

Cultural Representation in Indonesian Horror Video Games

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore how abstract traditional beliefs are translated into interactive digital forms such as video games. Video games today are not merely entertainment media; they are a medium capable of becoming cultural ambassadors that effectively introduce local cultures on the international stage, related to traditions and belief systems. Indonesian horror games on the international stage currently excel because they bring authentic local narratives and folklore. The video game Pamali is a local Indonesian horror game that highlights taboo traditions related to the supernatural world. The title itself, "Pamali," refers to the concept of prohibition or taboo that is very familiar in the daily lives of Indonesian society. This analysis combines Stuart Hall's theory of representation with concepts from game studies to dissect three main aspects: visual, narrative, and game mechanics. The use of qualitative methods focuses on in-depth analysis of Cultural Meaning; Visual Representation; Supernatural Entities and Folklore, as well as Interactive Cultural Learning. The finding is that the culture in the video game Pamali is not merely decorative embellishments or esthetic backgrounds, but rather a learning experience about the meaning of local culture. These cultural elements have been integrated into the game system, where every player action and the resulting consequences directly reflect the logic of taboos in the real world. It can be concluded that this game successfully creates a space for global players to experience the complexity of Indonesian moral values and traditions thru digital exploration. Video games can be a significant potential as a platform for cultural diplomacy in the era of massive digital distribution.

Keywords: *Cultural Representation, Video Games, Indonesian Culture, Horror Games, Digital Media*

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, the position of video games has no longer been merely as a form of entertainment, but rather as a major industry that can drive the creative economy or serve as a medium for disseminating information, such as the global depiction of culture. Video games can reflect culture. Video games have become a medium for disseminating cultural information to their players. In video games, cultural information such as stories, identities, and even social values can be embedded in the gameplay. Peneliti dalam studi media dan budaya semakin mengakui video game sebagai artefak budaya yang mencerminkan konteks sosial dan budaya di mana mereka diproduksi (Jenkins, 2006; Shaw, 2010). As explained in the above quote, games can reflect the social environment in which they are made, but in certain cases, game developers may be outsiders with limited knowledge of the local culture, leading to misinterpretation. In certain cases, video game developers cannot accurately depict a culture and are even rejected by the community that possesses that narrative or culture. Anti-globalization sentiment in the field of video games is also starting to grow. Currently, many local game developers are starting to produce video games and highlight their own cultural narratives. Cultural interaction has become a quite profitable weapon for foreign players. Local visual elements, narratives, and gameplay systems are powerful tools in introducing culture, especially to foreign audiences who have never encountered it before. This phenomenon reflects a broader process of cultural exchange within the global media environment (Appadurai, 1996). Thru visual design, storytelling, and gameplay systems, video games can serve as a platform to introduce narratives and cultural traditions to international audiences.

In this context, Indonesia is a country that is also reluctant to be left behind in the local video game trend. Local video games like Pamali are among the local games that have been quite successful in the market and have entered the global market. Unlike Western-style games that emphasize scare tactics with jumpscare or physically appearing monsters, Pamali is a unique Indonesian local game that carries the theme of Southeast Asian horror rich in myths, supernatural beliefs, and folklore. In this game, local cultural objects often appear in the video game, both visually in the form of artifacts and narratively thru the concept of local Indonesian culture. The use of the game's title, Pamali, itself is a local cultural concept where Pamali means something taboo or a customary prohibition that the local community is reluctant to violate. For many Indonesians, pamali is not only considered superstition, but also a form of cultural guidance that regulates behavior and reflects moral values within society (Geertz, 1973). Traditions that usually appear in the oral culture of local communities now emerge in the form of video games, which have largely been forgotten by the younger generation of Indonesians, especially for foreign players who are forced to interact with these taboos in the game.

Translating culture into a video game is not a simple challenge. In the context of a culture that cannot be faced by foreign players, the concept of a horror-themed game wrapped in local culture becomes a challenge to be accepted or at least understood by the players. How an abstract taboo concept from local beliefs can be translated into concrete game mechanics that can be understood by international players presents a unique challenge for the studio creating it. The function of Pamali or customary prohibitions becomes a mechanic in the game. The concept of taboo customary prohibitions that should not be violated usually appears in the form of a story, serving as the foundation for game design where the narrative becomes more realistic with immediate consequences if the player commits a violation. The significance of reinterpretation in this research is how a concept from ancient oral traditions can be revived or interpreted in the form of a modern video game. This research aims to thoroughly examine the representation of local beliefs of Indonesian society in the video game Pamali. The analysis focuses on how visual elements, narrative structures, and gameplay systems convey cultural meanings and construct horror experiences that have specific cultural characteristics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Representation and Stuart Hall's Framework

The concept of representation becomes a key element in cultural studies. From Stuart Hall's (1997) perspective, cultural meaning does not emerge on its own; rather, it is produced from the symbols, language, and images that are present. Cultural representation in media such as video games does not appear like a mirror reflecting reality as it is. Media such as video games actively shape players' understanding of certain identities. In the world of gaming, cultural representation is more vivid because players can directly interact with those cultural symbols. Players can interact according to the mechanics determined by the game developers. This makes cultural representation in interactive digital media like games more impactful compared to just watching.

