

EĞİTİM yayınevi

Editörler: **Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Özlem Uyan**

Grafik

Alanında Uluslararası Araştırmalar - II

International Research in the Field of Graphics

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Sayfa Tasarımı: Kübra Konca Nam
Kapak Tasarımı: Eğitim Yayınevi Grafik Birimi

T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı
Yayıncı Sertifika No: 76780

ISBN: 978-625-385-207-8
1. Baskı, Mayıs 2025

Baskı Cilt: Sayfa Basım Sanayi
Tevfik İleri Mah. Emek Cad. Polat Sok. No: 2 Pursaklar / Ankara
Matbaa Sertifika No: 77079

Kütüphane Kimlik Kartı
Grafik Alanında Uluslararası Araştırmalar – II
International Research in the Field of Graphics - II
Editör: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Özlem Uyan
VI+162 s., 160x240 mm
Kaynakça var, dizin yok.
ISBN: 978-625-385-207-8

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Yayınevi Türkiye Ofis: İstanbul: Eğitim Yayınevi Tic. Ltd. Şti., Atakent mah. Yasemen sok. No: 4/B, Ümraniye, İstanbul, Türkiye

Konya: Eğitim Yayınevi Tic. Ltd. Şti., Fevzi Çakmak Mah. 10721 Sok. B Blok, No: 16/B, Safakent, Karatay, Konya, Türkiye
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Yayınevi Amerika Ofis: New York: Egitim Publishing Group, Inc.
P.O. Box 768/Armonk, New York, 10504-0768, United States of America
americaoffice@egitimyayinevi.com

Lojistik ve Sevkiyat Merkezi: Kitapmatik Lojistik ve Sevkiyat Merkezi, Fevzi Çakmak Mah. 10721 Sok. B Blok, No: 16/B, Safakent, Karatay, Konya, Türkiye
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ÖNSÖZ

Grafik tasarım, çağdaş görsel kültürün yapıtaşlarından biri olarak, yalnızca biçimsel estetikle sınırlı olmayan; düşünsel, kültürel ve teknolojik düzlemleri kesen çok katmanlı bir alan hâline gelmiştir. Disiplinin gelişimi, teknolojik ilerlemelerle paralel biçimde hız kazanmış; bu durum, grafik tasarımı hem bir iletişim aracı hem de eleştirel bir ifade biçimi olarak yeniden konumlandırmıştır. Günümüzde grafik tasarım, sadece tasarımsal kararlar ya da görsel üretim süreçleri üzerinden değil; aynı zamanda toplumsal bellek, kültürel temsiller ve dijital dönüşüm bağlamlarında da ele alınması gereken disiplinler arası bir inceleme alanına dönüşmüştür.

Bu kitap, grafik tasarımın günümüzdeki çok katmanlı doğasını anlamaya yönelik bir çabanın ürünüdür. Tasarımın sadece biçim değil, aynı zamanda içerik ve bağlam üretimi olduğu anlayışından yola çıkarak hazırlanan bu çalışma; tipografiden mekâna, illüstrasyondan belleğe, dijital oyunlardan sanal gerçeklik teknolojilerine, yapay zekâdan kültürel temsillere kadar geniş bir yelpazede konuları kapsamaktadır.

Okuyucu, bu kitapta grafik tasarımın tarihsel temellerinden beslenerek çağdaş anlatı biçimleriyle nasıl yeniden şekillendiğine tanıklık edecektir. Görsel dilin çocukluk algısıyla nasıl ilişkilendiği, kültürel kimliklerin dijital evrenlerde nasıl temsil edildiği, tasarımcının sanal dünyadaki konumu, yapay zekânın üretim süreçlerine etkisi ve eğitimdeki rolü gibi güncel meseleler hem teorik hem uygulamalı bir perspektifle ele alınmaktadır.

Kitapta yer alan her çalışma, grafik tasarımı yalnızca bir meslek olarak değil, aynı zamanda bir düşünme ve ifade biçimi olarak değerlendirmekte; görsel kültürün dönüşümüne dair eleştirel ve yaratıcı yaklaşımlar sunmaktadır. Disiplinler arası geçişkenliğe açık, sorgulayıcı ve yenilikçi bu yaklaşımın, tasarım alanında çalışan ya da bu alana ilgi duyan herkese katkı sağlayacağına inanıyoruz.

