

## Cultural Appropriation and Structuralist Semiotic Through Game Narrative in Southeast Asia

Nelysa Nurshafira Mohd Roslan<sup>1</sup>, Neesa Ameera Mohamed Salim<sup>2</sup> and Hafizah Rosli<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,3</sup>Faculty of Film, Theater and Animation, Universiti Teknologi MARA

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA

### ABSTRACT

*This study examines cultural appropriation and its relationship to structural semiotics within game narratives in Southeast Asia. The regional gaming industry is expanding, leading to a rising number of video games that integrate elements from Southeast Asian cultures, including folklore, traditions, visual themes, and mythological symbols, into their narratives. The adoption of cultural features without contextual comprehension or ethical awareness can lead to misrepresentation and the loss of cultural authenticity. Grounded in a structuralist semiotic framework, this research explores how meaning is constructed and potentially distorted when cultural signifiers are detached from their original signified concepts within local semiotic systems. The study employs a qualitative methodology to examine cultural appropriation in game design by analysing Southeast Asian games. To achieve this, qualitative content analysis is utilised to scrutinise gaming narratives, alongside a comprehensive examination of the visual and narrative components in Kabaret (2022), Pamali (2018), and Skull and Bones (2024). The results are analysed using structural semiotics to reveal trends in cultural representation and appropriation. This method facilitates the recognition of ethical and semiotic ramifications in the representation of culture in digital games. Ultimately, the study contributes to the discourse on ethical game development by providing a culturally grounded framework for assessing authenticity and sensitivity in narrative design. It emphasizes the need for developers to engage with cultural elements responsibly, ensuring that game narratives reflect and respect Southeast Asia's cultural richness.*

**Keywords:** Cultural appropriation, game design, game narrative, Southeast Asia, structuralist semiotics

### ABSTRAK

*Kajian ini menyelidik isu perampasan budaya dan kaitannya dengan semiotik struktural dalam konteks naratif permainan video di Asia Tenggara. Seiring dengan perkembangan pesat industri permainan di rantau ini, semakin banyak permainan video yang menggabungkan unsur budaya Asia Tenggara, seperti cerita rakyat, tradisi, motif visual, dan simbol mitologi, ke dalam penceritaan mereka. Namun begitu, penggunaan unsur budaya ini tanpa pemahaman konteks atau pertimbangan etika boleh mengakibatkan salah tafsir dan kehilangan keaslian budaya. Berteraskan kerangka semiotik struktural, kajian ini meneroka bagaimana makna dibina dan berpotensi untuk diseleweng apabila penanda budaya (signifier) dipisahkan daripada makna asalnya (signified) dalam sistem semiotik tempatan. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, kajian ini meneliti isu perampasan budaya dalam reka bentuk permainan melalui pemerhatian terhadap permainan video dari Asia Tenggara. Bagi mencapai objektif ini, analisis kandungan kualitatif digunakan untuk meneliti naratif permainan, disokong dengan analisis mendalam terhadap elemen visual dan naratif dalam permainan Kabaret (2022), Pamali (2018) dan Skull and Bones (2024). Dapatan kajian ini ditafsirkan melalui lensa semiotik struktural untuk mengenal pasti pola representasi budaya dan perampasan yang berlaku. Pendekatan ini membolehkan pengenalpastian implikasi etika dan semiotik dalam gambaran budaya melalui permainan digital. Akhirnya, kajian ini menyumbang kepada*

*wacana pembangunan permainan yang beretika dengan menyediakan satu kerangka yang berpaksikan budaya bagi menilai keaslian dan kepekaan dalam reka bentuk naratif. Kajian ini menekankan kepentingan bagi para pembangun permainan untuk berinteraksi secara bertanggungjawab dengan unsur budaya, agar naratif permainan mencerminkan dan menghormati kepelbagaian budaya Asia Tenggara.*

**Kata kunci:** Asia Tenggara, naratif permainan, rekaan permainan, penyalahgunaan budaya, semiotik structural

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is a culturally diverse and historically rich region, comprising a wide range of ethnic groups, languages, belief systems, and artistic traditions. Among the nations in this region, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia are particularly significant due to their shared cultural heritage within the Malay Archipelago (Rusli 2012). They share interconnected colonial histories and actively participate in the global and regional digital creative economy, particularly in game development and interactive media.