Video Games as Cultural Texts

Researchers in the field of games view games not merely as a form of entertainment, but as texts that can be analyzed as a scientific study. Consalvo and Dutton (2006) emphasize that games have narrative structures, visual systems, and game rules that collectively shape the process of meaning production in gameplay. Meaning in games emerges from the combination of narrative, visuals, and game mechanics that can guide player understanding. In this context, game mechanics designers play an important role in directing meaning. Gee (2003) states that video games create what is known as situated meaning, a situation in which players learn and interpret meaning through interactions with the game environment. With the involvement of players in video games, the formation of meaning becomes more dynamic depending on the situation and mechanics, where players learn about culture precisely when they take action within the game. This is very different from films or literary media in shaping cultural meaning. Shaw (2010) also notes that video games are increasingly involved in broader discussions about cultural identity and representation. Thru digital distribution, video games become cultural ambassadors that introduce local traditions to the international stage.

Horror Games and Cultural Folklore

Fear in horror video games often arises from beliefs in supernatural cultures, myths, and folklore that circulate in the surroundings. Krzywinska (2015) states that horror games often rely on specific cultural interpretations of fear and the supernatural. The feeling of fear in horror video games often arises from beliefs in supernatural cultures, myths, and folklore circulating in the surroundings. Horror is a culturally subjective matter; what is frightening for one group of people may be viewed differently, influenced by their beliefs in the supernatural. In Indonesia, stories about ghosts and spirits are deeply rooted in folklore. These narratives often reflect moral lessons, social values, or unresolved conflicts within society (Danandjaja, 1994). Ghost stories in Indonesia are not just about being scary, but often come with moral messages or social values that have been present for a long time in films and TV. This also influences video games that feature horror stories with their own unique meanings. Indonesian horror media, including film and television, have long utilized this tradition (Heider, 2011). The horror video game Pamali brings this tradition to an interactive digital level; the game not only sells the visual terror of monsters but also the fear of violating societal customs.

METHODOLOGY

To dissect the depth of cultural meaning in the cultural representation in the video game Pamali, an in-depth qualitative approach is necessary. This method was chosen because the focus of the research is on the interpretation of meaning, not just numbers. The main object of analysis in this research is the video game Pamali, a horror-themed first-person game by StoryTale Studios released in 2018. This video game was chosen for its strength in presenting cultural representation, particularly in taboo or customary prohibitions. Data in this research was actively collected. Instead of just observation, the research was conducted with the researcher directly playing this video game to note relevant visual scenes, dialogs, and interactions.

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze how cultural meanings are represented in the video game Pamali. The research focuses on the visual and narrative elements that emerge within the gameplay experience. The object of analysis in this study is the first-person horror game Pamali, developed by StoryTale Studios and released in 2018. Data was collected through direct observation of gameplay and documentation of visual scenes within the game. The analysis is conducted thoroughly by dividing it into several pillars. The analysis focused on main aspects:

- 1) Cultural Meaning
How societal values are translated into game narratives.
- 2) Visual Representation
The use of symbols, environments, and physical objects that reflect local identity.
- 3) Supernatural Entities & Folklore
The use of symbols, environments, and physical objects that reflect local identity. An analysis of the ghostly figures and myths presented, not as ordinary monsters, but as part of folklore.
- 4) Interactive Cultural Learning
How players unconsciously "learn" about Indonesian customs thru game mechanics.

Through this approach, the study aims to understand how cultural meanings are embedded in the game's interactive structure.

