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Consecrating video games as cultural artifacts: Intellectual legitimation as a source of industry renewal

Alexander Styhre*, Anna Maria Szczepanska, Björn Remneland-Wikhamn

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The video games industry, one of the fastest growing creative industries and now engaging larger proportions of populations as smartphones and tablets achieve wider use, seeks to enhance its institutional legitimacy in order to further exploit the new economic possibilities provided by, for example, portable digital media and their market penetration. This strategy is based on a form of *consecration*, a portrayal of video games as cultural artifacts, i.e., objects carrying a wider cultural and aesthetic significance than merely being a form of entertainment. In order to consecrate the video game, the industry relies on video game reviewers and journalists. This strategy, rooted in market opportunity recognition, challenges some of the conventional wisdom of the industry, the gamer community, and the inherited mainstream media view. As a consequence, institutional legitimacy is not easily acquired or earned since historical conditions and path-dependencies also matter in high-pace industries such as the video game industry.

1. Introduction

In the third season of the Netflix original series *House of Cards*, released on February 27, 2015, the protagonist, the ruthless Washington D.C. politician Frank Underwood, has now managed to make it into the Oval Office but he is otherwise under severe pressure in both his professional and private life. To retreat from this harsh public life, Underwood enjoys quiet, nocturnal sessions where he plays the game *Monument Valley*, an indie video game developed by Ustwo (Dean, 2015: 1248). The scenes where Underwood plays *Monument Valley* are rare occasions where the president appears to be relaxed and in harmony, giving the impression that the video game offers a refuge from a strenuous life. The use of this beautifully designed and much-acclaimed video game in the TV-series is also indicative of how the video game industry and the popular culture industry is increasingly co-developed, exchanging creative ideas and production concepts. Furthermore, the use of *Monument Valley* in this context is exemplary of how a video game may be consecrated as what is extraordinarily well designed, aesthetically appealing, and not the least providing an everyday experience that other media cannot substitute. After *Monument Valley* featured in the Netflix series, it became a “smash hit” (Dean, 2015: 1248, footnote 55).

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how certain video game industry actors and commentators (e.g., journalist) are actively working to consecrate video games as cultural artifacts, i.e., digital objects

having wider cultural significance than is being acknowledged to date. The video game industry is a success story in economic and technological terms, launching and marketing newly-engineered digital objects and products on the basis of a combination of computer science expertise, creative work, and entrepreneurship. The video game industry is one of the fastest growing creative industries of the new millennium. By 2010, the global video game market was worth around US\$56 billion, which is “more than twice the size of the recorded-music industry” (Storz, Riboldazzi, & Moritz, 2014: 125) and, according to the market intelligence firm Newzoo, the estimated global turnover of the video game industry was US\$99.6 billion in 2016. In 2016, the global growth of the industry was estimated at 8.5 percent. The new portable digital media (e.g., smartphones, and tablets) have provided entirely new market opportunities for the video game industry; in the U.S. alone, it is estimated that in 2016, 144 million people—every eight out of ten smartphone owner—will use their smartphones to play games (Dean, 2015: 1244). Despite its remarkable development in the last decade, the management studies literature include relatively few studies (see e.g., Scarbrough, Panourgias, & Nandhakumar, 2015; Tschang, 2007, for two exceptions), and much of the empirical research work is located to digital media studies and specialist video games journals.

Video games have historically been associated with adolescent males and an underground culture, as well as with frivolous and at times even asocial activities and lifestyles (Molesworth & Watkins, 2014; Thornham, 2008). Some video game developers and

* Corresponding author at: Dept. of Business Administration, Box 610, School of Business, Economics, and Law, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden.
E-mail address: alexander.styhre@handels.gu.se (A. Styhre).

commentators argue that the industry is burdened by its “geek culture,” portraying video games as an adolescent and essentially masculine pastime (and thus demonstrating a trajectory similar to that of computer science more widely; Ensmenger, 2015). Consecrating video games as cultural artifacts, a pursuit to fashion a more “high-brow” and sophisticated image of the industry’s output, is therefore by no means an uncomplicated or trivial pursuit as it challenges the conventional wisdom regarding what video games are, or should preferably be, and introduces a series of issues pertaining to, for example, gender equality and the nature of art and culture more broadly.

The process of consecration can be understood as a process of legitimation, the work to establish a “convention” as what is normatively sanctioned and thus justified as an acceptable social practice (Davis & Thompson, 1994: 550). Institutional theorists have repeatedly emphasized that organizations do not always act strictly on basis of autonomously defined and optimal routines and practices, but can take long detours to demonstrate ceremonial commitment to institutional norms and beliefs, or act in accordance with prescribed and normatively dominant instrumental models, or existing guidelines (Baron, Dobbin, & Jennings, 1986; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Thus, organizations do not only seek to maximize use of their resources and assets at hand, but also to enhance their social and cultural legitimacy. “Organizations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness,” argue DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 150). One important consequence is that legitimation work is costly but necessary for organizations. In several cases, institutional theorists remark, there is a rift between the social and economic fitness of the firm inasmuch as what may be a socially legitimate norm may impair economic performance. Legitimation work is therefore at times located to specific organizational units or activities separated from the organization’s core activities (Thompson, 1967): firms include loosely coupled departments and work processes (Weick, 1976), participate in rituals or ceremonies that pledge allegiance to certain norms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), or become “irrational” or even “hypocritical” insofar as they endorse certain norms and values while still protecting core economic activities and interests from detrimental and costly deviations from this focus (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Brunsson, 1982).

