Asian histories in games

Rock, Paper, Scissors and social transformation in 1847 Japan

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Jade Empire

Sony’s Shahid Ahmad

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Memory Insufficient
the games history e-zine

About the Editor: Zoya Street is a freelance video game historian, journalist and writer, working in the worlds of design criticism and digital content business strategy.

Memory Insufficient is a celebration of history.

First and foremost, it is an attempt to promote and encourage historical writing about games; social histories, biographies, historically situated criticism of games and anything else.

It is also a place to turn personal memories of games past into eye-opening written accounts. It is a place to honour the work of game developers who have influenced the path of history. It is a place to learn what games are - not as a formal discipline, but as lived realities.

Like all historical study, Memory Insufficient is fundamentally about citizenship. It’s not enough to just remember and admire the games of the past. History is about understanding our place in the world; as developers, as critics and as players.

The power of history is to reveal where the agents of change reside, and empower us to be the change we want to see. Memory Insufficient is a celebration of history, not just as fact but as action.
Interview with Shahid Ahmad

The Indian National Character

Ghosts of China past: BioWare’s Jade Empire

Mahjong as edutainment

‘Come at me with your fox!’

Games industry veteran Shahid Ahmad shares his personal history of games and programming as a way of escaping from racist bullying in 1970s Britain.

Strategy games expert Troy Goodfellow provides a thorough and thoughtful study of how India is portrayed as a character in historical strategy games.

Asian cultures can be exploited in video games, but is Bioware’s Jade Empire more sensitive? John Harney studies BioWare’s gaze on Chinese mythology.

Sinologist Maggie Greene sheds light on China’s addiction to the game Mahjong, uncovering one attempt to redesign it to serve the goals of the state.

Editor Zoya Street shows how a game became a symbol of social change in 19th century Japan, drawing a parallel with game design in America today.
As part of a talk about Beyond the Final Boss at GDC this March, Shahid Ahmad shared his moving personal story of how games helped him to find the strength to go on when he was being bullied at school. Life was extremely challenging for an Asian family growing up on a council estate in 1970s London; racism was prevalent, and the police often failed to take threats of violence against his family seriously.

I asked Shahid to share with his personal history of sports and video games as a way of building confidence in spite of years of ferocious bullying, and for his view on multiculturalism in the video games industry over the past 30 years.

As a child, what was the role of games (e.g. football) in your navigation of cross-cultural relationships and racial prejudice?

Nearly every boy at my primary school, whether they liked football or not, nevertheless played football and ‘supported’ a football club. For boys, football played a tribal role that almost, but never quite transcended race.

My family endured violent racial abuse for many years. I remember on one night our guests were beaten up for parking their car in a neighbour’s place. This surprised me because the neighbours that lived at number 12 had never previously expressed racism, but since a whole gang of neighbours had ganged together to beat up our guests, it was clear whose tribe they were picking.

On another occasion, a crowd of youths, maybe 20 in number were attempting to smash down our (thankfully reinforced) front door with a metal girder. We called the police and the youngsters dispersed. We explained the harassment to the police who just told us to ‘grin and bear it’. I never forgot how alone we were made to feel. I never forgot how my younger sister and brother were treated and how helpless and impotent I felt.
The one time I felt the nation come together, certainly for men back in the 70s if not for women was when England reached the finals of a major tournament. So to communicate my unity with the nation, I'd openly express my enthusiastic support at every opportunity. There was no doubt who I supported at school, but since our neighbours' kids played outside and there were long periods when we couldn't because of the violent racism we faced, to express my solidarity I would use blue tack to create a virtual scoreboard of any England match in which we were winning. It was the only way I could show people which tribe I was in. Of course, I regret that now.

Nobody told me that it was perfectly alright to have different skin colour back then; racism was just a part of life.

*You mentioned that learning to make games helped you to rebuild your self-confidence after being bullied. What do you remember about those early experiences making games?*

Making games was the second interest that truly consumed me. Music had done that before, but even my love of music never pushed me to play an instrument. I'm talking about a passion that made me stay awake for three days at a time.

The more I did it, the better I got. I was obsessed. I couldn't stop and couldn't think of anything else. I rarely got frustrated. Here was something that made total sense to me. I had truly absorbed GIGO and knew that I was responsible for everything that was happening. For the first time in my life, I felt like there was something over which I had some control. In a world where we were at the mercy of capricious racist thugs and insouciant police officers, computers would not let me down, would not call me 'paki', would not beat my brother and sister, would not make my mother cry.

There was more. Computers might help us get out of the grinding poverty of life on a council estate in a single-parent family. Although this wasn't a driver for me, it remained a light at the end of the tunnel.