Bu kitabın ortaya çıkmasına katkı sunan tüm yazarlarımıza, araştırmaları ve fikirleriyle bu çalışmayı zenginleştirdikleri için teşekkür ederiz. Umuyoruz ki bu eser, grafik tasarımın değişen dünyasında düşünsel bir durak ve ilham verici bir kaynak olacaktır.

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Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Özlem UYAN

INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN DIGITAL GAMES

Cihangir Eker*

Introduction

Cultural symbols are graphic and visual forms that emerge as a result of the visibility of various elements of culture through different methods. These symbols consist of visual representations of numerous tangible and intangible components of culture, such as traditions, geography, language, history, philosophy, food and beverages, tools, architectural structures, cities, and artistic or design products. These representations not only signify culture and its components, but also facilitate the perception and learning of cultural elements by individuals both within and outside the culture through visual engagement. From past to present, graphic symbols related to culture have become visible in many areas of human activity. From cave paintings to canvases, engravings to books, and from urban spaces to consumer goods, cultural symbols signify and represent specific cultural elements in a variety of contexts.

In today's digital games—highly preferred for purposes such as entertainment, learning, passing time, and socialization—cultural symbols are frequently encountered. From the icons used to launch the game to the graphic user interface, from promotional posters to the virtual environment in which the game takes place, the use of cultural symbols can be observed across various elements of the game. These symbols occupy a significant place in games as elements that influence the narrative, context, gameplay, setting, and progression. Within the virtual world where the game unfolds, cultural symbols are transformed into signs that represent a geography, a nation, a habit, plants, animals, architectural and artistic structures, and the culture to which they refer. These symbols may indicate a specific location in the game environment, be placed for navigational purposes, or be used as decorative elements. Regardless of their function, cultural symbols in digital game spaces ultimately act as carriers and signifiers of a particular culture, enriching the narrative of the game.

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In this chapter, cultural symbols representing various nations, which appear in digital games—one of the prominent forms of entertainment in the 21st century—will be examined. The analysis will explore the impact of these graphic forms within the game universe on both the gameplay and the narrative, supported by examples. The case study will focus on Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2), a truck-driving simulation game. This game allows players to transport cargo from one city to another and earn money, while also offering a wide range of customization options for the trucks they drive. Players can modify numerous features, from roof lights to engine upgrades, and from bull bars to rims. Additionally, they have the option to change the colors and patterns of the truck's exterior. Among the available paint jobs are designs that incorporate cultural symbols from various countries. In this book chapter, the influence of cultural symbols in digital games on gameplay and narrative will be examined through the example of culturally themed truck exterior customizations in ETS2. In doing so, the opportunities for cultural representation available to the player within the virtual world of the game will be illustrated through various types of graphic cultural symbols featured in the selected game.

Cultural Symbols: Graphic and Designed Signifiers of Society

Culture is a significant concept that encompasses a broad and comprehensive meaning, referring to the ways of life and numerous vital characteristics developed by humans throughout civilization. Scholars from various disciplines have proposed different definitions of the term, taking into account a range of elements. Etymologically, the word derives from the Latin term cultura. It entered the English language as "culture" in the early 15th century, initially used to denote meanings related to agriculture and the cultivation of natural growth (Oğuz, 2011: 126). In this context, the term originally described agricultural activities, which in turn point to the emergence of settled life and early agricultural practices. When considered from the perspective of civilization's transition to sedentary life and agricultural production, it becomes apparent that the concept of culture also encompasses meanings closely linked to civilization itself. Within this framework, it is possible to identify four fundamental meanings attributed to culture: culture as civilization in the scientific sense; culture as education in the humanistic sense; culture as fine arts in the aesthetic sense; and culture as cultivation and agriculture in the material-biological sense (Güvenç, 1974). These meanings and their implications indicate that elements of culture began to form and diversify from the very early stages of human civilization.