In order to improve their social and economic “fitness”, organizations may mobilize a variety of resources and exploit interorganizational connections that serve to render their activities both legitimate and respectable (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). This institutional legitimacy work has been observed on different levels, including professions such as executive coaches (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007), nurses (Goodrick & Reay, 2010), and entrepreneurs (Garud, Schildt, & Lant, 2014), at transnational organizations such as the World Trade Organization (Conti, 2010), in organizational forms such as think-tanks (McLevey, 2015), or in industries such as the automobile (Rao, 1994) or finance industries (Weiss & Huault, 2016). In other cases, the legitimation process seeks to justify specific managerial practices such as corporate social responsibility activities (Marens, 2013) or the implementation of hostile takeover protection (Rhee & Fiss, 2014).

One form of legitimation work is to participate in activities aimed at consecrating certain contributions and accomplishments (Allen & Lincoln, 2004), as in the case of the cultural industries. Allen and Parsons (2006: 808) define consecration as a “durable symbolic distinction” made between “objects and individuals worthy of veneration” and regular, less remarkable objects and individuals. Consecration, originally a theological term, thus imposes a distinction between what Émile Durkheim ([1912] 1995) referred to as the sacred and the profane, but do so in secular terms as being an imposed and fabricated line of demarcation between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the qualitatively normal and average and the superior. In the specific case of the video game industry, the consecration of some video games and some video game genres is intended to leverage the status of video

game production and video games in the eyes of key constituencies, including e.g., high-brow consumers and new entrants into the industry, primarily female presumptive co-workers. A consecration of certain video games is therefore part of a wider industry strategy pursued by a number of actors to better pave the way for the expansion of the video game industry into new market segments demanding new, relatively unexplored qualities in the video games.

The empirical interview material presented below suggests that the consecration of video games include three interrelated themes: Firstly, video games are treated as a form of *cultural expression*, based on certain skills comparable to those of an artisan, including the ability to conceive of new images of digital objects and what they can accomplish and to create new stories that can be translated into video games (c.f. Anthropy, 2012; Flanagan, 2009). In this view, video game development is not only a matter of engineering skills and technical proficiency, but is compared to a *craft* (Westecott, 2013), the creation of aesthetically appealing, engaging, and ethically responsible video games.

Secondly, the consecration of certain genres of video games includes a grappling with some of the genre inequality issues of the industry, including forms of sexism in the video games per se and the masculine dominance in the industry and in its client-base more largely (e.g., Harvey & Shepherd, 2017; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008). When addressing these issues, the video game industry is dependent on what Elsbach (2009) calls “expert commentators” such as video game journalists and professional or semi-professional video game reviewers and bloggers who comments on and debate perceived gender inequalities and other issues. Such journalists, reviewers, and bloggers to some extent serve as “reputational entrepreneurs” (Fine, 1996), who act to create novel images of both video games and video games production, benefitting the consecration of video games as cultural objects.

Third and finally, the consecration of video games includes an emphasis on the “creative fringe” of the industry, the independent developers and “indie” developers that build video games and apps as part of a wider social activism project (c.f. Liptkin, 2013; Martin & Deuze, 2009), making issues such as gamification (the addressing of social issues through the use of video games) and the question of diversity in video games key concerns. The consecration of the video game as a cultural artifact is in other words serving the end to promote a more diverse and inclusive video game industry, expanding the scope of what video games are, and how they can be used to address societal challenges (Anthropy, 2012; Westecott, 2013). The empirical material presented in this article is thus contributing to the institutional theory literature (e.g., Baron et al., 1986; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) inasmuch as it is demonstrated that high-growth industries, reporting higher turnover and employing more co-workers, are still relying on forms of legitimacy being granted within specific institutional settings. In the current case, video games have been primarily treated as adolescent entertainment, and industry actors therefore actively promote their product and the competencies they access to recognize other qualities in the video games. In these practices, being part of the campaign to consecrate video games, industry actors draw on institutional norms and beliefs regarding the line of demarcation between categories of goods and services. Second, the study adds to the literature on the literature on consecration (e.g., Allen & Parsons, 2006; Schmutz, 2005) in showing how emerging industries and industries historically associated with entertainment rather than cultural production may in fact consider the consecration of goods and services a pathway to increased legitimacy and wider influence, on the next level hopefully resulting in economic benefits. The consecration of certain goods and services is thus a matter of status differentials, rooted in classificatory practices wherein certain goods and artifacts acquire more cultural value than others do (e.g., chamber music is granted a higher cultural value than more “folksy” popular music in a bourgeoisie salon culture). The concept of consecration is thus not only part of a theological vocabulary but is also applicable in strategic decision making on firm and industry

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