One night, the violence got really bad. Something was boiling inside me, ready to explode and I didn't know why. I think suddenly, I had something to lose, something to fight for, something that was truly mine. There was nobody else who could do this. Only I could do this. Instead of snapping, a certainty came over me and I walked out of the front door to face the racist thugs who had destroyed our childhood. I shouted at them. I was not out of control, on the contrary, I felt powerful. I told them what they had done to us and how they had made us feel, and that we were flesh and blood and human and British like them.

Astonishingly, after my tirade, they were stunned into silence. Then, by some miracle, they were not racist thugs any more. They were neighbours. We never had any problems with them again.

Until that time, I had wanted death. Computers, more precisely, the creation of 8-bit, simplistic video games in 1982 had given me something to look forward to and I was not willing to give the potential of that future up.
What has been your experience of multicultural discourse in the games industry?

It’s totally ignored. I have never once felt racism in the video games business. Not once. It’s astonishing. 31 years and not a single incident of racism or glass ceilings.

After 6 months of learning to program, I was writing 6502 assembler and the first video game I had published was Storm in a Teacup by Artic Computing back in early 1983. I had communicated with Artic under the pseudonym “James Kent” because I feared my earlier video games might have been rejected because of my name.

The moment came for me to visit Artic in Hull. As I approached Chris, I said ‘bet you weren’t expecting a brown face’ to which he deadpanned without breaking his stride ‘I’m not surprised with your credits list’. It was never mentioned again. I carried on using the pseudonym for a while, but I didn’t need it for Jet Set Willy on the C64 and the only other pseudonym I’ve used was “Justice Rampage” for a couple of C16 games. Don’t ask me why.

It’s an amazing industry. I’ve not encountered any Islamophobia either. In fact, I asked for a prayer room at our current office and it was provided. Now several Muslims benefit from it. Nobody bats an eyelid and some people are genuinely curious.

The reason there is no real discourse within the industry is because I believe it’s genuinely colour-blind. That’s quite something for a business whose value is measured in the distribution of Red, Green and Blue channels in varying quantities.

I think there is a need for more even distribution and reflection of races in video games, just as I think gender is something we haven’t really used too well. That I think is also beginning to change, I’m optimistic about that. I’m optimistic about rather a lot actually.

Interviewed by Editor Zoya Street

Shahid is collecting other eye-opening and inspiring personal histories from game developers who were bullied at beyondthefinalboss.org.

Visit the site

Photo of Willesden, London by Shahid Ahmad
If *Civilization* has an iconic image that everyone has seen (and, let's face it, it has many) it is the sneering face of Gandhi warning us to behave ourselves because his words are **backed with nuclear weapons**.

There is a universal cognitive dissonance in seeing the face of active but peaceful resistance to imperialism threatening our empires with atomic annihilation because...well, who knows why? In *Civilization II* (1996), Gandhi didn't need much of a reason to hate us.

Gandhi is the father of modern India and the face of the civilization to many strategy gamers, so it's natural for both designers and players to conflate the great revolutionary's personality and skills with that of one of the world's oldest and greatest cultures.

India is a puzzle for many people, because our general knowledge of it is so rooted in the present.

We assume that there is a single India, the 1960s cemented in many minds a culture of yogis and spiritual thinkers (fitting for the birthplace of both Buddhism and Hinduism – two of the oldest and most enduring faiths) and now we see India as a more free China (populous, technologically sophisticated, the next great power on the horizon.)

Keep these numbers in mind while we talk about what India means. The modern nation state of India has 1.2 billion people – one billion plus 2/3 of the United States over again. Half a billion more people than all of Europe. It is twice the size of France, Germany and Spain added together. It recognizes over 20 regional languages, and is so diverse in language and culture that it had to adopt the imperial conqueror's language as a common tongue. And this is not including statistics from Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, all of which can be considered integral parts of what many understand as Indian culture and central to Indian history.
It almost makes as much sense to speak of Indian national character as it does to speak of European or African. To discover India is to discover a world. India is not a Germany – a people united by language and religion but seeking a state. India is a state that history has built upon a people divided by almost everything we assume makes a culture a culture. (If you read old political science textbooks, like I used to, it's fun to see all the predictions of India's imminent collapse. India is the first modern multicultural success story.)

It's no wonder that game designers want to think of India as a single culture and entity. Even though it was very rarely unified in its history, there is an assumption that the peninsula makes sense as one civilization and not, say, five. The reference points, then, become almost exclusively modern.