DISCUSSION

The Cultural Meaning of Pamali

In Indonesian society, Pamali is not just a word but a set of unwritten rules that govern daily behavior. Taboos or customary guidelines that are believed in and reluctant to be violated. These customary rules are usually passed down orally and inherited from ancestors. Pamali is conveyed orally from parents to their children and often followed without explanation as to why it must be adhered to. There is meaning in the word "don't" that often appears in the concept of pamali. There are deep moral values, respect, and efforts to maintain social harmony. Children often carry this message, and it is passed down thru generations, repeated in accordance with the previous message. Some are discussed openly by parents, while others become taboo subjects. Anthropological studies of Indonesian culture show

that everyday social practices are often connected to broader belief systems about the visible and invisible world (Geertz, 1973). Geertz explains that trivial actions such as moving objects or making noise in certain places are considered to disrupt the balance between the real world and the spiritual world. Of course, such things are also difficult to convey scientifically from parents to their children; the limitation lies only in belief. Pamali serves as a cultural mechanism to make society more cautious and self-aware of their environment.

In the video game titled Pamali, the concept of cultural taboos becomes the main theme carried in the game's narrative, not just a mere seasoning of the story or the random appearance of ghostly disturbances. In the video game Pamali, tension arises precisely when players interact with objects or spaces considered "culturally sensitive." Culturally sensitive, this will certainly be easily understood by people who are accustomed to the local culture, and it becomes an additional challenge for foreign players who are not familiar with it. There are consequences to the player's choices in playing this game. Players can respect the existing cultural boundaries or ignore them. Each of these choices will determine the ending of the game. This game does not lecture players about culture thru long dialogs, but rather thru the experiences they have. Games with multiple endings like this teach players directly about the culture present in the surrounding society. Learning from mistakes is a mechanic deliberately created by the game developers so that players learn directly and experience supernatural consequences if they violate the taboos. The ghost in this video game is a logical consequence of violating the previously stated customary rules.

Pamali successfully translates ancient oral tradition beliefs into modern interactive storytelling media such as video games. This game provides a reflection of real life, especially for Indonesian players. Indonesian players, especially those from the local area where the story is set, are quite familiar with taboos like this. For foreign players or those outside the local narrative of this game, this medium serves as an introduction to another culture. Foreign players come to understand that horror games in Indonesia are not just about monsters but also about morality and ethics. The video game Pamali proves that games can serve as a medium to preserve and globally distribute local knowledge. Cultural representation of horror-consequential elements in this game is not just a passive visual, but more alive with the players' choices and actions in the virtual world.

Visual Representation of Indonesian Cultural Spaces

The background visualization in the game Pamali is not just decoration, but rather a cultural identity in Indonesia. The main strength in the visualization of the Pamali video game is its ability to present a domestic space that is very characteristic of Indonesia. The objects that appear, the types of plants, the shape of the houses, along with the vandalism scribbles that relate to conditions in Indonesia. This makes the Indonesian atmosphere very strong and adds immersiveness for the players. The interiors that appear in the video game are not just houses made to be scary. The interior of the house showcases the lower middle-class living spaces in Indonesia that are commonly encountered in reality. The simple living room, narrow hallways, and furniture layout that gives a sense of "familiarity" to local players. This design provides a concept that is real with a real world, not in a vague world that can diminish the sense of reality, and this strengthens the context. Players seem to be brought into the real world in a video game version.

The small objects that appear in the visual representation of the building tell the story of its inhabitants' identities. Compared to Western horror video games in general, which are far from reality with monsters created in super advanced labs, viruses that turn people into cannibals, and other elements that, after playing, make you feel they won't happen in your world. In the game Pamali, it's quite the opposite; the setting is a place that is very much intertwined with the daily lives of local players. Thus, the horror in the game Pamali arises from realistic elements. The objects that appear in the game are often related to cultural identity. Objects such as religious items, heirlooms, old family photos, and everyday items can serve as cultural markers. The game Pamali uses the concept of environmental storytelling to explain that players understand the character's history just by observing how the objects are placed. From a cultural representation perspective, these objects serve as visual symbols that convey aspects of Indonesian social life. Hall (1997) states that visual images in media can function as a representational system that carries cultural meaning

An atmosphere thick with the everyday can actually become frightening. The horror in the game Pamali is not just about dimming and flickering lights or jump scares, but the discomfort that arises in spaces that are usually and should be safe. This transforms the safe space, which was once a place far from disturbances, into a spot of supernatural disturbances. For local players, this increases the level of fear because the house in the game resembles their own

house, or at least is located in a place that might be nearby. This makes the players' feelings more unified. For foreign players, this space serves as an entry point to visually understand Indonesia's domestic culture. Introducing how buildings and objects commonly found in Indonesia appear. Spatial design in the video game Pamali is a meeting point between cultural identity and interactive horror narrative.