These three countries offer a unique and practical scope for cultural analysis within the Southeast Asian context. Despite differences in political structures, religious compositions, and economic scales, they exhibit strong cultural parallels, especially in traditional folklore, linguistic roots, and visual motifs. The connection is evident in the overlapping myths, music, and legends found across borders (Dewantara 2024). Their similarities enable comparative analysis, while their differences reveal how national contexts shape narrative appropriation and representation in game design. Moreover, all three countries have vibrant and growing creative and gaming industries. Malaysia and Indonesia have witnessed a surge in locally produced games that incorporate regional folklore and myth, such as *Kabaret* (Malaysia), *Pamali* (Indonesia), and *Skull and Bones* (Singapore). Even Singapore, on a smaller scale, serves as a regional hub for game development and publishing, often positioning itself as a cultural mediator between East and West (Wong 2023). The cross-cultural dynamics in these countries make them ideal for studying the tension between cultural preservation and commercial reinterpretation in games.

Focusing on Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, therefore, provides a manageable and meaningful subset of Southeast Asia, offering rich material for analysis without oversimplifying the region's complexity. It allows researchers to highlight specific cultural narratives, trace semiotic structures in localised media, and address issues such as cultural appropriation, representation, and authenticity in game narratives, all while remaining grounded in a shared regional heritage.

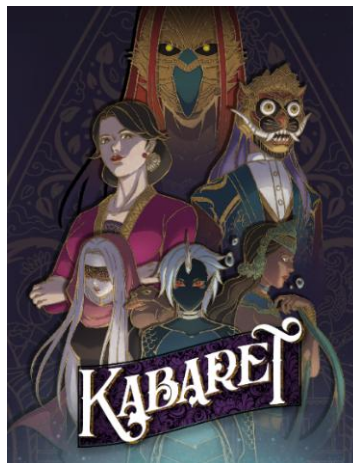
According to The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature (2007), cultural appropriation is defined as taking elements from another culture without permission and using them outside their original context. It involves taking intellectual property, cultural expressions, artifacts, history, and ways of knowledge without permission. The act of cultural appropriation is seen as wrong because it can lead to the commodification and vulgarization of a culture, jeopardizing its integrity and even its survival.

Cultural appropriation in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, presents a complex and contested landscape shaped by shared heritage, postcolonial identities, and increasing globalisation. When cultural elements such as traditional attire, folklore, rituals, or motifs are adopted in popular media, including games and digital storytelling, without proper attribution or contextual understanding, tensions may arise. In Malaysia and Indonesia, cultural ownership is often closely tied to national identity, leading to disputes over shared cultural

symbols such as batik and traditional dances. Singapore, as a multicultural society and digital media hub, often navigates the representation of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures in a delicate balance, which risks superficial or commodified portrayals. The appropriation of culture across these three nations becomes particularly sensitive when one culture is simplified or commercialised in media narratives for aesthetic purposes, detaching it from its original meanings and community significance. Thus, cultural appropriation in this region is not merely a matter of artistic freedom, but one deeply entangled with historical grievances, identity politics, and the ethics of representation.

In a world of digitization, cultural appropriation can lead to the erasure or distortion of cultural heritage, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and the marginalization of communities. Although it can offer a lifeline for preserving global cultural heritage, adopting one culture from individuals or entities in the digital realm without proper understanding or respect for its significance can also be inappropriate or disrespectful. Once cultural heritage is digitized, it becomes accessible to all beneficiaries, including developers and users. This will raise the ethical question of the culture's values and norms (Manžuch 2017). To fully harness this flow of cultural heritage knowledge for the general public, it is crucial to enhance users' understanding of heritage through effective and ethical visualization. This entails making visualizations flexible, interactive, and user-oriented (Boboc 2022).

Games designed in various parts of the world often exhibit distinct differences, as developers implicitly or subconsciously infuse their creations with their values and cultural influences (Ngai 2005). This phenomenon highlights the unique way in which games serve as cultural artifacts, reflecting the norms, beliefs, and aesthetics of their creators. From the storytelling elements and character designs to gameplay mechanics and visual styles, these cultural imprints can be discerned by players and researchers alike. The games developed by Malaysian, Indonesian, and Singaporean game developers from different studios, as shown in Figures 1 - 3 below, display the influences of Southeast Asia cultural identity.



**Figure 1.** *Kabaret* by Persona Theory Games.



**Figure 2.** *Pamali* by StoryTale Studios.



**Figure 3.** *Skull and Bones* by Ubisoft Original.

Game designers often unintentionally appropriate elements of various cultures, leading to misrepresentation and perpetuation of stereotypes that can be offensive and harmful to players and communities. According to Meershoek (2014), conflicting behaviour can arise when players bring their own culture to serious games, hindering their ability to achieve the game's objectives. There is a pressing need to develop guidelines, resources, and tools that empower game developers to navigate the complex terrain of cultural identity, fostering greater inclusivity, respect, and cultural understanding in game design.