What do we mean by India? We mean whatever the British said was India, and that is close enough for game design work. Religious divisions between north and south, east and west, old and new become blurry. We see an unbroken chain of custody from Asoka down to Nehru, even though the Mughals had only mixed success in the south, the Punjab was always restive and the British showed up to an India where they could play prince against prince.

All nations and states are ideas more than reality, but India is a very special idea and it is a very western one. India is a resource to be harvested. It is a destination. It is a place more acted upon than acting.

Not only is India the state a Western invention, India the game idea is a Western conceit. Take Nitro's promising but ultimately shallow East India Company (2009). A game named after one of the great legal pirate companies in history takes India (and really all non-European powers) out of the game since all that is really important is the money. The EIC was a fascinating diplomatic/business/political/military company, an 18th century Halliburton or British Petroleum, that could dictate the course of British politics and imperial acquisition. But all that was taken out to focus on India and other ports as trading opportunities. Yes, this is what the EIC was about, but it misses the most important part of the story.

The first Europa Universalis (2000) had some of this blindness, but that was rooted in the original board game design. India was not a subcontinent full of independent players; the coastal areas were all “native provinces” that you could just colonize and take over. Because it was that easy for Europe, I suppose. There is still a lot of debate over how profitable the Raj actually was for Britain, but for strategy game designers, India assumes the place of an historical El Dorado just waiting to be controlled and tamed.

The battle for India itself, of course, has not gotten a lot of attention. 1991’s Champion of the Raj from Level 9 was probably the closest we've had to a game that drew attention to the economic and military competition for India. It’s a clever strategy game with a tactical battle subgame, as well as annoying arcade mini-games like those you find in Centurion and Defender of the Crown. You can use your prestige to seduce cities into your empire and protection, which is a great reflection of how so much of the subcontinent fell into British hands, and there is a fail state beyond simply being conquered, because the Thug society is a constant threat to your security. Though not really a great game, it was smart enough to see the potential in building around the idea that India was a theater for political action and not just economic.
The economic power of India was also reflected in how Rise of Nations (2003) treated the culture. Only introduced in the expansion, India's cities had larger radii for resource capture, buildings did not increase in cost no matter how many you built and the cost of fortifications increased at half the regular rate. So without actually using gold bonuses beyond a modest caravan income boost, the Indian civ was able to hoard amazing piles of resources by midgame. And, of course, it had elephants. Can't have an historical RTS without elephants. Interestingly, Big Huge Games dubbed these attributes “The Power of Majesty”, even though the connection between majesty and cheap barracks is lost on me.

Age of Empires 3, though, takes a view of India that is not economically focused, probably because the Dutch have that sewn up. The brilliant 2007 Asian Dynasties expansion – also from Big Huge Games, incidentally – does a few things with villagers, so that you can increase your population for lower costs and using less food. That last bit is important, because India is forbidden from harvesting livestock for food. You can use them to increase your experience, but this design choice is a reflection of India as the spiritual nation. This is a power shared with Japan for some reason, even though the refusal to eat beef or pork was central to the Indian Mutiny that sets up the Indian Campaign in the game.

It's interesting to note that none of the Age of Empires III European civilizations have notable religious powers or limits, but in both expansions, religion plays an important roles in at least some of the new factions.

In his 1924 classic novel A Passage to India, E.M. Forster wrote that “India is a muddle”, which the author claimed is a more honest term than “mystery” when characterizing this larger and complicated world. For strategy game designers, I almost wish India were a muddle. For them, India is a land of sage wise men, amazing wealth, red forts and elephants. Except for the elephants and the colour of the forts, you could say as much about Europe or Arabia or China.

India's muddle sends designers to seek refuge in a united India. They see hundreds of millions of people as their conquerors saw them: India is easy money. So relax, go native and suck in the wisdom of the gurus.

Editorial note
This essay is a cross-post from a brilliant series Troy wrote in 2011. He looked at countries as characters in historical strategy games, and how those games portray national character through their mechanics. Comparing the way that nations' histories are depicted in games to his own expectations based on his knowledge of those histories, Troy asks: what do designers believe, and what do these choices tell us about what some people think is important about a nation?

Read the rest of the ‘National Characters’ series at Flash of Steel
In 2005 BioWare released *Jade Empire*. This role-playing game built on many of the developer's strengths in the genre, but moved western RPGs away from their comfort zone, with an East Asian aesthetic in place of Tolkienesque medieval fantasy or space opera science fiction.

The resulting game did reasonably well, earning a positive critical response. Recently departed BioWare titans Ray Muzyka and Greg Deschuk were not shy about their enthusiasm for the property. *Jade Empire* sits somewhere between the status of a lost classic and an unquestioned triumph.

