Games with Culture: Using Cultural Heritage as Game-Making Material

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how games express youth's engagement with different types of cultural heritage. It is part of the Europe Horizon project EPIC-WE (2023–2026), in which over 400 young people took part in 12 cultural game jams in three cities in the European Union. The paper combines a distant reading of all 116 EPIC-WE games with a close reading of three selected examples. The readings are based on a conceptual framework that draws its categories from UNESCO documents (tangible heritage and intangible heritage), critical heritage studies (authorised and subversive heritage discourses), game studies (national and regional heritage in games), and works related to the EPIC-WE project (games through culture and games for culture). The paper proposes a complex approach to the analysis of games and heritage, which may also be useful in the study of the complexity and intersectionality of game- and heritage-related pleasures.

Keywords

cultural game jams, EU values, games for culture, games through culture, intangible heritage, tangible heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

Games can contain visible ties to local culture, history, or geography. From the little-known titles designed by young people in the 1980s Czechoslovakia (Švelch, 2021), to the widely recognizable genre of "Japanese roleplaying games" (Pelletier-Gagnon & Hutchinson, 2022), to the games connected to Latin American culture (Penix-Tadsen, 2016), local, national, and regional cultural elements in games have long been a counterweight to their global aspects (Swalwell, 2021). Such elements are often related to heritage; in this way, games link the past with the present and the future (Mochocki, 2022). Cultural heritage, specifically, is becoming increasingly important for game developers and scholars alike (Eklund et al., 2024). Researchers have studied the links between cultural heritage and serious games or educational games, as well as the representations of cultural heritage in games in general (Zeiler, 2024). Most studies in these areas concern video games but they respond to

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sociocultural trends which appear to be similar in other types of games, too, like board and card games.

The concept of cultural heritage has been shaped predominantly by international law, with a central role of UNESCO (Francioni, 2020). A few features of cultural heritage are commonly named in international law: it is something that we inherit from others and then safeguard for future generations, it is important to the construction and communication of a group identity, and it is defined through its symbolic social aspects more than through mere physical existence (Blake, 2000). Cultural heritage can take many shapes: it can be the Roskilde Cathedral in Denmark, but it can also be Inuit drum dancing and singing. It can also have a digital form (Thwaites, 2013), and even video games are increasingly treated as cultural heritage in and of themselves (Eklund et al., 2019; Guay-Bélanger, 2021; Harkai, 2022). To make sense of this diversity, organisations and scholars have distinguished among different types of cultural heritage and heritage discourses; however, such distinctions have rarely been applied in game studies. Our paper is focused precisely on these distinctions. We analyse games created by young people during the EPIC-WE project, asking the question: How do EPIC-WE games express youth's engagement with different types of cultural heritage?

The Europe Horizon project EPIC-WE (2023–2026), *Empowered Participation through Ideating Cultural Worlds and Environments*, is a large-scale design-based research and innovation action that focuses on developing and examining cultural game jams (CGJs) and game-making as a form of culture-making. In the project, young people (aged 15-25) used cultural heritage to game jam with culture and create playable prototypes (Nørgård & Holflod, 2024; Eriksson, Costa et al., 2025). Over 400 youth participated in 12 CGJs in Aarhus (Denmark), Hilversum (the Netherlands), and Óbidos (Portugal) during 2024 and 2025; they were primarily recruited from educational programs – local universities, university colleges, upper secondary high schools, and vocational education. This resulted in 116 cultural games, 8 of which were further developed by Mothworks (Denmark), Battlesheep (Portugal), and Dropstuff Media (Netherlands). Central to the project is the conceptualisation of game-making as culture-making, which situates the creation of games within local, national, and regional cultures (Nørgård, Holflod et al., 2025; Holflod et al., 2024).

Research from the project establishes and develops the format of cultural game jams, a previously undeveloped concept (Costa et al., 2025). CGJs integrate cultural heritage, both tangible (artworks, historical sites, archives, etc.) and intangible (regional values, national traditions, local stories, etc.), as core material for game-making (Eriksson, Holflod, & Nørgård, 2024b; Holflod et al., 2024). Young participants are encouraged to engage with heritage through expressing their own views, voices, and values (Eriksson, Holflod, & Nørgård, 2024a). Physical presence in cultural heritage locations, such as the medieval village or lagoon of Óbidos, inspires cultural--creative ideas within CGJ teams (Almeida et al., 2025).

The shared CGJ Kit and Protocol support the integration of tangible and intangible cultural heritage on local, national, and regional levels, and across diverse sites and heritage collections (Eriksson, Costa et al., 2025). Furthermore, cultural heritage institutions shift from curators to partners in culture-making and heritage transformation (Eriksson, Holflod, & Nørgård, 2024a) to scaffold youth's perceptions of cultural heritage socialisation; through this, the youth become more empowered and less foreign to cultural heritage (Holflod et al., 2024). In effect, game-making at

CGJs becomes culture-making, which is marked by the transformation of heritage from a static resource into an active practice.

This paper contributes to three areas of scholarship. First, it advances game studies, offering a framework for understanding how games can become cultural technologies of empowerment through heritage. By distinguishing different types of heritage (including intangible EU values) and different ways of engaging with it (especially "games through culture" and "games for culture", which are subcategories of "games with culture"), the paper expands current debates on the sociocultural dimensions of games and their role in shaping identity, ethics, and civic engagement. Second, it contributes to heritage studies by demonstrating how heritage in its various forms (tangible, intangible) and scales (local, national, regional) can serve as game design material in participatory contexts. The paper shows how heritage institutions and youth co-create new cultural expressions, moving beyond preservation towards transformation and dialogue. Third, the paper addresses the study of intersectional pleasures, which is the theme of the DiGRA 2026 conference. Elucidating the complexity of young people's engagement with cultural heritage, the paper suggests that the pleasures to be drawn from heritage in games are equally complex.

2. MAIN CONCEPTS

To prepare a conceptual framework for our study, we have extracted a set of key terms from several groups of publications: UNESCO documents (tangible heritage and intangible heritage), critical heritage studies literature (authorised and subversive heritage discourses), game studies literature (national and regional heritage in games), and works related to the EPIC-WE project (games through culture and games for culture).

