Bringing Culture into Focus

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Our cultural disposition affects all facets of our lives, including how we perceive situations, how we react to them, and how we feel about them afterwards. As culture is intertwined in all that we do, it is also at work in the games we play. Being able to identify and analyse cultural values in games gives us a better understanding of how culture influences our ways of making sense of games, while leveraging cultural tropes and values in game design intentionally can lead to more deeply resonating and effective digital experiences. In this talk, I will present three ways in which culture can be brought more clearly and practically into focus in game creation and analysis.

First, I will address how culture can be accounted for at the level of game design and mechanics, beyond representations of cultural groups in game worlds. I will discuss the structural relationship between cultural values and games, and how games can be examined as cultures. Using cultural values as a lens of interpretation, I will present snapshots of game mechanics analyses of existing well-known games. I will also outline how cultural values can be used as a design tool in persuasive game design, drawing from my own work as a game designer.

Second, I examine the role of cultural values in the design methodologies used to create digital games and other software, particularly stressing underlying cultural assumptions at work. I will share reflections from a game development workshop conducted with Danish-Arabic high school students.

Finally, I briefly consider the potential of taking a cultural perspective on artificial intelligence techniques. I will look at how cultural behaviours are used as metaphors to inform agent behaviours, as well as ways to incorporate cultural values and behaviours into procedural content generation and player modelling, drawing from my experience in recent large-scale projects.