A comprehensive framework for integrating cultural appropriation and structural semiotics into game narratives is necessary for the industry's ability to create culturally inclusive and responsible gaming experiences. Jackson (2021) stated that cultural appropriation is a crucial concern for folklorists and ethnologists, as well as for many of the communities with which they engage and partner. However, cultural appropriation and structuralist semiotics have received relatively little general conceptual attention.

Hence, this research aims to explore and understand how cultural elements from Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia are represented and reinterpreted in selected Southeast Asian video game narratives. The researcher will provide an in-depth background of existing literature on these topics. The research problem and corresponding objectives will be clearly outlined, followed by a detailed discussion of the research's significance, scope, and limitations. Finally, relevant terms used in this study will be defined.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Cultural appropriation in game development can pose ethical dilemmas, especially regarding the portrayal and representation of culture within game frameworks. While cultural elements in games may retain their original significance through recontextualization, it is crucial to address the ethical considerations arising from these practices. The importance of identifying emerging ethical issues is emphasized before determining the approach to promoting culturally authentic narratives. According to Asimina (2014), cultural appropriation in gaming can pose ethical

dilemmas, especially regarding the portrayal and representation of culture within game structures. The misalignment not only undermines the authenticity of the cultural narrative but also contributes to the ongoing marginalization of cultural communities. Therefore, there is a critical need to examine how game narratives in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, engage with cultural signs and how structuralist semiotics can help unpack the consequences of cultural misrepresentation and appropriation in game narratives.

Cultural appropriation can be critically examined through the lens of structuralist semiotics, which focuses on how meaning is constructed through systems of signs. According to structuralist theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, cultural symbols, such as traditional costumes, folklore, or rituals, function as signifiers inherently tied to culturally specific signified meanings within a given semiotic system. When these cultural signifiers are extracted from their original context and used in different cultural products, such as video games, films, or advertisements, without preserving their intended meanings, they risk becoming empty signifiers, stripped of cultural depth and authenticity. This process is central to cultural appropriation, in which the dominant culture adopts signs from a marginalized or local culture and reassigns to them new, often commercial or aesthetic, meaning. In Southeast Asian game narratives, for example, mythological figures or traditional motifs may be recontextualized for gameplay or visual appeal, but without engagement with their cultural significance, the signs become distorted representations. Structuralist semiotic analysis, therefore, reveals how appropriation operates not only as a social or ethical issue but also as a breakdown in meaning-making, in which signs are detached from their signified realities and recoded within new ideological frameworks.

To build this understanding, it is essential to first examine how narrative functions as a medium through which cultural meanings are constructed, communicated, and sometimes appropriated within game design. Narratives derive from the theory of Narratology. It encompasses various approaches and methodologies, including empirical narratology, the narratology of comic art, cognitive narratology, text linguistics, and post-narratology (Arsenault 2023). Narratology gained prominence in the 1960s, influenced by structuralist theory. Claude Lévi-Strauss' "Structural Anthropology" (1958) contributes to the structuralist understanding of narrative (Collins 2021). The rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism in the 1980s had a profound impact on the field of narratology, challenging the established structuralist approaches to understanding and analyzing narratives (Ruitenberg 2018). These intellectual movements encouraged a more complex, self-aware, and non-linear approach to storytelling that extended beyond traditional structural analysis, reshaping how narratives are understood and interpreted in contemporary culture.

Narrative structures in games are being explored in two articles by Barry Ip (2011). The first article provides an overview and discussion of the definitions and representation of stories in games. It explores the use of narrative in games and highlights the distinction between story, narrative, and plot. The second article concludes the examination of narrative in games, presenting results schematically and chronologically to illustrate the unique nature of game narratives, including the portrayal of emotions, narrative structures, and archetypes.

According to Malegiannaki (2020), the use of narrative-based games in cultural heritage settings is a powerful and innovative approach to communicate cultural content and engage players with the subject matter in immersive and meaningful ways. This approach combines elements of storytelling, interactivity, and gameplay to create a dynamic and educational experience. However, cultural appropriation in games can raise ethical concerns, particularly in how culture is portrayed and represented within game structures. The recontextualization of cultural elements in games can preserve their original meaning, but it is important to consider the ethical implications of such practices. It is argued that identifying emergent ethical concerns

is imperative before deciding how and to what extent to encourage culturally authentic narratives.