Until the turn of the 1990s, cultural heritage law favoured world cultural heritage, which was defined as "monuments", "groups of buildings", and "sites" that have "outstanding universal value" (e.g., "architectural works", "works of monumental sculpture and painting", "cave dwellings", "archaeological sites"). (UNESCO, 1972, Article 1.) The emphasis on World Heritage Sites reflected a top-down approach to culture and reinforced hegemonic values through a preference for monumental heritage over other types of heritage, for Europe over other continents, and for states and dominant cultural groups over minorities, indigenous peoples, and local communities (Vadi, 2023, pp. 36–37 and 69–70).

Afterwards, UNESCO attempted to balance the protection of universal world heritage and the safeguarding of intangible heritage. This brought into focus the tension between globalist and localist approaches to heritage (Blake, 2000). Previously, international charters, recommendations, resolutions, and conventions tended to emphasise the need to protect historical monuments selected for their universal value for humanity; now these documents also include oral and immaterial goods, and they are more likely to recognise the connection between cultural heritage and local identities (Vecco, 2010; Vadi, 2023, pp. 29–35).

Intangible heritage received its own definition as "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills . . . that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage"; some examples would be language, performing arts, festive events, knowledge, and craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2). The opposite category of *tangible heritage* was also popularised; it is

typically divided into movable, immobile, and underwater heritage – for instance, paintings, castles, and shipwrecks (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009).

Furthermore, critical heritage studies have distinguished between *authorised heritage discourse* and *subaltern heritage discourses*. The former is a dominant discourse that "promotes a certain set of Western elite cultural values as being universally applicable". It also "privileges monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building". In turn, subaltern heritage discourses are the ones that "stand outside of the dominant discourse" (Smith, 2006, p. 11). One example is that of indigenous populations that do not have full rights in respective nation-states (pp. 276–298).

All this has brought into sharp relief the fact that different groups can lay claim to cultural heritage. When the group in question is the nation, or those who claim to act in its name, we can talk about *national heritage*. In game studies, many works discuss heritage in this context (Mochocki et al., 2024; Kang et al., 2024), but they hardly ever define national heritage as such. Here, we treat it as cultural heritage associated by social groups and organisations with a given nation-state (e.g., placed in the national heritage register). The state's definition of heritage may conflict with those of minorities and indigenous communities (Vadi, 2023, p. 37). We can also talk about *regional heritage* – heritage associated by groups and organisations with a particular region. The definition of the region is flexible (Liboriussen & Martin, 2016); here, the term encompasses spaces that transcend the territory of a single nation-state, like Europe (Navarro-Remesal & Pérez-Latorre, 2022) and East or Southeast Asia (Anh, 2021).

Lastly, the work on the EPIC-WE project has pointed to two different yet complementary ways in which cultural heritage is integrated into game-making practices in games with culture. Game creators can both transform heritage into design material (*games through culture*) and position games as a medium for cultural dialogue and societal reflection (*games for culture*). The phrases "games through culture" and "games for culture" can also be used as names of analytical approaches, or as names of game types. The two concepts are key to our study and to understanding the role of games in shaping cultural meaning through play.

2.1. Games through Culture

In this approach, game-making is a practice that interprets cultural heritage and actively contributes to its further development and reimagination. Games through culture use tangible cultural heritage as primary material for game-making (Costa et al., 2025). This approach foregrounds heritage as a playable resource, transforming it into interactive systems that revitalise, remix, reinterpret, and reconfigure cultural heritage into new aesthetic, narrative, and game interaction forms (Eriksson, Holflod, & Nørgård, 2024b). This is achieved through heritage-centred making; development often occurs within specific heritage contexts, or in conjunction with such contexts, which enables direct access to cultural heritage collections and expertise (Almeida et al., 2025). That leads to aesthetic remediation and interactive reinterpretation of cultural heritage, asserting youth's agency as they "reinterpret cultural heritage in ways that resonate with themselves as cultural citizens in contemporary society" (Holflod et al., 2024, p. 400). Games jam with the cultural heritage sites and artefacts

they are surrounded by, creating “new expressions of cultural heritage” (p. 396). (See also Nørgård, Holflod et al., 2025.)

2.2. Games for Culture

This approach applies game-making to cultural and societal issues, which are explored, problematised, critiqued, and transformed. It focuses on societal transformation, cultural dialogue, and youth empowerment, highlighting the power of games to create new cultural forms and expressions (Almeida et al., 2025). The core of this approach is that it is value-driven, as game-making explicitly orients itself toward cultural, social, or civic aims such as inclusion, identity work, and critical reflection. Here participants integrate intangible cultural heritage, like EU values (e.g., freedom, equality, human dignity), into their games (Eriksson, Holflod, & Nørgård, 2024b). Young people in particular may feel included and empowered through their desire to create games based on just struggles or good values (Eriksson, Holflod, & Nørgård, 2024a; Eriksson, Costa et al., 2025).

Through games for culture, youth showcase how culture or society might be reimagined and recreated through games. This leads to societal engagement and the crafting of mechanics and interactive narratives to surface dilemmas, contested histories, and cultural accounts (Costa et al., 2025). Games for culture strongly emphasise youth and civic empowerment by fostering youth’s transition from passive consumers to reflective game-makers who critically reflect on and address cultural and societal challenges (Eriksson, Holflod, & Nørgård, 2024b).

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study is part of the EPIC-WE project. The project employs a design-based research (DBR) methodology to examine how game design processes and game creation can foster youth empowerment using national and European cultural heritage. DBR functions both as an interventionist and as an analytical research approach, enabling iterative cycles of design, intervention, evaluation, and redesign in close collaboration with diverse stakeholders and study participants to produce both practical design solutions and theoretical developments (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Barab & Squire, 2004; McKenney & Reeves, 2018). The project’s research team has facilitated the creation of video games, board games, and card games by young participants, and the cultural game jams have served a dual purpose: as methodological tools to examine the relationship between games, cultural heritage, and citizenship/empowerment, and as a means of creating cultural game prototypes that act as design outcomes embodying and mediating participants’ experiences and values as well as local, national, and European heritage. In all this, special attention has been paid to six official EU values: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights (European Union, n.d.), which we understand as components of cultural heritage. At the beginning of each cultural game jam, the participants were asked to refer to one or more of these values in their games.

