

Playable folklore - Digital games and the representation of folklore and CH

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ABSTRACT

Digital games occupy an increasingly important position as media of cultural transmission and representation. Titles such as *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)* (E-Line Media 2014), *Black Book* (Morteshka 2021), *Skábma* (Red Stage Entertainment 2021), and *Mundaun (Hidden Fields 2021)* demonstrate how interactive structures can engage with elements of intangible cultural values, myths, practices and worldviews. Yet such works also raise questions of authenticity, cultural reduction, decontextualization and aesthetic appropriation, particularly when living cultural processes are translated into finite and rule-based systems. These tensions are therefore relevant not only to the analysis of folklore and cultural heritage in games, but also to game studies and design practice more broadly.

This project investigates this problem by examining the representation of folklore and cultural heritage in digital games through a critical, design-oriented theoretical inquiry, informed by ongoing exploratory work on a folklore-based game project. The work is situated at the intersection of folklore studies, heritage research, and game design. Central to the inquiry is the conceptual distinction between folklore, understood as a living, processual and variable form of cultural expression, and cultural heritage, which is more closely associated with codification, safeguarding, institutional preservation and exhibition. Drawing on Ben-Amos (2023), a central contradiction emerges: tradition risks being transformed into heritage when it becomes codified, managed, or staged for external consumption.

Digital media can support the circulation, preservation and revitalisation of cultural practices, but they also introduce forms of fixity. Code, game systems and representational conventions stabilise cultural material that is otherwise fluid, collectively interpreted, maintained and renegotiated in lived settings. Digital codification, whether through games, archives, databases or heritage lists, therefore risks transforming dynamic processes into managed and repeatable entities. This raises questions about whether digitally mediated tradition can retain the qualities that define living folklore, or whether it becomes something qualitatively different once translated into technical systems.

Existing scholarship has explored how games can communicate historical knowledge, create virtual heritage, or model historical spaces (Champion 2006; Mochocki 2021). However, much of this literature focuses on accuracy, reconstruction and heritage

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experience rather than on folklore as a variable cultural process, its underlying logics, or the structural tensions that emerge when folkloric material is translated into interactive mechanics and systemic design principles. Studies on digital folklore (De Seta 2019) foreground participatory culture, vernacular creativity and the continued circulation of folklore in digital spaces, yet these perspectives have rarely been connected to the specific constraints of game systems and game design. This underlines a gap in understanding not only how folklore and its underlying logics might inform rules, mechanics and player interaction, but also how these systems transform, stabilise or limit the cultural material they mediate.

To address these challenges, the project asks the following research question:

What structural and ethical constraints emerge when folklore and cultural heritage are represented in digital games, and how do these constraints shape design processes?

Two secondary questions guide the analysis: *(1) How do specific design decisions emphasise, transform, stabilise, or omit aspects of folklore during development? (2) How can existing frameworks such as cultural presence, folk mechanics, digital folklore, and mnemonic hegemony help identify the possibilities and limitations of culturally grounded game design?*

The project builds on a composite theoretical foundation drawing from four key frameworks. Cultural presence (Champion 2006) supports an understanding of how environmental, social and cultural meanings may emerge in virtual heritage and game environments. Folk mechanics (Ensslin 2024) supports the analysis of how systemic and ludic structures can communicate folkloristic meaning, not only through narrative or aesthetics, but through player action and rule-based interaction. Digital folklore (De Seta 2019) provides a way to understand the continued circulation, variation and reinterpretation of folklore within digital spaces. Finally, mnemonic hegemony (Lundedal Hammar 2019) enables a critical approach to the pressures that shape cultural representation in games, including simplification, dominant narratives and selective remembrance. Together, these models support “playable folklore” as a conceptual lens, treating games not as display cases for heritage, but as cultural systems in which living traditions may be selected, stabilised, transformed and contested.

Methodologically, the project combines critical theoretical analysis with ongoing exploratory design work connected to the development of an independent game project based on Hungarian folklore. This work currently includes the identification of transferable folkloric logics, early mechanic outlines, visual concept materials and reflective design notes. These materials are examined as design traces rather than as evidence of a finished prototype, focusing on decision points where cultural material is translated into rules, interaction patterns, visual identity, or deliberately left unimplemented. The goal is not to prescribe universal guidelines, but to examine how cultural material is selected, transformed, stabilised or omitted during design,

highlighting the tension between the dynamic qualities of folklore and the stabilising forces of game production.



Figure 1: Concept art for the game in development based on Hungarian folklore. Art by Zofia Matczak

The project is expected to contribute to the academic field on three levels. First, it offers a design-oriented critical analysis of how folklore and its underlying logics may inform mechanics and systems, while also tracing how design choices alter, stabilise, omit or reinterpret cultural elements. Second, it proposes a bridge between theoretical discourse and game design by examining how existing models can be brought into dialogue with the practical constraints of small-team development, without treating them as prescriptive solutions. Third, it contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding the ethics of representation by critically examining how mnemonic pressures, codification, commodification and production constraints shape creative decisions throughout a development process.

The project concludes by reflecting on the potentials and limitations of translating living cultural processes into interactive systems. While the dynamic nature of folklore can never be fully replicated through the codified systems of digital games, game design may still engage with it critically by foregrounding variation, player agency, negotiation and systemic openness. Ultimately, the research contributes a critical account of the constraints that shape folklore-inspired design, offering insights relevant to independent developers, cultural institutions and game researchers seeking to work responsibly with cultural heritage and living traditions.

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