Beyond its etymology and formation process, the concept of culture today encompasses an extensive and multifaceted domain. As a result of the millennia-long development of civilization, both culture and its related elements have evolved and diversified. This has allowed for the formulation of various definitions of culture in differing scopes and forms. Güvenç, in his definition, emphasizes the relationship between culture and learning, stating that culture consists of everything individuals learn throughout their lives as members of a society, primarily through education (1997: 54). Naylor, approaching the concept from an anthropological perspective, describes culture as a uniquely human characteristic that must be learned, while also highlighting its dynamic nature due to the ever-changing environment (1996: 18). Aktan and Tutar argue that culture includes all physical and intellectual accumulations resulting from human-induced transformations in nature, and therefore, every aspect of human experience in daily life can be considered within the scope of culture. They also emphasize that culture is inherited from previous generations, experienced, and subsequently transmitted to future generations (2007: 2). In his work on the concept of culture, Oğuz points out that one of the significant transformations the concept has undergone is the shift from a predominantly tangible content to one that also includes abstract dimensions, paralleling the development of systems of thought (2011: 137). Based on these definitions, culture can be understood as something created by humans in interaction with nature, capable of change and enrichment depending on various factors, and transferable between individuals and societies across time. In the transmission of culture to future generations, visual outputs such as creative productions, oral traditions, and written records play a crucial role. Symbols—including simple graphic forms, images, environmental structures, and three-dimensional designs—serve as practical and universal products of visual design that contribute both to the representation of cultural attributes and to the intergenerational transmission of culture.

A symbol is a form of graphic communication that enables the conveyance of a specific message through shapes and forms. Based on the definition that graphic communication is a mode of conveying ideas and information through pictorial symbols and drawings, with the aim of presenting content instantaneously and effectively (Tutar et al., 2014: 182), it can be asserted that symbols are forms that transmit intended messages swiftly and efficiently. The origins of symbolic production date back thousands of years, to the foundational periods of civilization. “For early humans, fear, religion, magic,

and the rituals that developed within this framework, along with the first drawings and existential acts inspired by nature, laid the groundwork for the act of symbolization" (Alp, 2009: 67). Cultural phenomena that emerged through human activity and interaction with the environment were visualized through symbols. Ketenci and Bilgili emphasize that a symbol often carries with it a story or a chain of visual associations, and that within the cultures in which they are used, a shared understanding of their meaning generally exists (2006: 270). This implies a collective agreement within the communities and cultures where symbols originate. Considering the relationship between symbols and culture, it can be said that the forms of symbols may vary across different cultural contexts. While symbols generally possess a universal quality, the specific conditions of societies with diverse cultures may cause symbols to take on certain localized characteristics (Koca, 2010: 92). In this regard, symbols can be regarded as a form of graphic communication that is both internationally applicable and locally embedded within cultural contexts. Today, symbols encountered in all areas of social life may be designed and utilized for various purposes. Erdoğan notes that symbols may be used to indicate the location of different objects or services, to represent statistical information through proportional relationships, or to signify an organization, service, or product (2022: 224). Designed and employed for purposes such as communication, information-sharing, indication, and representation, symbols can also render visible various features of the culture in which they are embedded. At times, symbols are deliberately created and used to represent the culture from which they emerge and its various elements. In such cases, these symbols are referred to as cultural symbols, as they function as carriers of culture.

The concept of the cultural symbol refers to the relationship between symbols and the cultures from which they emerge. As previously noted, while symbols often possess a structure that enables broad comprehension due to their widespread usage, they may also carry localized meanings specific to the society and culture in which they originated. Consequently, such symbols transform into a form of graphic communication that conveys the meanings of the culture they belong to—sometimes even directly representing specific elements of that culture. Indeed, it has been argued that symbols form layers of reference in the transmission of cultural experiences, and that culture cannot be explained without reference to symbols (Deacon, as cited in Temel Eğinli & Nazlı, 2018: 59). In this context, a cultural symbol can be defined as a visual means of expression that reflects a culture's socially manifested behaviors,

mediates social relationships, and constitutes the norms that govern these relationships (Yavuz, 2019: 176). Cultural symbols may also be described as signs that communicate the values and qualities they represent within the framework of culture. According to Yavuz, cultural symbols are phenomena that form the precondition for comprehending specific events and objects within a culture, fundamentally centered around verbal and written linguistic communication (2019: 177). When considering communication, cultural symbols can also be seen as significant conveyors of meaning across cultures. Arı notes that cultural symbols not only reflect the individual and social nature of human beings but also represent the communicative codes between different cultures. In his view, every encounter between individuals and cultures is less a matter of physical contact and more a symbolic interaction. "Cultural meanings and symbols are the most crucial indicators for understanding cultures, analyzing societies, and interacting with other communities; without an understanding of cultural symbols, interpretation, inference, and transmission become impossible" (Arı, 2016: 40–41).