The aim of this study is to uncover how EPIC-WE games express young people’s engagement with various types of cultural heritage. We approach this problem in two ways; through an analogy to Franco Moretti’s (2013) work on literature, these two ways can be called “distant reading” and “close reading”. Distant reading involves an analysis of selected game elements across a broad range of titles, and close reading

involves an in-depth inspection of a small number of games. To combine both is to look at general tendencies as well as specific cases, which may create a more complex picture of the examined material.

In line with this, we follow two consecutive analytical procedures. In the first procedure, we consider the expression of EU values in all 116 games created in the cultural game jams. This is a distant reading, although it is accompanied by several brief presentations of individual titles, intended to illustrate what it may mean in practice for a game to engage with EU values. The result of the first procedure is a bird's-eye view – with a few close-ups – of how EPIC-WE games express youth's engagement with one specific aspect of heritage, that is, intangible cultural heritage on the regional scale. The second procedure is a close reading of just three games (one for each site) which demonstrate a broad application scope of our conceptual framework. Here we have translated the concepts discussed in the previous section into a set of analytical questions; we ask these questions to elucidate different types of heritage used in the games as well as different kinds of youth's engagement.

By combining a broader dataset with detailed case studies, our analysis shows that game-making can become culture-making, which transforms heritage from a static resource into an interactive, interpretive, and value-driven practice. The analysis also serves as a link between the conceptual framework and the discussion, where we synthesise insights from our distant and close readings and reflect on their implications for the study of game design, cultural heritage, and value-sensitive practices.

We have noted before that our conceptual framework is derived from different sources: UNESCO documents (which are related to international heritage law), critical heritage studies, game studies, and works related to the EPIC-WE project. The framework thus brings together categorisations with disparate theoretical assumptions, and so at this stage it is a heuristic rather than a model. Nevertheless, we hope to show that this heuristic framework, grounded in multiple bodies of research literature that are not usually combined in a single analysis, can already be helpful in the examination of cultural heritage in games.

All games from the EPIC-WE project have been described on its website (EPIC-WE, n.d.). The video games are publicly available and can be accessed freely through the link https://epic-we.au.dk/games.

4. DISTANT READING: EPIC-WE GAMES AND EU VALUES

Throughout the EPIC-WE project, analysts (researchers from the respective cultural game jam sites) were asked to describe and categorise each of the 116 games on multiple counts. Among other things, they were asked questions "Is there a cultural theme?" and "What values does the game express, if any?"[1] (in some cases, the wording of the questions was slightly different). The analysts responded by presenting their own insights, but also by drawing from the creative teams' own development notes. We collated the answers and marked any of the six EU values that were named or suggested in them.

The results, summarised in Table 1, are an approximate measure of how often the six official values of the European Union are expressed in the EPIC-WE games. Out of 116 games, 102 were assigned at least one EU value and 14 were not. The presentation of these results involves six examples, one for each value (with two examples from every game jam site). They are mostly taken from a subset of 46 games which form two versions of a catalogue that is one of the project's outcomes (Nørgård et al., 2026a, 2026b), and which were originally selected by the three site teams as engaging with cultural heritage in a particularly salient manner.

EU value	**Number of games**	**Percentage of all games**	**Example (genres)**
Freedom	51	44%	*Roomination* (exploration video game)
Equality	31	27%	*Challenges* (trivia board game)
Human dignity	19	16%	*Terra Mater* (survival board game)
Democracy	17	15%	*Blue Brigade* (side-scroller video game)
Rule of law	9	8%	*Art Parable* (interactive fiction)
Human rights	3	3%	*He Must Be Fed* (fishing simulation video game)

Table 1. The frequency of EU values in EPIC-WE games
(based on analysts' descriptions)

The most frequent value by far is freedom. Some games celebrate the process of achieving it in face of adversity, and some present scenarios in which freedom is impossible to achieve. An interesting case of the latter is *Roomination* (SOAR, 2024), in which you endlessly traverse rooms and corridors inspired by the works of Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi. The game's eerie aesthetics is reminiscent of survival horrors, in which limited player agency is often an important theme.

In general, the games convey the message that freedom is desirable; the question is whether it can or cannot be attained. The same broad pattern can be observed for other EU values, including equality. However, a value like equality may also be present from the start. The board game *Challenges* (Kyra et al., 2024) prompts players to engage creatively with language and popular culture. The players compete by drawing cards and completing word-based challenges described in them, often connected to memes. The game manages this competition by taking into account the players' different abilities and thus attempting to equalise the opportunities.

Figure 1. An empty corridor in *Roomination*. (The figures are screenshots from the games' web pages.)

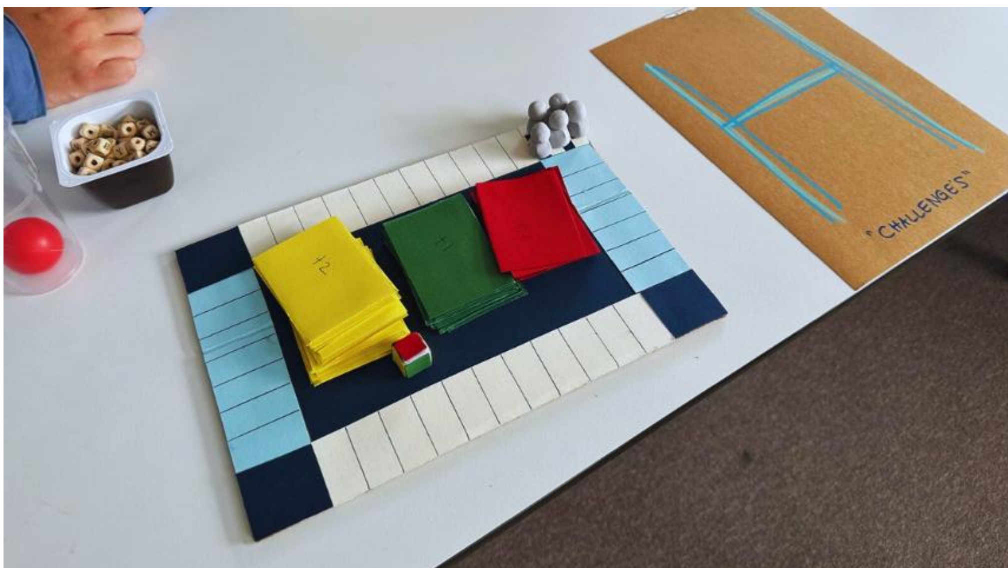

Figure 2. Materials for the game *Challenges*.