Supernatural Entities and Folklore

Supernatural elements play a crucial role in shaping the atmosphere and narrative structure of Pamali. Like many other horror games, the presence of supernatural entities serves as a primary source of tension and fear. However, what sets Pamali apart is how these entities are deeply connected to Indonesian folklore, rather than simply being fictional horror creatures. In Indonesian cultural narratives, stories about ghosts and spirits have long been embedded in everyday storytelling. Folklore often depicts supernatural beings associated with specific places, tragic events, or moral transgressions (Danandjaja, 1994). These stories are typically told within families and communities, thus becoming part of the collective cultural imagination of the community. Therefore, supernatural figures in Indonesian folklore are not only understood as frightening figures but are also often associated with moral lessons, social behavior, and cultural values.

The supernatural entities that appear in Pamali reflect this narrative tradition. Rather than randomly appearing monsters, the game features spirits whose appearance is linked to specific actions taken by the player. The appearance of these entities is often triggered when the player interacts with objects or spaces in ways that violate cultural taboos. In these cases, the supernatural elements serve as narrative consequences of the player's decisions. This design choice reinforces the central theme of pamali as a cultural taboo. In many traditional stories, ignoring certain prohibitions can lead to encounters with supernatural forces. The game translates this idea into an interactive format, allowing players to experience firsthand how cultural beliefs regarding taboos and consequences develop throughout the storyline.

From a narrative perspective, this approach creates a form of horror rooted in cultural meaning, not simply spectacular effects. The fear evoked in the game stems not only from visual surprises or sudden appearances, but also from the gradual realization that the player's actions may have disturbed something within the game environment. This form of suspense mirrors a storytelling pattern often found in folklore, where encounters with supernatural beings arise in response to human actions. The visual design of the supernatural entities also contributes to this cultural representation. Many of the spirits appearing in the game are designed with characteristics inspired by traditional ghost imagery common in Indonesian folklore and horror media. These visual elements help establish a connection between the digital representations in the game and the broader cultural narratives from which they derive.

For Indonesian players, these representations can evoke familiar cultural references. Meanwhile, for international players, these supernatural figures may seem unfamiliar or different from the horror tropes commonly found in Western games. This difference demonstrates how horror concepts can be shaped by different cultural perspectives and narrative traditions. By integrating supernatural entities derived from folklore, Pamali demonstrates how traditional storytelling can be adapted to contemporary digital media. The game doesn't simply reproduce folkloric narratives but reinterprets them through interactive design. Thus, players can experience elements of Indonesian cultural imagination within a modern gaming experience.

Interactive Cultural Learning

In the video game Pamali, ghosts appear as manifestations of culture, not just monsters. The supernatural elements in the game Pamali are the main axis that builds the atmosphere, yet they carry real cultural weight. The ghostly figures that appear in this video game are not merely creations of the game developers, but rather figures that have long been present in the collective imagination of Indonesian society. Ghosts like pocong or the ghostly figure of a living corpse bound in cloth are among the ghostly figures in the video game that are quite well-known in Indonesian society. As Danandjaya mentioned above, that the ethereal beings in Indonesian folklore often appear as a result of tragedy or moral transgressions. These ghost stories are oral traditions passed down thru generations, so ghosts are understood not just as frightening figures, but also as bearers of moral messages or reminders of social values.

The appearance of the ghost in the game Pamali is a narrative consequence. Ghosts do not appear suddenly without reason, but are triggered by specific actions of the player. The appearance of the ghost in this video game is related to taboo actions or violating a societal taboo. If players are disrespectful toward certain objects or spaces, a ghost appears as a punishment or consequence of that activity. This video game, Pamali, successfully transforms an oral tradition

that is usually only passed down thru generations into an interactive experience. Players experience firsthand what it feels like to be reprimanded by supernatural forces for breaking traditional rules.

In the video game Pamali, fear is rooted in meaning, not just visuals. The fear in the game Pamali does not come from grand visual effects, but rather from the player's awareness that they have disturbed something by breaking a taboo. Horror like this leaves a deeper impression because it is the player's own actions, not a narrative fabricated by others. There is a pattern in folklore, where supernatural disturbances are always a response to human actions that are not wise. In the game, the visual representation of supernatural beings appears authentically; the visual design of ghosts in the video game is the same as the traditional Indonesian ghost images that often appear in local horror media, creating a strong bridge between the digital representation and the original cultural narrative. The video game Pamali is an adaptation of oral traditions into modern media. For Indonesians, these ghosts are very familiar and personal cultural references. Stories that commonly appear in local culture, both as local myths and adapted into films. For foreign players, this entity offers a horror perspective that is completely different from the Western horror clichés that are commonly and routinely told, such as in the Hollywood version. Pamali not only transfers folklore into a game but also reinterprets it thru interactive design. Thru this game, the imagination of traditional Indonesian culture remains relevant and can be enjoyed in a modern technological format.