Eight years later, *Jade Empire* remains one of only a few story-based video games produced in the west that is primarily aesthetically influenced by East Asian cultural traditions, notwithstanding that old standby the samurai.

In the last couple of years in particular we have seen some interesting forays into western history with the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, *Red Dead Redemption* and most recently *BioShock Infinite*. All of these games interact with narratives of American or European history, often with mixed results from the perspective of professional historians.

All of them rely on dominant narratives about the societies in which the game is set. One can safely assume the average video game fan in Europe or the United States will at least recognize Leonardo da Vinci as a person of note. Players with limited knowledge of the Gilded Age in American history will nevertheless immediately understand the historical context of segregation. Someone playing *Red Dead Redemption* might not know an awful lot about life in the Old West, but does understand the basic concepts of cowboys and frontier towns.

Can we expect a western audience to make the same implicit connections with a pompous Confucian scholar or a supercilious comprador in nineteenth-century Shanghai?
Audiences in Asia have little difficulty with these associations. Historical settings are prevalent throughout East Asian media. Soap operas, comic books and cartoons are likely to rely on the audience’s familiarity with the basic history of the Tang Dynasty or the fall of the Qing at the dawn of the twentieth century. Beyond this, the audience is assumed to have at least passing knowledge of classics in Chinese literature. Cao Cao’s villainous status as established in the classic novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms is reprised in the button-mashing chaos of Dynasty Warriors games.

East Asian cinema regularly relies upon basic knowledge of Chinese history. 2000’s Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon revived the classic wuxia film and exported it to the west, but historical epics have long been a mainstay of East Asian blockbuster cinema culture. Red Cliff for example, released in two separate installments of over two hours each in 2008 and 2009, went back to the familiar well of the collapse of the Han Dynasty and the historical context of Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Chinese films are also more comfortable moving beyond epic action or staid drama when telling stories in a historical setting. Jackie Chan’s Drunken Master films are excellent examples of the potential for comedy subverting the traditional martial arts narrative. Stephen Chow’s Kung Fu Hustle and more recent adaptation of Journey to the West adopt a cartoonish, almost gonzo form of storytelling. Chow doesn’t have to worry about losing his audience along the way. He knows there is a baseline of historical knowledge there.

Beyond this, the spiritual context of traditional Chinese religion and mythology regularly informs all types of Chinese cinema, including genres such as romantic comedy. A personal favorite of mine, 2002’s My Left Eye Sees Ghosts, tells the story of a bereaved trophy wife in modern-day Hong Kong who develops a friendship with a ghost following a car accident, only to eventually discover the value of moving on to her next relationship.

There is a long tradition of Chinese “ghost stories” focusing on interaction between the denizens of the afterlife and humans living on this material plane. These function as morality tales, rather than horror fiction.

This is no accident. Chinese religious practice has focused on conceptions of our reality that merge the afterlife with the present for thousands of years. During the Song Dynasty (968 - 1279 AD) in particular, the gods and ghosts of local communities were organized into distinct hierarchies with kingships and other official positions in the bureaucracy of the afterlife recognized by the imperial state. This was an important tool for the government to co-opt local custom and religious practice into an overarching state ideology, but it also reflected a reality of Chinese religious experience that recognized the divide between the living and the dead as part of humanity’s spiritual existence rather than the end of physical life.

It is in this respect that I find Jade Empire most interesting. It moves towards a narrative that fully embraces interaction between the spiritual and the corporal worlds, though it swiftly arrives at the edge of its own limitations in this regard. The divide between the living and the dead in Jade Empire is treated for the most part as a negative development, a poisoning of the natural order akin to western conceptions of the profanity of the living dead as represented by numerous zombie films and tropes from George Romero’s classic examples to George R. R. Martin’s ‘white walkers.’ The dead are being kept from the comfort of oblivion.
The player-character's interactions with deceased spirit monks and guiding specters has more in common with a traditional Chinese approach to representations of spirituality in fiction, particularly in the wuxia genre. *Jade Empire* goes beyond superficial aesthetic references to Asia; it introduces a western audience to a historical narrative in a Chinese context.

Nevertheless, the underworld represented in *Jade Empire* is a timid version of a broadly conceived realm of the afterlife, rather than the more complex alternatives offered by Chinese religious syncretism. When it comes to the corporeal plane, *Jade Empire* liberally borrows elements from across the Chinese historical timeline: the political intrigue of the inner courts of the Ming Dynasty; the cosmopolitan capital city of Tang China; the relatively weak reach of the Confucian state on the imperial frontier.