### 3.0 FINDING

The representation of culture in video games has increasingly become a focal point of academic inquiry, particularly regarding the ethical boundaries of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation occurs when cultural elements are taken from a marginalized group and used outside their original context, often stripped of their meaning, and repurposed for commercial or aesthetic gain. This research examines the representation of Southeast Asian culture in three narrative games: *Kabaret*, *Pamali*, and *Skull and Bones*. Using a structuralist semiotic framework, the essay explores how these games maintain cultural integrity and avoid appropriation by preserving the semiotic relationships between signifiers and signified within their respective cultural systems.

Structuralist semiotics, developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, posits that meaning arises from the relationship between the signifier (the form of a word or symbol) and the signified (the concept it represents). Signs derive meaning from their differences and their place within a broader cultural and linguistic system. When signs are uprooted from their native semiotic systems and inserted into a foreign context without preserving these relationships, they risk becoming empty or "floating" signifiers, leading to cultural misrepresentation or appropriation.

*Kabaret* is a visual novel deeply embedded in Southeast Asian folklore, featuring mythological creatures such as the *Pontianak*, *Garuda*, and *Harimau Jadian*. These entities function as culturally embedded signifiers, whose meanings are tied to local cosmologies and traditions. The game maintains the structural integrity of these signs by contextualizing them within the fictional realm of *Alam Bunian*, a space that mirrors traditional Southeast Asian worldviews. Figures 4 and 5, shown below, illustrate the environment and traditional games played in the game.



**Figure 4.** *Congkak*, a Malay traditional game.



**Figure 5.** Characters from *Kabaret*.

Through visual motifs inspired by *batik*, shadow puppetry, and music composed with traditional instruments such as gamelan, *Kabaret* sustains the internal logic of Southeast Asian semiotic systems. Furthermore, the developers collaborated with cultural experts and local practitioners, ensuring the representations remained authentic and grounded. Rather than appropriating cultural elements for aesthetic purposes, *Kabaret* reaffirms their meanings, allowing players to engage with the culture as insiders rather than voyeurs.

Other than *Kabaret*, *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror*, developed by StoryTale Studios, is a notable example of a game that avoids cultural appropriation by authentically representing Indonesian supernatural beliefs, customs, and taboos. Rooted in Javanese and Sundanese folklore, *Pamali* draws upon real cultural practices, such as funeral rites, traditional ghost narratives, and daily rituals, and embeds them within its gameplay and narrative design. Unlike games that exoticize or commercialize folklore for entertainment, *Pamali* takes a culturally sensitive approach by providing in-game explanations, using *Bahasa Indonesia*, and incorporating context-specific consequences for violating taboos. This respectful representation stems from the developers' insider perspective and their intention to preserve cultural integrity, which contrasts with common patterns of cultural appropriation in which elements are decontextualized or distorted.

Both *Kabaret* and *Pamali* exemplify how culturally specific games can avoid appropriation through careful semiotic construction. Unlike titles that superficially insert cultural elements, such as Ubisoft's *Skull and Bones*, which has been critiqued for presenting Southeast Asian signifiers without proper cultural grounding, Persona Theory Games' and StoryTale Studios' titles embed signs within their original cultural systems, preserving the bond between signifier and signified. Figure 6 and Figure 7 show the titles cut and characters' cosmetic shop where the concept of Western pirates was embedded in the East cultures.



Figure 6. Titles cut.



Figure 7. Character's cosmetic shop.

*Skull and Bones*, is an action-adventure game set in a fictionalized version of the Indian Ocean during the Golden Age of Piracy. While the game includes elements inspired by Southeast Asian culture, such as sea shanties in local languages and in-game items like durians, the representation has been criticized for lacking depth and authenticity. For instance, the character Asnah Yatim, a Malay pirate, speaks with an accent that some players found unconvincing and disconnected from genuine Southeast Asian speech patterns. This phenomenon has led to the perception that cultural elements are added superficially, without meaningful integration into the game's world-building.