The rules in video games are a subtle way of conveying cultural values. The design of this game forces players to be more sensitive to their every action, not just because of text instructions, but thru direct experiences that have consequences. In this case, the consequences act as a teacher for the players. Every choice in the narrative carries consequences, which indirectly teaches a sense of caution and respect according to the taboos or prohibitions in the local culture. Game studies scholars argue that interactive systems can convey ideas and values through the procedural structures embedded in gameplay (Bogost, 2007). An interactive system can convey values thru rules, not just words. This allows players to learn from their own mistakes.

Curiosity and cultural reflection are part of this game. From a psychological perspective, horror game players are always curious about what will happen next, but that curiosity can lead them to violate cultural taboos, which also serves as a cultural lesson for the players. When the player's actions trigger unexpected supernatural consequences, a moment arises where the player begins to question the logic behind the event, whether it was due to their actions A, B, or something else. This is the point of deep cultural engagement. For Indonesians, this moment triggers memories of advice from parents or elders in childhood about what is permissible and what is not. This can strengthen their belief in the value of the taboo itself. This gaming experience ultimately becomes a space for nostalgia with deeply ingrained cultural teachings.

This video game serves as an informal medium for cultural learning. For foreign players who are not familiar with the local cultural concepts in this game, the concept of taboos in "Pamali" initially appears as a dark game mystery, but over time they realize there is a moral pattern behind it that is conveyed at the end of each game. Thru this interaction, foreign players can indirectly learn about the Indonesian worldview regarding morality, respect, and the supernatural realm. Games like Pamali are examples of cultural learning media that do not come across as preachy. Lessons are felt directly thru actions and consequences. The cultural meaning in this game emerges organically thru exploration, experimentation, and player interpretation within the virtual world.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study explores how Indonesian cultural beliefs are represented in the horror video game Pamali. This research successfully proves how Indonesian local beliefs are not merely attached to the game Pamali, but rather the essence of its entire design. Both in terms of visual aspects, storyline, and game mechanics, everything converges on one concept, which is the concept of Pamali or taboos found in Indonesian culture. Visually, the game presents an Indonesian atmosphere, narratively it originates from stories in Indonesia, and even in terms of game rules, it operates according to the concept of Pamali or taboos present in Indonesian culture. Cultural elements here are functional, not just decoration. Every action of the player and the consequences that arise are a reflection of social rules about spiritual balance in the real world. The video game Pamali successfully transforms traditions that are usually only passively observed into something that can be directly felt or interacted with by the players.

The role of domestic space and visual identity becomes important in building cultural narratives. Space becomes

a medium of meaning, where the setting such as house design and everyday objects within it are key to creating an authentic atmosphere. In a social context, these visual details are not just about esthetics, but tools to place the horror narrative within the very specific social context of Indonesian society, making it highly immersive, especially for local players. In the game, there is also visual symbolism; every corner of the room and the placement of objects serve as a medium that conveys cultural identity, allowing players, especially local players, to feel an emotional connection to their world.

The video game Pamali can contribute to and impact the future of digital cultural representation related to folklore and the distribution of culture in society. The use of ghosts from local folklore can strengthen the cultural framework in this game, where terror or disturbances arise not from monsters, but from moral/social transgressions. In this context, video games can be a very powerful tool for preserving and introducing local traditions in the modern era. Games like Pamali are proof that local knowledge can be translated into a universal language without losing its roots. In the end, modern game developers have a great opportunity to explore local myths and traditions to create a unique and valuable gaming experience in the eyes of the world.

This research is not just a game dissection, but rather an experiment to unite two fields of study, namely Cultural Studies and Game Studies. By dissecting the visuals, narrative, and interactions in video games simultaneously, this offers a new analytical framework to see how cultural meaning is injected into digital systems. Certainly, this research can be further developed, as there is still a lot to explore regarding culture in Indonesia, making it worthy of deeper examination. For the future, it is recommended to conduct comparative research on local horror games to find a larger pattern, whether there is a uniform way or a diverse approach in visualizing the unique fears of Indonesian culture. It is also suggested to focus on research that examines players, especially the differences in interpretation between local and international players. Does playing this game truly change foreigners' understanding of Indonesian culture, or is it merely entertainment? The next direction of research should be able to see the role of games in disseminating and redefining cultural knowledge on the global stage. Video games are a medium that can keep traditions relevant and alive amidst the onslaught of fast-paced digital media.

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