The setting is not a period piece, but a simulacrum of East Asian history and mythology wrapped up in a BioWare package, with remarkable similarities to the presentation of the Star Wars universe in *Knights of the Old Republic*. The approach mythologizes East Asia in the framework of western story-world building conventions.

Other decisions similarly draw *Jade Empire* further away from authenticity. The choice to create the fake language Tho Fan rather than include dialogue in Mandarin or another Chinese language is particularly disappointing. Having distinctly Asian looking characters spouting a universally incomprehensible tongue Orientalizes these individuals. The old sage by the beach or the mother fleeing her home choosing to speak in this tongue rather than the English predominantly used in the game subtly reinforce othering stereotypes.

Female characters are orientalised and sexualised. Whenever female characters are old enough to be sexually mature but young enough to be sexually desirable under the male gaze, they are dressed in a manner suggestive of the seductive Asian exotic. However, in this regard BioWare are no better or no worse than East Asian developers at work today. On this matter it seems that East and West can agree universally, unfortunately.

These flaws are all the more regrettable in light of how much BioWare gets right. The architecture of private and public buildings, shrines and gardens is reminiscent not just of East Asian historical examples but of East Asian cinematic representations.

Individual characters have clearly been designed with care, and archetypes are embraced in an enthusiastic manner that minimalizes or simply removes the dangers of caricature. The player character’s ‘wise old master’ from the first moments of the game is an excellent example of this. Both in the character’s physical design and in his role in the game’s plot, BioWare adroitly stepped away from lazy stereotyping while embracing the iconography of the Chinese sage.

*Jade Empire* is rather frustrating for a history nerd like me. Though the game does claim influence from across East Asia, and Korean and Japanese tropes do emerge here and there, the dominant influence is clearly Chinese. The game’s basic plot would work well set during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD), a period known for its predominant Buddhist influence and literary peaks, including tales of the supernatural.
Tales bleeding in between history and mythology are nothing new in the Chinese tradition. Chinese historians during the dynastic period were pioneers in the conception of narrative history. A fake emperor here and an invented conspiracy there, and the game’s story remains fantastical but rooted in a firmer historical context. One could consider such an approach to be not unlike that of the Assassin’s Creed franchise.

Ultimately however, perhaps BioWare made the correct choice. They certainly succeeded in avoiding many common pitfalls. There is no European faction or prominent white male NPC acting as a hegemonic avatar of the player’s presumed identity.

The decision to mythologize East Asian history in the same manner of the Star Wars universe’s simplistic moral mythology presents problems but it also betrays an approach defined not by prejudice but by good faith. Throughout Jade Empire one thing is very clear: the writers and designers of this game earnestly love the setting, and are not merely repeating popular Western conceptions of China.

For me, this is the most endearing thing about Jade Empire, and the most important aspect of any critique of the game from a historical perspective. Prejudice against Asian communities is alive and well in the West, though rarely blatant or obvious even to those guilty of promoting it. Even Asian game developers often reflect American stereotypes, either by presenting the white male heroes of the Resident Evil franchise or the cartoonish masculine figures of the Yakuza series.

In truth however, games such as the Yakuza series operate in a different space, purely because they know what they are. Yakuza games are soap opera in the same way that yakuza-themed films have been soap opera in Japan for decades. Complaining that these games present a skewed reality of modern day Japan is like complaining that Brian de Palma’s The Untouchables is unrealistic. Of course, the key here is that Yakuza’s developers are Japanese. It’s when painting such broad strokes of a culture that is not your own that we get into significant trouble, and the nuance of a character is lost. Satire and even homage becomes crude racism.

Jade Empire avoids many problems that can arise from cross-cultural representations, partly through a clear divide between the game’s universe and historical reality, and largely through BioWare’s passion and enthusiasm for the subject matter.

Before their departure from BioWare, Muzyka and Deschuk opined on the possibility of a Jade Empire sequel. This would seem to no longer be on the cards, but I hope the wait will not be too long for a video game set among the hongs of early nineteenth century Guangzhou or the chaos of Japanese-occupied Manchuria in World War II. For all of its faults, Jade Empire is proof that western developers do not have to fall into lazy caricature.

**Sources**


In 1927, the Chinese writer Hu Shi reflected on his time abroad and the pastimes of various countries. England had cricket; Americans adored baseball; wrestling was king in Japan. And China? Well, China had mahjong.

Unlike the robust physical games of those healthy nations, Hu Shi found the Chinese enjoyment of mahjong wasteful at best. In a famous bit of estimation, he figured every four hands of mahjong took about two hours; if one assumed that every day, there were a million games of mahjong in China, and every game took eight hands, that alone was four million wasted hours!