In one of the titles inspired by human dignity, the board game *Terra Mater* (Anonymous, 2025), the narrative and gameplay highlight the risk of losing land that carries the stories of ancestors. The game reaffirms its central value in a non--anthropocentric way: both people and animals race to the top of a hill to escape a flood, and the lives of both have worth.

Yet another way of affirming EU values – in this case, democracy – is shown in *Blue Brigade* (Fernandes et al., 2025). You assume the role of a Portuguese security officer in April 1974, striking people all around you with a blue pencil (a famous symbol of press censorship). You do so in an attempt to prevent a revolution, yet in the end it always comes. The game casts you as an opponent of an EU value, but in a clearly satirical manner, positioning itself against the oppression associated with the political dictatorship that ran in Portugal from 1933 to 1974, until the triumphant Carnation Revolution.

Figure 3. The design process of *Terra Mater*.

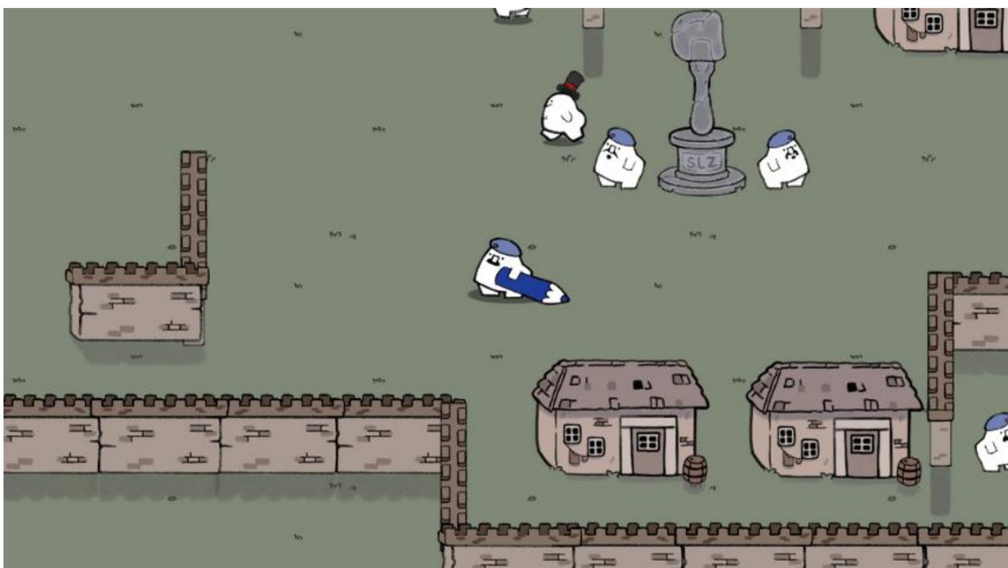

Figure 4. The censor in *Blue Brigade*.

The least frequent values in the EPIC-WE games are rule of law and human rights. Regarding rule of law, an interesting example is *Art Parable* (Team Epic-C, 2024), whose narrator asks you to complete Vilhelm Kyhn's mid-19th-century painting *Vejle Fjord*. You can comply, or you can rip off some elements of the idyllic landscape, uncovering disturbing history underneath. This may be read as affirmation of freedom, but also as subversion of the rule of law – a rare challenge to EU values themselves.

As regards human rights, their lack is emphasised in the horror-themed game *He Must Be Fed* (Leandro et al., 2025). You catch fish to sacrifice them to a mythical creature from the folklore of Óbidos, Portugal; the violent being feeds on the labour of a working-class protagonist, which may suggest a critique of contemporary modes of work and inequality. Your right to live is not guaranteed – you can only hope to bring enough fish to satisfy the creature.

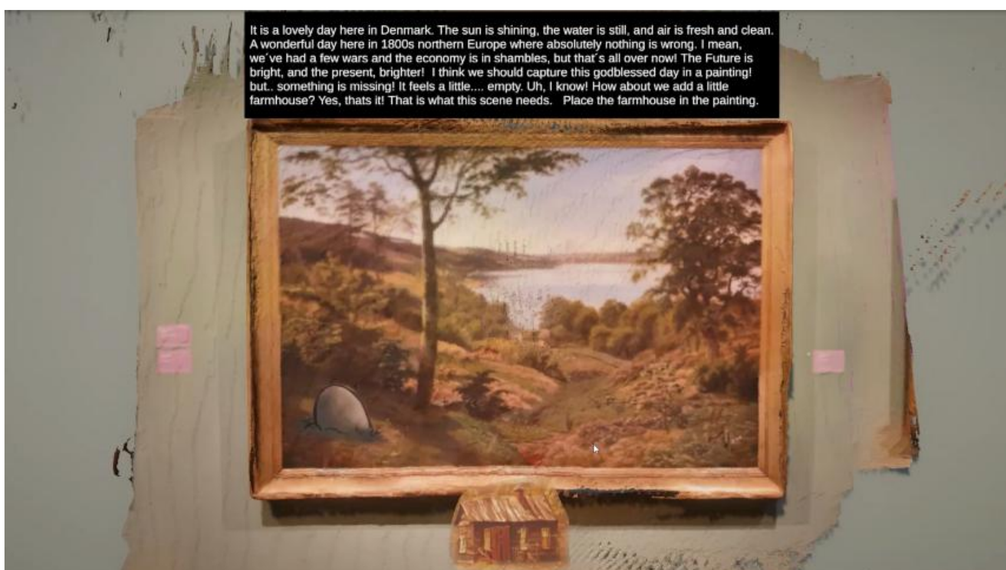

Figure 5. The narrator's introduction in *Art Parable*.

Figure 6. Fishing in *He Must Be Fed*.

5. CLOSE READING: ANALYSING GAMES WITH CULTURE

We will now analyse three games created within the cultural game jams (CGJ), one for each CGJ site. These cases were selected out of all 116 games because they provide particularly useful material for the application of our conceptual framework. That framework translates into the following analytical questions, which allow us to map different types of heritage (question 2) and different kinds of youth's engagement (questions 1 and 3):

1. How can the game in question be approached as a game with culture – that is to say, a game through culture and a game for culture?
2. Within each of these approaches, how does the game employ different types of heritage, distinguished by form (tangible heritage, intangible heritage) and by scale (national heritage, regional heritage)?
3. How does the game make use of authorised and subversive heritage discourses?