From a structuralist semiotic perspective, *Skull and Bones* presents a case of semiotic misconception and cultural distortion, particularly in its representation of Southeast Asian maritime culture. While the game features symbolic elements such as traditional ship designs, weaponry, and visual motifs inspired by the Malay Archipelago, these signifiers are often detached from their original cultural signifieds, the historical, spiritual, and social meanings they hold within local contexts. In structuralist terms, this disconnect results in a floating signifier, where symbols are recontextualized within a Western pirate fantasy framework that prioritizes global appeal over cultural authenticity. For example, the use of Southeast Asian aesthetics as exotic decoration contributes to cultural flattening, in which regional identities are homogenized and stripped of specificity. This superficial engagement with cultural signs reflects a broader pattern in the global gaming industry, where the visual language of culture is commodified without adequate narrative grounding. As such, *Skull and Bones* risks perpetuating misrepresentations and cultural appropriation, as the game's sign systems prioritize entertainment value over cultural integrity. Through the lens of structuralist semiotics, it becomes evident that meaning is not only constructed through symbols but also distorted when signs are transplanted without preserving their embedded cultural narratives and functions. Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of cultural elements in *Kabaret*, *Pamali*, and *Skull and Bones*, focusing on representation, authenticity, cultural risk, reception, and the use of Southeast Asian cultural elements.

**Table 1** Comparison of *Kabaret*, *Pamali* and *Skull and Bones*

| Aspect                              | <i>Kabaret</i>                                                                   | <i>Pamali</i>                                                                | <i>Skull and Bones</i>                                                |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cultural Origin</b>              | Developed by Malaysian studio                                                    | Developed by Indonesian studio                                               | Developed by Western studio (Ubisoft, Singapore)                      |
| <b>Cultural Focus</b>               | Southeast Asian myths and folklore ( <i>Pontianak</i> , <i>Naga Tasik Cina</i> ) | Indonesian taboos, rituals, and ghosts ( <i>Pocong</i> , <i>Kuntilanak</i> ) | Maritime Southeast Asia aesthetics and pirate history                 |
| <b>Cultural Appropriation</b>       | None or minimal, insider authorship and contextual integrity                     | None, uses native traditions with insider cultural knowledge                 | High risk, decontextualized and exoticized cultural symbols           |
| <b>Semiotic Structure</b>           | Strong: Signifier-signified relationship preserved                               | Strong: Cultural signs retain intended local meanings                        | Weak: Signs detached from context, become aesthetic or commodified    |
| <b>Narrative Integration</b>        | Deep character-driven narrative grounded in culture                              | Narrative based on moral choice and consequences tied to local values        | Narrative is secondary to gameplay mechanics; minimal cultural depth  |
| <b>Gameplay Relation to Culture</b> | Story choices reflect cultural values and belief systems                         | Player decisions reinforce traditional norms and taboos                      | Cultural elements used as decoration rather than influencing gameplay |
| <b>Ethical Representation</b>       | Collaborated with cultural consultants; respectful and authentic                 | Based on lived cultural experiences; reflects indigenous worldview           | Culture used as spectacle; lacks community input and cultural respect |

*Kabaret*, *Pamali*, and *Skull and Bones* each engage with Southeast Asian cultural elements but differ significantly in how they treat cultural authenticity, semiotic structure, and narrative design. *Kabaret* integrates Malaysian folklore and myth through a culturally informed lens, preserving the structural integrity of traditional signs and their meanings. This reflects a high level of semiotic fidelity, in which the relationship between the signifier (e.g., monsters or symbols) and the signified (cultural or spiritual meanings) is maintained, thereby promoting ethical representation. Similarly, *Pamali* utilizes Indonesian ghost stories rooted in Javanese and Sundanese traditions, relying on cultural taboos and local rituals that resonate with players familiar with these customs. It effectively uses narrative gameplay to reinforce cultural messages, allowing player choices to reflect traditional beliefs and consequences. In contrast, *Skull and Bones* appropriates Southeast Asian maritime aesthetics, symbols, and references, yet detaches them from their historical and cultural meanings. From a structuralist semiotic perspective, the game decontextualizes cultural signifiers, transforming them into exoticized commodities. Its narrative design is largely mechanic-driven, lacking cultural nuance and depth. Therefore, while *Kabaret* and *Pamali* exemplify culturally respectful storytelling grounded in semiotic coherence, *Skull and Bones* exemplifies the risk of cultural commodification, where narrative and symbolic integrity are compromised for global market appeal.

#### 4.0 METHODOLOGY

Several features will be prioritized during planning to ensure the study achieves its stated objectives. As Brunsdon and Morley (2005) state, the reception model falls within the interpretative paradigm. By identifying the elements of cultural appropriation in game design, the researcher will analyze structuralist semiotics in the game narratives through an in-depth examination of the visual and narrative elements present in the chosen games.