Hu Shi himself was a majiang gaoshou, or highly skilled mahjong player. He was, no doubt, being somewhat tongue-in-cheek when he criticised the game. But there is little question that he, along with many intellectuals, was concerned by this ludic manifestation of the perceived moral failings of the Chinese people.

Mahjong is a game for four players, played with a set of 144 tiles. The tiles can be grouped into two major sets, the ‘number tiles,’ and the special ‘honor’ tiles. Number tiles are divided into three suits, each suit having nine numbered tiles. The honor tiles can be divided into the ‘winds’ (north, south, east, west) and the ‘dragons’ (zhong, fa, and bai). Finally, there are eight unique, optional tiles called huapai (flower tiles); the flower tiles are frequently fancifully decorated, and the motif may be unique to a set.

The goal is to create winning hands by discarding and drawing new tiles. The basic mechanics are deceptively simple, as the intricacies that govern game play are complicated. Like many card games of similar purpose, there are numerous combinations that can make up a winning hand, with rarer wins worth more points.

Mahjong seems to have descended from various types of pai (card or tile) games and a game called madiao. It probably arose sometime after the first Opium War (1839-1842) with the opening of China’s treaty ports. There, drifters and workers from many different provinces gathered together, and mahjong spread like wildfire. By the end of the 19th century, mahjong had spread to all of China.
It may have been popular, but it inherited negative associations from its predecessors. *Madiao* was a game that literati had looked on with a mix of horror and attraction. It was so popular among scholar-officials that Wu Meicun, a 17th-century poet and official, labeled it as “the game that lost the Ming.”

Unfettered play was a symptom of the moral decline of the ruling class, who spent more time socializing and playing pointless games than worrying about the nomadic armies sweeping down from the north.

Like *madiao*, mahjong found favor in a time of great crisis for China: this time, it wasn't nomadic armies, but imperialist powers, that posed a threat. Even after the fall of the Qing in 1911, concern over mahjong continued – it was a visible symbol of both seedy lower class habits and decadent bourgeois sensibilities.

However, at least one anonymous writer recognized the potential of using a wildly popular game in service to national goals. In 1904, an article one hundred years ahead of its time appeared on the pages of the radical Zhejiang paper *Alarm Bell Daily News*. In contrast to the numerous diatribes on the mahjong scourge that offered no concrete solutions to the problem, the author argued that its potential national benefit should not be underestimated:

‘In observing the rise and fall of nations, one should not observe matters of great importance, but instead look at trifling things.’

Sensibly noting the difficulties of getting rid of old customs entirely and tackling large issues, the author suggested that mahjong could make an excellent tool for education. As a ‘trifling thing’ popular across the whole of China, it was a perfect vehicle for reform on a small scale.

The author dreamed up a ‘reformed mahjong’ that bore little resemblance to any variation of the original. The “educational” purpose is painfully obvious.

The *zhong*, *fa*, and *bai* tiles were replaced with government types (autocracy, constitutional monarchy, and republic), while the directional tiles were mapped to four classes of people (farmer, worker, merchant, and soldier). The three suits were assigned one continent per suit (Asia, Europe, the Americas); each of the nine tiles per suit was assigned a country and corresponding government type (e.g., “China – autocracy,” “England – constitutional monarchy” and “Brazil – republic”). A variety of tiles replaced the traditional flower tiles: the five inhabited continents, the five major oceans, and technological innovations (steamship, railroad, telegraph, printing, and hot air balloon).

The new rules were complex, but in essence, republicanism and technology ruled the day. Players facing a hand of autocratic nations or, worse yet, Australian and African tiles, had a near-impossible task in front of them, as the rules limited their ability to draw new tiles. Dominance in ‘reformed mahjong’ (and the world of the late Qing) required the right government and the right technology: the player stuck with the ‘colonized people’ tiles had no hope of competing with the enlightened continent of Europe. Technology alone would not save an autocratic China.

Unfortunately, the author’s modifications made the ruleset overly complicated, and the obviously educational component seems off-putting to the extreme. There is no evidence that this reformed mahjong made it any further than the pages of the *Alarm Bell Daily*. 
This attempt to reappropriate mahjong prefigures contemporary attempts by the Chinese government to co-opt a medium even more threatening. The world of digital games is proving as big a headache for social crusaders and government officials as mahjong ever was. The discourse surrounding digital gaming bears striking resemblance to the way intellectuals talked about mahjong and madiao: addicting, waste of time, dangerous.