The insights presented regarding the concept of the cultural symbol illustrate that such symbols function as visual and graphic carriers of meaning and communication tools pertaining to the communities and contexts in which they originate. Through cultural symbols, numerous elements and qualities of a particular culture are conveyed and shared—both within that culture and across different cultures. A wide range of meanings, from abstract concepts such as traditions and behaviors, habits, communicative expressions, emotions, thoughts, and narratives, to tangible entities such as architectural structures, cities, institutions and organizations, physical practices, places, and tools, can be represented through cultural symbols. This act of representation occurs in all areas where symbols are made visible. In contemporary environments where daily life unfolds, cultural symbols facilitate communication and comprehension. From public spaces such as streets, shops, squares, and transportation stations to private domains like homes and virtual environments in the digital world, one frequently encounters symbols and cultural symbols. These symbols, as a form of graphic or designed communication, transmit contextual meanings and directions, thereby facilitating and enriching everyday life. Cultural symbols appear on shop signs, on streets, posters on walls, in cities, in nature, labels on goods and services we purchase, book covers and pages we read, and across numerous platforms on our smartphones and computer screens. Also, cultural symbols are embedded in digital games—virtual environments where billions of people

spend significant amounts of time today. In these games, a wide range of symbols, including cultural ones, are present. While they serve practical functions such as providing orientation and information relevant to the gameplay, they also help construct the narrative framework within the game environment. Cultural symbols embedded in the game's narrative influence the player's engagement with the game in various ways and ultimately become a key component in how the game is interpreted and understood.

Relationship Between Narrative and Cultural Symbols

The concept of narrative has been a subject of discussion and development in the context of digital game studies particularly in recent decades. Although narrative had already been the focus of scholarly inquiry in fields such as literature and performing arts prior to the 21st century, it began to be addressed within the scope of digital games starting in the 2000s. Game studies gained academic prominence with the publication of the journal Game Studies by Espen Aarseth in 2001. Aarseth notes that academia began to take games seriously in 2001, as that year marked the organization of the first academic conference dedicated to digital games and the establishment of the first game-related departments in universities (Demirbaş, 2017: 365). In his article published in the first issue of the journal, Aarseth argued that "scholars of literature and cinema tend to analyze video games within the boundaries of their own disciplines, thereby preventing the emergence of a specialized field for video game research" (Şener & Keleş, 2020: 363). With these assertions, Aarseth positions Ludology in opposition to Narratology in narrative-focused studies on digital games. This stance played a crucial role in the emergence of the Ludology/Narratology dichotomy in the field of game studies. Before delving into definitions of narrative and its various forms, it is useful to briefly address this debate.

In the digital game literature, the narratology-ludology debate holds a significant place, grounded in the question: "Should digital games be interpreted as a continuation of story-telling media such as novels and films, or should they be approached as a unique form of play activity beyond narratology?" (Cansever & Poyraz, 2021: 119). Narratology is essentially a theoretical framework developed for analyzing works belonging to textual and performative art forms such as literature and cinema. Theorists such as Janet Murray and Henry Jenkins argue that narratology can also be applied to digital games, suggesting that game narratives can be interpreted using these techniques. Janet Murray, one of the leading figures of this approach, states

that "regardless of whether they are electronic or not, all games can be considered a form of drama, which is itself a subcategory of narrative" (Erbay, 2021: 525). Therefore, according to the narrative-driven perspective led by Murray, digital games are a continuation of traditional narrative media such as cinema and literature. Previous narrative theories are also applicable to the narratives within digital games, and narratology does not reject the dynamic narrative structures of games (Evren, 2017: 269). Along with Murray, Henry Jenkins also asserts that digital games can be evaluated narratively through the lens of narratology. Furthermore, Jenkins emphasizes that game worlds can present narratives through spatial design. "In Jenkins' theory, games play a significant role in the telling of spatial stories. According to him, spatial narratives can evoke existing stories, stage the events and scenarios within the narrative, embed content that is not directly told, or provide context for the events that unfold" (Gülleb, 2024: 55). In this sense, narratology is a theory rooted in traditional media and proposed by researchers such as Murray and Jenkins as applicable to digital games as well.