The study adopts a qualitative methodology to explore the complex details of the subject matter, which revolves around cultural appropriation in game design as perceived by Southeast Asian game designers. The data used for the study were retrieved from Scopus and indexed publications. These databases were selected because they contain extensive peer-reviewed publications and provide practical tools for downloading data. The search was run in July 2024 using the search terms "(Cultural Appropriation AND Game Narrative)". We selected the search query to ensure that the results were relevant to the adaptation of cultural appropriation in the game narrative (Boboc, 2022).

In structuralist semiotic analysis, which involves interpreting the meaning embedded in signs and symbols, a qualitative approach enables a thorough examination of the intricate details of the game's narrative. Through qualitative methods, such as visual semiotics and narrative analysis, we aim to uncover the subtle layers of meaning woven into the fabric of *Kabaret*, *Pamali*, and *Skull and Bones*. The selection of games as the primary case study is deliberate, given their significance as narrative-driven games and their potential for rich semiotic exploration. The case study design enables a focused and in-depth analysis of the semiotic elements embedded in the game's narrative structure. Data collection will employ a multifaceted approach. Visual semiotics will be scrutinized through detailed examinations of the game's visual elements, including graphics, symbols, and storytelling. Narrative semiotics will involve meticulously analysing the storytelling techniques, the plot structure, and the semiotic devices employed to convey meaning.

To first identify the elements of cultural appropriation in the game narrative, content analysis on Southeast Asian cultural identity and cultural appropriation was conducted. Content analysis is often used in communication and media research for various purposes. It involves a thorough and organized examination of specific textual elements to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings (Berg, 2009). The method has been widely used in disciplines such as the humanities,

social sciences, criminology, and psychology, as well as in various forms of human communication, including written documents, photos, films, videos, and audio materials.

The qualitative content analysis used in this study is derived from the concept proposed by Hijmans (1996) and elaborated by Neuendorf (2017). Neuendorf identified five distinct forms of qualitative content analysis: structuralist-semiotic analysis, discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis, and interpretative analysis. The study also highlighted that structuralist-semiotic analysis asserts central themes in culture and society and that its interpretations are theoretically informed. This method will assume that the researcher(s) are competent members of the culture.

Semiotics is the foundation for uniting the conceptual framework and research procedure across various forms of symbolic communication (Chandler, 2002). Structuralist semiotics explores the underlying subjective meanings within messages, revealing how phenomena are structured, and assumes that the researcher possesses a deep understanding of the culture. In the context of narratology in game design, the components of cultural appropriation primarily involve the symbols and signs of Malaysian society that represent both major and minor ethnic groups. Symbols like architecture, attire, and food may sometimes appear overly apparent in their meanings, offering little beyond their surface interpretations.

The structuralist-semiotics refers to a semiotic view of human culture within the boundaries of a sign system. As Hawkes (1977) states, structuralism is the process of making sense of the world through the perception and description of structures. In several cases, signs are interpreted arbitrarily by a person, based on culture and experience.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French anthropologist and ethnologist, had a significant impact on the development of structuralism and structural anthropology. His work emphasized the idea that universal patterns in cultural systems stem from the inherent structure of the human mind. Lévi-Strauss claimed that diverse practices and rituals, such as food preparation, religious ceremonies, games, myths, and texts, hold meaning that can be deciphered by examining the underlying structure that generates them. By analyzing these cultural phenomena, he sought to uncover common patterns and structures across cultures. Lévi-Strauss aimed to delve into the underlying patterns or structures beneath the customs and beliefs of different societies, highlighting their shared natural or universal properties (Collins, 2021).

A study by Jenkins (2004) suggests that the "ludologist" stance was not solely about prioritizing gameplay mechanics but rather about highlighting the vital need to integrate both mechanical and semiotic elements. It aimed to caution against and critique the thoughtless, unexamined use of terms like "narrative" and "story" in discussions of games. This theory will be applied to identify and interpret the signs (representations of cultural elements) within the game. This involves analyzing the signifier (the cultural element as depicted in the game) and the signified (the meaning behind the depiction).

- 1) Signifier: How cultural symbols, practices, and elements are depicted visually or narratively in the game.
- 2) Signified: The meaning or connotations attached to these cultural symbols, whether accurate or distorted.