The cases represent distinct cultural contexts and design strategies. Together, they illustrate the diversity of approaches within the CGJs and highlight the potential of participatory game-making to foster ethical reflection, cultural creativity, and empowered participation with(in) heritage. Each case study explores how cultural heritage is applied as a design material, how values influence gameplay and narrative, and how the game contributes to cultural dialogue.

The section demonstrates the paper's contribution to game studies and heritage studies by highlighting how games can simultaneously preserve, critique, and reimagine cultural forms. It also hints at the intersectionality of pleasures derived from the three games.

5.1. Aarhus Cultural Game Jam Example: *Grind the World*

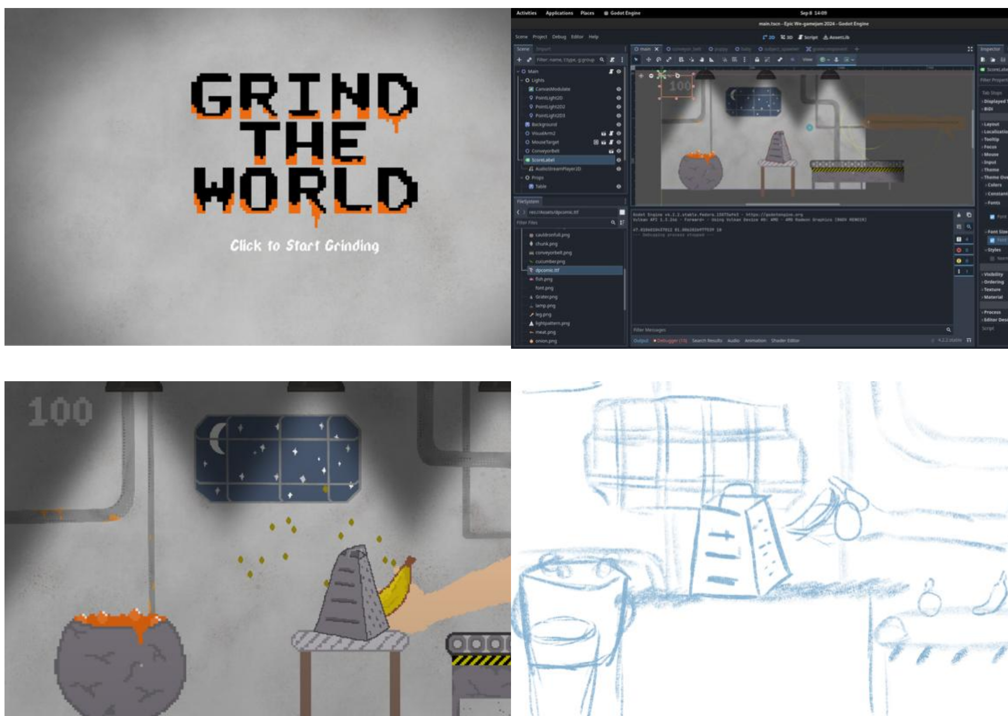

Figure 7. *Grind the World*: opening screen (top left), gameplay snapshot (bottom left), the technicalities of game-making (top right), and a design draft (bottom right).

Grind the World (Ugilt et al., 2025) is an experimental video game prototype created during the second cultural game jam in Aarhus, Denmark, an event dedicated to exploring modern and postmodern national art through contemporary curatorial practices. The game's deceptively simple mechanic, the act of grinding objects, serves as a vehicle for ethical confrontation. You are presented with an escalating series of objects, beginning with ordinary groceries like onions and bananas, but soon moving to deeply disturbing and ethically charged items such as a puppy and even a baby. At any point, you can refuse to continue, but doing so means relinquishing progress and "victory". This freedom of choice positions you in a stark moral dilemma, forcing a reflection on the violent repetition and desensitisation normalised in contemporary gaming culture. By embedding this tension within gameplay, *Grind the World* challenges habitual, routinised play and foregrounds the possibility of ethical agency, affective engagement, and embodied reflection in a digital environment.

5.1.1. Grind the World *as a Game through Culture*

The tangible cultural heritage reference point for *Grind the World* is the Danish video artwork *Afrivning af løg* (*Shredding of Onions*, 1995) by Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen. In the 6:27-minute video, two women sit together in a bare room, grating onions until tears stream down their faces. What at first appears as a mundane, domestic act gradually transforms into a performative ritual, a bodily endurance piece that evokes suffering, persistence, and women's repetitive labour. The artwork has been widely interpreted as a feminist commentary on everyday rituals and as a meditation on collective experience, absurdity, and the physicality of emotion. Its minimal setting and repetitive gesture produce a Sisyphean rhythm, evoking both intimacy and discomfort.

Grind the World draws directly on this logic. The repetitive grinding mirrors the gestures of the women, transforming an ordinary motion into a site of cultural reflection. However, the game adds an ethical and ludic layer. Where the video artwork stages a fixed performative endurance, the game gives you the freedom to say no to grinding and just stop. This potential act of refusal becomes a primary mode of ethical reflection and resistance, an enactment of the EU value of freedom, interpreted by the team as the autonomy to act according to one's ethical and emotional judgement rather than the game's procedural compulsion. Thus, the game operates *through* culture by drawing directly on the artwork – both literally through the grinding mechanics and metaphorically through embedding that mechanics in the cultural and aesthetic tradition of Scandinavian feminist performance art, while simultaneously transforming that tradition into an interactive, player-driven exploration of freedom, ethics, and social norms.

5.1.2. Grind the World *as a Game for Culture*

Grind the World engages with intangible cultural heritage in the form of the EU value of freedom, and with associations to adjacent regional values such as human dignity. The game's design challenges you to reflect on how much you are willing to "grind" to achieve progress or completion. This hyperbolic escalation, from harmless

vegetables to living beings, reveals how easily game mechanics can normalise ethically questionable actions when framed as tasks or objectives. By allowing refusal, however, the game interrupts this normalisation.

Grind the World critiques a broader cultural phenomenon: the ethical disengagement that can occur in digital play. The game becomes a performative commentary on your own complicity and freedom, situating you between absurd humour and existential discomfort. Feedback from the team's playtesting of the game with other game jam participants has underscored how strongly players related their choices to social norms and expectations; this highlights the potential for multiplayer or collective versions of the game in which diverse ethical perspectives could be explored.