While the government continues to take concrete efforts aimed at controlling the physical spaces where players congregate, like internet cafés (wangba), it has also appropriated the methodology behind ‘reformed mahjong.’

In 2007, the Ningbo government decided to capitalize on the popularity of online games to educate players. One official described the game Incorruptible Warrior:

‘Players fight their way through one level after another, overcoming all obstacles to eliminate corrupt officials and enter a spring-like paradise filled with birdsong and the scent of flowers, a peaceful world where people live in love, harmony, and national prosperity.’

Unlike Alarm Bell’s take on mahjong, Incorruptible Warrior appropriated existing the structure of existing games and gave it a facelift without making substantive changes to the game play itself. Killing the powerful and notorious Ming eunuch Wei Zhongxian, for example, netted players one hundred experience points, with which they could upgrade their stats in ‘combating corruption,’ ‘moral character,’ and ‘degree of being corruption-free.’

Unlike ‘reformed mahjong,’ the game was popular. So popular, in fact, that it crashed servers and was unavailable until further upgrades to the infrastructure were made.

This is a particularly striking example of a rising trend; the government is getting directly involved in gaming culture, instead of just regulating it. These attempts at control, reform, and refashioning are too often read as a product of “Red China”: authoritarianism played out in the digital realm.

Yet as mahjong illustrates, anxiety over ‘play,’ serious misgivings about the way people spend their time, and attempts to do something about it are by no means the exclusive domain of the contemporary People’s Republic of China. This point is obvious to the China specialist; for those less familiar with the longer sweep of modern Chinese history, China frequently exists in an odd Communist vacuum, as if there was no China before 1949.

The tendency to treat contemporary issues as if they exist in a vacuum – this “amnesiac” approach to games – is one that cannot and will not stand up under scrutiny from a historical perspective.
Come at me with your fox!

The song above comes from a kabuki play performed at a theatre in the Asakusa district of Edo, Japan in 1847. It was sung during a scene in which a dancer and a bath house servant get drunk and rowdy while playing a game known as kei. The song was so popular that it was reproduced in a set of prints, and that Spring a series of short plays were produced about kei. Soon people were buying guides on how to play kei at home.

Ken was an early version of rock, paper, scissors that originated in China, but became very popular in Japan during a time of social upheaval. It was often played in the pleasure quarters, and it came to form part of a satirical discourse that surrounded the collapse of the feudal regime in Japan in the 19th century.

Kabuki, sake and ken all contributed to the construction of liminal spaces around the pleasure district. In these liminal spaces, some aspects of the hierarchical and restrictive social order of the outside world were suspended temporarily. The samurai, the highest-ranking members of the feudal order, were to leave the swords that symbolised their authority at the gate. Young women were indentured there

About the Author: Zoya Street is a freelance video game historian, journalist and writer, working in the worlds of design criticism and digital content business strategy.

sake should be kezake. sake wa kezake
There are many ways [to play]:
The frog hops once, twice, thrice,
the snake slithers and slithers.
Let's play as the slug!
Jingle jangle janken now,
that old lady
put the big hero down.
The tiger creeps in
to the strumming of the shamisen
so come at me with your fox!

(Translation adapted from Sepp Linhart’s)

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into the service of patrons' emotional and physical needs, including providing liberal amounts of sake. Kabuki actors were often depicted as seductive companions to samurai and merchants in the pleasure quarters.

For wealthy urban men, this was a world of play (asobi) where cultural and material capital trumped social capital. Merchants, officially the lowest rung in the social order of the world outside, used the dynamics of the pleasure quarter to attain a privileged position barred to them by the Neo-Confucian polity; they were able to enter the most elite tea houses, charm the most popular actors and entertainers, and show off their superior wealth to the often penniless samurai.

The rock-paper-scissors mechanic was often employed in drinking games featuring full-body actions through which people would roleplay as different animals. Cheap, widely-distributed woodblock prints such as the one shown above represented this drunken playing of different roles as a kind of magical shapeshifting.

The ken meme was a game mechanic that represented the merchants' reconstruction of the social order. Ken games made people feel like they could game the system; they could play with the hierarchy rather than quietly live under it.

Ken games incorporated powerful social metaphors. From 1847 onwards 'kitsune ken' became a mainstream variant of the game. Kitsune ken equalised the feudal social hierarchy – village elder trumps huntsman, huntsman trumps fox, but fox trumps village elder because foxes were believed to be magical, mischievous creatures that could possess him. Therefore, although the hierarchy remains intact as a part of the game mechanic, it is revealed to be preposterous and empty, because the person on the bottom-most rung can overpower the person on the top.