Building upon the structuralist understanding of how meaning is constructed through signs, it is equally important to examine how these meanings are conveyed and reshaped through narrative structures in video games, where storytelling mechanics play a critical role in framing cultural representation and player interpretation. Multiple techniques have been used, with varying degrees of success, to enable games to convey narratives. Aarseth (2012) has proposed a ludo-narratological framework that should acknowledge how "narrative games" can differ

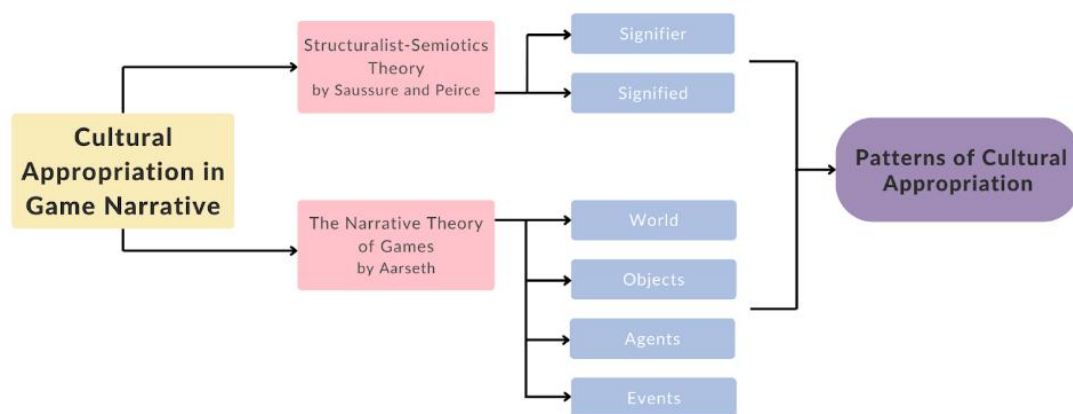
from one another. The study's approach is called the narrative theory of games. The theory proposes viewing the ludo-narrative design space through four distinct dimensions: World, Objects, Agents, and Events.

These elements are present in every game and story, but their configurations vary. Game worlds can vary from linear to multicourse to open, which significantly affects how the narrative structure is perceived. Objects, including avatars and player vehicles, can be dynamic, user-created, or static, representing a spectrum from dynamic and simulated to static and narrative. Agents can be portrayed as rich, deep, and round characters (the narrative pole) or shallow, hollow bots (the ludic pole), spanning from the narrative end to the ludic end. The sequence of events can be open, selectable, or plotted, and the narratological concept of nuclei (defining events) and satellites (supplementary events) can describe different types of games. This approach will show that when used appropriately, narratology, in conjunction with a diverse range of game types, can offer a valuable and illuminating viewpoint on game design (Aarseth 2012).

In the context of games, cultural symbols, such as costumes, architecture, language, or mythical creatures, function as signifiers that may lose their intended meaning when detached from their original cultural signifieds. This becomes particularly important when assessing how culture is represented or appropriated in digital narratives. Complementing this, narrative game theory explores how storytelling in games differs from traditional media, emphasizing interactive structures, player agency, and emergent narratives.

A conceptual framework, as outlined in Table 2, serves as a descriptive and analytical model that illustrates the key constructs and their relationships in the context of this research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, the framework integrates structuralist semiotic theory and narrative game theory to examine how cultural elements are encoded and interpreted in Southeast Asian video games.

**Table 2** Research Conceptual Framework



The integration of narrative game theory enables a deeper investigation of how cultural elements are not only symbolized but also experienced by players through branching storylines, environmental storytelling, and player choices. Together, these theories form a conceptual lens to analyze how cultural meanings are encoded, manipulated, and potentially misconstrued in game narratives, highlighting the ethical and semiotic implications of representing Southeast Asian cultures in interactive digital environments.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of *Kabaret*, *Pamali*, and *Skull and Bones* through the prism of structuralist semiotics provides critical insights into the ethical and representational intricacies of cultural appropriation in game narratives. The original semiotic systems of cultural signifiers, including folklore, rituals, and mythological entities that can be meaningfully retained when developed by creators from within the culture, as demonstrated by both *Kabaret* and *Pamali*. These games effectively maintain the signified meanings of their cultural components, thereby promoting narrative immersion, authenticity, and respect. In contrast, *Skull and Bones* serves as an illustration of a structural semiotic disjunct, in which Southeast Asian motifs are decontextualised and repurposed as exotic signifiers, separated from their historical and cultural significance. This leads to a "floating signifier" effect, in which cultural symbols are reduced to ornamental commodities within a Western-centric fantasy framework. The comparative analysis emphasises the significance of narrative depth, insider authorship, and cultural proximity in preserving the integrity of cultural representations. In conclusion, the results underscore that video games are not solely entertainment platforms; they are also potent semiotic systems capable of influencing cultural perceptions. Developers must, therefore, critically engage with the signals they deploy, ensuring that cultural representation is approached with ethical responsibility and contextual awareness.