The game's design philosophy emphasises the affective and performative dimensions of play. Like *Afrivning af løg*, it transforms a trivial act into a ritual that elicits tears, laughter, and discomfort. This oscillation between humour and horror underscores the cultural and bodily nature of games as (also) ethical experiences. The grinding mechanic becomes a metaphor for both everyday persistence and ethical erosion, inviting you to feel and live through your ethical choices rather than just think about them.

By merging tangible heritage (the feminist video artwork and its material aesthetics) with intangible heritage (the EU value of freedom), *Grind the World* exemplifies how games can operate simultaneously *through* and *for* culture. It transforms shared cultural artefacts and values into interactive experiences that engage players not only cognitively but affectively and ethically, turning play itself into cultural heritage reflection and critique.

5.1.3. Grind the World and Heritage Discourses

Grind the World navigates the tension between authorised and subaltern discourses. While its tangible heritage inspiration, *Afrivning af løg*, belongs to an established, institutionally recognised modern canon of Danish art, and is part of the curated space at the renowned ARoS Art Museum, the game recontextualises this national heritage through an accessible and participatory medium that encourages alternative, affective engagements. In doing so, it creates space for emotional, ethical, and bodily responses that challenge narratives of cultural authority. The game's emphasis on refusal, willingness, agency, and affective discomfort destabilises the relationship between institutionalised heritage and everyday experience. The game preserves, remediates, and re-performs the original artwork, which itself creates a feminist performative art experience – potentially another form of subaltern heritage discourse.

5.2. Hilversum Cultural Game Jam Example: *Meestromen*

Figure 8. Overview of the collage made by the *Meestromen* team, showcasing the inspiration they took from the archive of the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.

Figure 9. The game during the final expo of the game jam.

Figure 10. Part of the materials created by the team, showing the remixing of archival material on the play cards.

Meestromen (Express, 2025) is a prototype card game from the fourth cultural game jam in Hilversum, the Netherlands. The game jam theme, "Tides of Heritage", asked teams to design games set in future sea-level-rise scenarios in which EU values were under pressure. The game aims to educate players about sea-level rise risks and the importance of water management institutions. It is based on the experiences, stories, and audiovisual materials from the Sound and Vision archive about the 1953 North Sea flood, which caused major devastation; this event led to the Delta Works, a major national project to improve the Netherlands' flood defences, which still symbolises the ever-lasting battle the Netherlands fights against water.

The game allows you to play the mayor of a place that must deal with a flooding event. The place can be a city, a town in the river lands, a town in the countryside, or a town close to the sea. You must collaborate with others to mitigate the effects of the flood; however, every player has different interests, and if you do not all work together, the risk of further escalation increases. The players need the sea level to rise to 0 to win, which can also be achieved individually.

As the game-makers describe it themselves: "It is 1950, and the land has been flooded, and you are the mayor of a water municipality . . . that has been tasked to make it dry again. But that's a challenge. The resources are finite, and the water does not stop coming. But due to making tactical deals with other mayors, building pumps and collecting water management taxes, you keep your head above water".

5.2.1. Meestromen *as a Game through Culture*

Meestromen utilises tangible flood-archive materials as a reference point. The game--makers independently explored the archive for videos related to the 1953 flood and used stills as part of the game. In one instance, they say: “One of the first archive photos that caught our attention was one of the houses that was flooded up to the roof. This got us talking . . . about how extremely important water management is”. The stills serve as illustrations on action cards which introduce events that the players need to act on.

Additionally, the creators employed historical figures to represent some of the players: “We have . . . the mayor of the dunes, and we used an old photo from Mr. Van Veen, who kind of predicted all the disasters that occurred in 1953”. Besides the visible use of the archive in the game artefacts, the game-makers mention how they were inspired by the collection, which showed them the importance of the Dutch regional water authorities and which influenced their decision-making and thinking.

5.2.2. Meestromen *as a Game for Culture*

The team specifically mention embedding the EU value of democracy in their game. *Meestromen* centres on the importance of the Dutch regional water authorities, which are partly elected by residents. One creator says that they want to “get the conversation going about how important these water municipality elections are. Because personally, I didn't know how important it was”. The creators have also embedded these values in game mechanics. For example, the game’s currency is collected each round through taxes, which can be used to fund effective anti-flood measures if the players cooperate and find a majority. There is also a risk/reward mechanic that gives you a chance to get the money back from your investments, showing how sometimes policies can earn themselves back.

Tangible heritage is embedded in the game through visual cues and the accompanying storyline. Intangible heritage shows the players the importance of Dutch regional water authorities, and how they operate and collaborate to keep the Netherlands dry.

5.2.3. Meestromen *and Heritage Discourses*

There are primarily links to be made to the authorised heritage discourse. There is a focus on national identity and pride in the Dutch battle with water, and in the innovation in water management. The game also has a strong governance focus. There are some glimpses of subaltern heritage discourses, for example, in the diversity of perspectives of the different mayors you can play (larger city vs. smaller communities), or in how gameplay subtly critiques institutional governance.

