select all that apply: Beshbarmak, Boursak, Kymyz, Shubat, Qazy)	Multiple-choice
Post-Play Questions	After playing the game, how interested are you in learning more about Central Asian culture and cuisine?	Likert 1–5
	Do you have a better understanding of Kazakh culture and cuisine through this game?	Likert 1–5
	How likely are you to explore Central Asian restaurants, recipes, or media after this experience?	Likert 1–5
	Which of the following terms do you recognize? (Select all that apply: Beshbarmak, Boursak, Kymyz, Shubat, Qazy)	Multiple-choice

Gameplay Feedback	What were some 2–3 interesting or surprising things you learned about Kazakh cuisine or culture from the game?	Short response
	How engaging was the game in terms of cultural content?	Likert 1–5
	Do you feel the game helped you learn about a new culture in an enjoyable way?	Likert 1–5
	What aspects of the game were most effective in conveying cultural knowledge?	Short response
	What could be improved in the game?	Short response

Table 1: Playtest study questions.