## 6.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Faculty of Theatre and Animation, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), for their invaluable support, expert guidance, and generous permission to utilize the faculty's facilities throughout the course of our research titled "*Cultural Appropriation and Structural-Semiotic through Game Narrative in Southeast Asia*." Their continuous encouragement and assistance played a crucial role in shaping the direction and execution of this study. Our sincere appreciation also goes to the Office of Research and Innovation, UiTM Cawangan Selangor, for endorsing and approving this research for academic publication. Their trust in the potential of our work has been instrumental in advancing our scholarly contributions to the field of game narrative and cultural studies. We are especially grateful to the Geran Kesenian dan Kreativiti Dana UiTM Cawangan Selangor (DUCS-KK) for providing the funding and unwavering support from the inception of this project, 600-UiTMSEL (PI. 5/4) (013/2023). Their financial assistance not only facilitated the research process but also enabled us to explore creative methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches. Finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank all individuals, academics, collaborators, game developers, and respondents who have directly or indirectly contributed to the successful completion of this research.

## REFERENCE

- Aarseth, E. (1997). *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP
- Arsenault, D. (2023). Narratology. In *The Routledge Companion to video game studies* (pp. 588-596). Routledge.
- Berg, S. (2009). Identity theft causes, correlates, and factors: A content analysis. *Crimes of the Internet*, pp. 225–250.
- Boboc, R. G., Băutu, E., Gîrbacia, F., Popovici, N., & Popovici, D. M. (2022). Augmented Reality in Cultural Heritage: An Overview of the Last Decade of Applications. *Applied Sciences*, 12(19), 9859.
- Brunsdon, C., & Morley, D. (2005). *The nationwide television studies*. Routledge.
- Chandler, D. (2002). *The basics*. London, UK: Routledge.

- Collins, J. (2021). Parallel structures: André Leroi-Gourhan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the making of French structural anthropology. *History of the Human Sciences*, 34(3-4), pp. 307–335.
- Dewantara, J. A., Budimansyah, D., Darmawan, C., & Sulistyarini, S. (2024). Sense of belonging, identity and nationalism dayak bidayuh on the border Indonesia-Malaysia. *The Asian Conference on the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Conference Proceedings*, 481–491. <https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2186-2303.2024.42>
- Hawkes, T., & Hawkes, T. (1977). *Structuralism & semiotics* (pp. 16-17). London: Methuen.
- Hijmans, E. (1996). Logic for qualitative media content analysis: A typology. *Communications-Sankt Augustin Then Berlin-*, pp. 21, 93–108.
- Ip, B. (2010). Narrative Structures in Computer and Video Games: Part 1: Context, definitions, and initial findings. *Games and Culture*, 6(2), 103–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412010364982>
- Ip, B. (2010b). Narrative Structures in Computer and Video Games: Part 2: Emotions, structures, and archetypes. *Games and Culture*, 6(3), 203–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412010364984>
- Jackson. (2021). On cultural appropriation. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 58(1), 77. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.58.1.04>
- Jenkins, H. (2010). *Game design as narrative architecture*. Computer 44, no. 3 (2004): 118-130.
- Malegiannaki, I. A., Daradoumis, T., & Retalis, S. (2020). Teaching cultural heritage through a narrative-based game. *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage (JOCCH)*, 13(4), 1-28.
- Manžuch, Z. (2017). Ethical issues in digitization of cultural heritage. *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, 4(2), 4.
- Meershoek, C. J., Kortmann, R., Meijer, S. A., Subrahmanian, E., & Verbraeck, A. (2013). The culture driven game design method: Adapting serious games to the players' culture. In *Perspectives on Culture and Agent-based Simulations: Integrating Cultures* (pp. 231-249). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Miles, M. B. (1994). Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook. *Thousand Oaks*.
- Neuendorf, K. A. (2017). *The content analysis guidebook*. Sage.
- Ngai, A. C. Y. (2005). Cultural Influences On Video Games: players' preferences in narrative and game-play.
- Ruitenbergh, C. W. (2018). Postmodernism and poststructuralism. In *International handbook of philosophy of education* (pp. 689-702). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Rusli, M. H. M. (2012). Straits of Malacca and Singapore: pride of the Malay Archipelago, priceless maritime heritage of the world. *Jurnal Hadhari*, 109-127.
- Wong, K. T. (2023). *Inter-Asian Gaming in Southeast Asia: Remapping the Globalization of Videogames through the Lens of Malaysia and Singapore* (Doctoral dissertation, UC Irvine).