5.3. Óbidos Cultural Game Jam Example: *Criminal Fauna Identification*

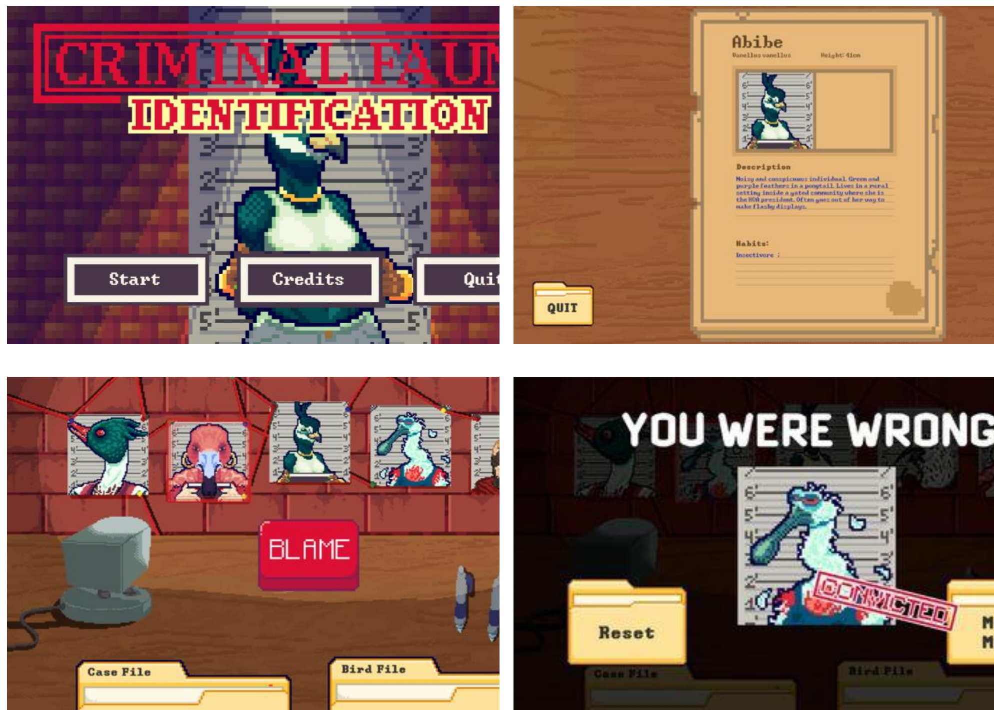

Figure 11. *Criminal Fauna Identification*: main menu (top left), gameplay (bottom left and top right), and game over screen (bottom right).

Criminal Fauna Identification (Team Ovo, 2024) is a 2D investigation game developed during the second Óbidos cultural game jam. This video game prototype draws inspiration from the Óbidos Lagoon, a rich and dynamic ecosystem that is significant – in cultural and environmental terms – both locally and nationally as the largest lagoon system in Portugal. (Óbidos is also a UNESCO Creative City of Literature, which is reflected in other games.)

The Lagoon is a heritage site laden with cultural meanings inscribed in the imagination and practices of local communities. The relationship between the communities and the Óbidos Lagoon constitutes a nexus of intangible-tangible heritage, including cultural expressions and daily practices such as artisanal fishing, bird watching, shellfish gathering, and the construction of traditional boats. Consequently, the Óbidos Lagoon is present in local narratives and is part of collective memory and territorial identity, currently being an intergenerational heritage site visited by families. Also important is the surrounding cultural heritage, such as old port structures, landmarks, fishing equipment, or vestiges linked to the historical forms of lagoon exploitation.

The game reflects the importance of the Lagoon's biodiversity and its local social and cultural connection (e.g., to birdwatching). Different bird species that inhabit the Lagoon's ecosystem have been chosen as game characters. You assume the role of a detective who picks a bird-species-character and, through their interactions and responses, associates their specific characteristics with possible "small crimes",

such as an object being taken or a window being broken. The goal is to identify "the perpetrator of the crime".

5.3.1. Criminal Fauna Identification *as a Game through Culture*

The game highlights tangible heritage through the game-world presence of birds that inhabit the Óbidos Lagoon, emphasising their physical and behavioural characteristics in nature, but also reinterpreting their connection to the local culture and community. *Criminal Fauna Identification* highlights heritage scenarios that reflects the importance of the Lagoon's biodiversity. The creators have made use of specific cultural heritage information about the lagoon and its species. The bird characters take on cultural form in that their description includes information related to their position in society, such as being the president, or to a recurring tradition, such as artisanal fishing.

5.3.2. Criminal Fauna Identification *as a Game for Culture*

The game promotes knowledge about intangible heritage in the form of local traditions in a national context, emphasising biodiversity by casting Óbidos seabirds as characters linked to cultural traditions. Through the game, you learn about the behaviour of various bird species and about its connection to the Lagoon with its cultural and social activities. Further, gameplay and narrative, focused on the identification and subsequent punishment of bird perpetrators, are related to the EU value of the rule of law: you are expected to reinforce the legal and ethical order, but your decisions may also lead to unjust convictions.

5.3.3. Criminal Fauna Identification *and Heritage Discourses*

There are primarily connections to be made with the authorised heritage discourse. The game concentrates on local identity and culture in the adherence to the significance and history of the Óbidos Lagoon, such as the activity of outdoor strolls around it; various traditional activities are referenced as well. The game inherits and remixes heritage in line with the authorised discourse through a focus on cultural learning related to local biodiversity, with a connection to official ethical values, since whoever commits the "crime" is condemned.

6. DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have examined how games can express youth's engagement with cultural heritage. We have carried out a distant reading of 116 cultural prototypes of games through and for culture produced in cultural game jams (CGJs) during the EPIC--WE project, as well as a close reading of three titles, *Grind the World*, *Meestromen*, and *Criminal Fauna Identification*.

Our distant reading shows that freedom and equality are the most represented EU values in EPIC-WE games, followed by human dignity and democracy, with a notably low share of titles dealing with rule of law and human rights. The discourses of freedom and equality appear to speak the most strongly to youth participants, whereas democracy and the rule of law are perhaps seen as more abstract; human rights do not score high when considered individually, but it is not always easy in an empirical analysis to distinguish them from human dignity, and perhaps the two should be treated jointly as the third most frequent value, akin in its concreteness to

freedom and equality. While these calculations are necessarily approximate (complex material does not always allow for clear categorisation), they do suggest that values such as democracy and the rule of law would need additional efforts from game jam facilitators to be made more interesting and appealing for young people working with intangible heritage.

The examples accompanying the distant reading open further avenues for interpretation. EU values are almost universally affirmed in EPIC-WE titles, perhaps partly due to the institutional context of the CGJs; however, achieving these values in the games often requires overcoming certain challenges, and in rare cases even turns out to be impossible. Further, EU values, as a regional component of cultural heritage, are frequently accompanied by references to national cultures and artworks from local collections. Overall, the value component frames the EPIC-WE titles as games for culture, in which young people use heritage to voice their opinions on social and cultural issues.

The three close reading case studies demonstrate different ways in which cultural heritage becomes activated as material for game development. In all cases, tangible heritage has primarily influenced aesthetics, mechanics, and spatial design, while intangible heritage has shaped narrative, ethical framing, and value-based goals. For example, *Grind the World* adapts a feminist video artwork into a repetitive grinding mechanic, embedding ethical choices as a central gameplay element; *Meestromen* incorporates archival flood imagery and historical figures into a collaborative card game that highlights democratic governance; and *Criminal Fauna Identification* draws on biodiversity and local traditions to craft playful detective scenarios that connect ecological knowledge with cultural identity.