Songs were written about ken games, and printed alongside images of people playing ken. Then, as the political order became increasingly unstable, parody ken songs were written to spoof recent events.

On a rainy day one month after kitsune ken hit the kabuki theatre, samurai Nonoyma Shikibu demanded that a young apprentice hand over his umbrella. He was then beheaded by Iijima Kasan, who was apparently angry on the apprentice's behalf. This satirical poem was published shortly afterward, in the style of the kitsune ken song:

Watch the sake, old man
your head will bounce once, twice, thrice,
your blood will slither and slither away.

Let's play at swordfighting!

Pitter-patter goes the rain,
the place is Misujicho in Asakusa
so come along to number 5!

(Translation adapted from Sepp Linhart's)

The repetitive onomatopoeia that made the kitsune ken song sound playful are here used to gloat about the violent retribution that the 'old man' samurai received for his arrogance. The implication is that the toppling of the hierarchical elite as played out in a ken game has become a violent reality, and everyone is invited to join in.
I first wrote about ken in 2011, a few months after I first began studying video games. It was a short blog post largely based on the work of Sepp Linhart’s chapter in the excellent anthology Japan at Play. Only later did I start to think about the debate between game developers about the significance of narrative versus mechanics.

This debate has recently taken an interesting turn, with strong characters making their voices heard; should we rely on formalist dissections of game design such as Raph Koster’s, which aim to hone essential tools for the craft of game design? Or do formalist taxonomies lead to an elitism that excludes narrative-oriented work such as that advocated by Anna Anthropy?

The dichotomy drawn here is purely rhetorical. Neither side truly sees the other as some sort of monolithic enemy, and there is considerable overlap and interaction.

Ken offers a useful historical example of the intersection between the design of mechanics and the importance of narrative; an intersection not at all ignored in the work of Anthropy and comrades such as Merritt Kopas, and well within the scope of Raph Koster’s work. In Anthropy’s Triad and Kopas’s Lim, just as in ken, mechanics are metaphors for social dynamics.

In Triad, an adapted tetris-like mechanic plays out a comedy of errors from the arrangement and behaviour of three individuals sharing a bed designed for two. In Lim, movement and collision mechanics combine with colour matching to portray the harrowing social psychology of conformity. Both games use mechanics to demonstrate a friction between social norms and transgressive behaviours. They use game mechanics to show that fitting in is not just about what you are; it’s about how you behave in a world that doesn’t have room for you.

When applying game mechanics to our social lives, there is more at stake than their formal composition alone can indicate. Throughout history and across the world, game mechanics have had the capacity to both reflect and subvert the existing order.

In ken, Triad and Lim, social constructions are modeled by game mechanics, and at the same time, these mechanics offer a way out. In ken games, the way out of an oppressive hierarchy is to play on the hidden powers of the bottom rung. In Triad and Lim, the way out of the discomfort of not fitting in is to persevere and adapt in order to find a space that is comfortable for you. These games are constructed in a context of radical opposition to the mainstream. The growth of video games into a multi-billion dollar industry has seen game designs largely homogenise around mechanics that suggest that the only ways to solve any problem are violence and acquisition.

The craft-oriented discourse of formalists and the subversive politics of videogame zinesters share in common an interest in developing new mechanics that push the boundaries of the mainstream narrative, in the same way that the rock-paper-scissors mechanic challenged the feudal structure of Edo Japan.

Sources

Anna Anthropy, Rise of the Videogame Zinesters

Raph Koster, A Theory of Fun
Histories of gender & sexual diversity in games

Call for submissions

To accompany the LGBT pride festivals celebrated in many countries during the month of June, the next issue of Memory Insufficient takes up histories of gender and sexual diversity in games.

At Memory Insufficient, ‘queer’ is a verb. Submissions that complicate or challenge the issue’s topic titles are very much welcome. Every topic can be read with the words jumbled up. That means you could, for example, write up your history of being gendered in games, or you could write about minority sexualities in a game about history, or submit a history of the gaming of gender expression, or any other permutation imaginable.

Any kind of history will be accepted: social, biographic, documentary, personal, descriptive or polemical. Submissions are unlikely to be rejected for being ‘not history,’ because nobody has the authority to decide what that means. Likewise, nobody has the authority to decide what a game is. ‘Gender and sexual diversity’ includes anybody whose gender identity or sexual preferences have been policed.

Feel free to get in touch with any questions or suggestions. The deadline for submissions is 15th June. Send them to rupa.zero@gmail.com or tweet @rupazero.

Image of amphora courtesy of the British Museum