This pattern indicates that tangible heritage often acts as an anchor for visual and material design, while intangible heritage, including values, traditions, and practices, influences interpretive and ethical aspects. Notably, these games do not merely reproduce heritage; they remix and reimagine it, fostering reflection and dialogue. The cases also expose tensions between authorised and subaltern heritage discourses. *Grind the World* begins with an artwork housed in a major museum but reinterprets it through participatory play, facilitating affective and ethical engagement beyond institutional frameworks. *Meestromen* mostly reinforces authorised narratives of Dutch water management and national pride, though its collaborative mechanics subtly critique institutional governance and resource distribution. *Criminal Fauna Identification* remains closest to the authorised heritage discourse, focusing on cultural learning rather than challenging dominant stories. These dynamics show CGJs as spaces where institutional heritage can be appropriated, transformed, and sometimes contested, although the extent of subversion varies. In all this, EU values significantly influence design choices: freedom in *Grind the World* is expressed through the player’s capacity to refuse ethically questionable actions, democracy in *Meestromen* manifests through cooperative decision-making and taxation mechanics, and rule of law in *Criminal Fauna Identification* is present in the convictions of birds for their “crimes”.

Youth translate heritage into games through three core design strategies. First, aesthetic remediation converts visual and spatial heritage into interactive spaces and assets, enabling embodied exploration and sensory immersion. Second, mechanic mapping embeds intangible values such as freedom and equality into rules, constraints, and feedback loops so that ethical concerns become playable affordances

rather than mere narrative labels. Third, narrative reauthoring reframes histories and traditions, at times allowing players to inhabit contested or marginalised voices. Together, these mechanisms determine which interpretations of heritage become visible and which remain marginalised.

Patterns emerge across forms and scales of heritage. Tangible heritage tends to produce exploratory, sensory, and materially grounded play; intangible heritage tends to produce reflective, dilemma-oriented, and civic mechanics. Regional heritage often fosters place-specific creativity and opens space for subaltern reinterpretations, while national heritage more commonly aligns with authorised narratives and identity work. Values recur as design affordances, indicating that contemporary civic concerns are readily translated into gameplay objectives. Young people use a variety of strategies to contest, appropriate, or transform heritage.

In examining the myriad ways in which young people engage with different types of heritage, the paper also provides the grounds for a reflection on the intersectional pleasures of making and playing games with culture. Creators and players can enjoy new cultural configurations or use games to take a stand on contemporary social problems; they can draw pleasure from the transformed materialities of tangible heritage or from the ethical and civic reflections prompted by intangible heritage; they can engage with local, national, or regional issues that they deem important and interesting; or they can look for their own position in the space between authorised heritage discourse and subaltern heritage discourses. And all these kinds of pleasure intersect, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes contradicting one another. A player of *Meestromen* can be drawn in by the game's nationally relevant theme and then further appreciate the collaborative message emerging from the gameplay mechanisms; a player of *Criminal Fauna Identification* can have a laugh at its over-the-top aesthetics but then discard this response in favour of a more contemplative attitude when they start thinking about whether the rule of law should apply to birds.

Conceptually, the paper offers two main contributions. First, it provides a useful framework for analysing how games engage with heritage, either as material for creative reinterpretation (games through culture) or as vehicles for cultural dialogue and transformation (games for culture). These two orientations frequently overlap in practice: many games combine their grounding in local artefacts with mechanics and stories that encode civic concerns, which results in hybrid works that both reinterpret material culture and stage value-centred dialogues. The paper supplies empirical evidence that youth game-making is a productive site for studying the negotiation of values, identity, and power in cultural representation. And it argues for a research agenda that moves beyond static representation analysis toward value-sensitive, participatory, and heritage-aware design scholarship that attends to scale, authorship, and social impact. Second, the cultural game jam format demonstrates a design-based research approach that connects cultural theory with participatory design, emphasising youth empowerment and co-creation. Games are not merely mirrors of heritage; they are active cultural technologies through which young people interpret the past, uphold or contest present values, and imagine alternative futures.

Methodologically, the findings underscore the value of mixed-scale, design-based approaches. The combination of distant and close reading delivers a scalable model for exploring cultural heritage integration across diverse game design and research contexts, capturing both the prevalence of value themes and the nuanced ways individual teams negotiate heritage in context. Cultural game jams function not only

as data sources but as interventions: they reveal how co-creative formats can shift heritage institutions from curators to partners in culture-making, and how participatory design amplifies youth's agency in framing and reimagining heritage.

Several limitations constrain the generalisability of our findings. First, the close reading concentrates on just three cases selected from a set of 116 games; while these cases were chosen for strong cultural heritage links, they do not reflect the full range of approaches within the EPIC-WE project. Second, all cultural game jams studied occurred in European settings (Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal), which are closely linked to EU policy frameworks and UNESCO heritage narratives; thus the relevance of the proposed frameworks to non-European or pluriversal contexts is restricted, as heritage values and practices there may differ significantly. Future research should explore these ideas in the Global South or indigenous contexts to avoid Eurocentric bias. Third, the study captures the outputs of game-making processes but does not include longitudinal data on cultural learning outcomes; without follow-up studies it remains unclear whether these games promote lasting cultural awareness or civic empowerment beyond the jam environment. Finally, the lack of player-centred data (for example, ethnographic observation and post-play interviews) limits the capacity to understand how heritage and values are interpreted during play.

Further research should therefore expand the analysis to the entire dataset. Player studies could investigate how the games are experienced and whether they have lasting effects. And cross-national analyses beyond Europe would test the flexibility of the proposed frameworks and address questions about decolonial heritage practices.

In conclusion, EPIC-WE games through and for culture express youth's engagement with heritage through a set of interrelated, practice-based modes that both reuse and remake cultural heritage. Concretely, youth engage with heritage as material and as meaning: they treat tangible heritage – sites, objects, artworks, archives – as playable resources that can be remediated into new aesthetic and interactive forms, and they treat intangible heritage – values, traditions, narratives, civic ideals – as the ethical and narrative scaffolding that shapes mechanics, goals, and player experience. This shows that games can be cultural artefacts that connect the past and the present, and that they also have a potential of shaping the future.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The question was meant to refer mainly to EU values – it is conceivable that certain games might not express any of them. In a broader sense, when we consider any kinds of values, it can be argued that no game is value-free, although some creators are unaware of the values they encode in their games (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014).