On the other hand, ludology is a discipline that analyzes games as systems of rules, mechanics, and structures. Its pioneer, Espen Aarseth, is also the figure behind the first serious academic efforts in game studies. "According to Aarseth, digital games are a new type of text that bear no resemblance to previous forms. What distinguishes this new textual form from traditional narratives is that digital games are fundamentally based on a system of rules rather than a narrative" (Evren, 2017: 269). Jesper Juul, another scholar focused on ludology-based studies, defines games as rule-based systems with variable outcomes in which the player exerts effort to influence the result, and the outcome of gameplay is negotiable (Demirbaş, 2017: 359). Juul's definition is rooted in ludology and centers rules, effort, and gameplay over narrative-driven approaches. This aligns with other ludological definitions. For instance, Markku Eskelinen rejects the idea that games can be studied as narratives and instead defines gameplay as a structured practice. This practice is assessed within a holistic framework comprising goals, tools, rules, equipment, and directive actions (Eskelinen, 2001). Gonzalo Frasca similarly argues that the fact that video games rely on an alternative semiotic structure known as simulation distinguishes their mechanics. "In this regard, games are a new form that cannot be examined using traditional narrative analysis tools" (Ata, 2013: 1710). In light of these perspectives, it is evident that narratology and ludology are distinct yet valuable analytical frameworks developed to examine digital games. In his study that brings a new perspective to the debate

between these two concepts, Demirbaş states that the current state of the narratology-ludology dichotomy has not led to reconciliation. He argues that as long as the field of game studies rejects the “theories that consider games in relation to culture,” which he views as utopian, it will lag behind in terms of inclusivity (Demirbaş, 2017: 370). While it is clear that gameplay elements such as mechanics and rules are crucial in digital games, it is also important to note that games often possess narratives—both direct and indirect—through gameplay, progression, environment, and characters. Therefore, in conducting research on digital games, drawing insights from both theories will be beneficial for a more comprehensive understanding of their meaning.

In digital games, narrative is fundamentally a concept encompassing the phenomena and elements related to the story and mechanics of the game. While narrative has been a focal point particularly among theorists adopting a narratological approach within game studies, today it is an element employed in numerous studies on games. Definitions offered regarding the concept demonstrate the significance of narrative within the realm of games. In his study on narrative structures in digital games, Ip argues that the definition of narrative in the context of digital games is more flexible compared to “story” or “plot.” “While the element of time and the sequence of events are strictly structured within the story, and causality is encapsulated in the plot, narrative determines how these events are expressed, in what sequence and duration they are presented, and how frequently the events are revealed” (Ip, 2010: 106). In her study examining video games as a narrative form, Öncü states that narrative is a general term for discourses that convey an event or situation. According to her, the events depicted in a narrative may be fictional or based on real occurrences (Öncü, 2023: 157). Moreover, not every game necessarily contains a narrative; still, games may include narrative elements to varying degrees. In this regard, Evren suggests that even at a minimal level, games possess an inherent narrative, and the player can complete the game within a programmed virtual environment and structure (2017: 269). Although the programmed and pre-planned structure of games cannot be overlooked, this statement cannot be generalized for all games. Some games, even without an explicit or direct narrative, allow players to construct narrative through gameplay dynamics, spatial elements, and interactivity. Öncü describes these elements as the "language of narrative," identifying key components such as written/oral texts, moving and still visual elements, sound effects, and music. “Narrative in video games gradually unfolds through in-game text flows, animated sequences, and player movements. The player is an indispensable

part of this narrative structure and plays a role in shaping the narrative at various levels" (2023: 158). From this perspective, it is possible to argue that each element within the game world can serve as a narrative component or contribute to the creation of a narrative.

Narrative in games influences the progression of gameplay in various forms and operates through different patterns. Accordingly, it can be stated that narratives generally unfold in diverse ways. One such form is the linear narrative, which follows a predetermined course, with a defined beginning and end, and a fixed progression. For instance, *Red Alert 2*, a game developed by Electronic Arts and released in 2000, which focuses on a fictional war between the Soviet Union and the United States, exemplifies a linear narrative. In the game, players select one of the factions and carry out strategic operations against the opposing side, following a pre-scripted storyline to complete the game. In contrast, non-linear or open-ended narratives enhance the player's ability to influence the pacing of in-game events, allowing them to alter the sequence in which specific events are triggered, thereby making a significant contribution to interactive storytelling (Ip, 2010: 109). A good example of this type is *GTA: San Andreas*, released by Rockstar Games in 2004. While the protagonist in the game is directed toward a specific ending, the sequence and timing of missions leading to that end are left to the player's discretion. The game also includes numerous side missions that further enhance its open-ended structure. Alongside linear and open-ended narratives, which emphasize the structure of progression, other narrative types such as embedded and spatial narratives have also been explored within game studies. Regarding embedded narrative, Henry Jenkins suggests that in games with this structure, the game space functions as a kind of "memory palace" that players must decipher in order to reconstruct the plot (Jenkins, 2004). Similarly, Domsch argues that in games containing embedded narratives, players shape the story through their interactions with various characters and objects. Textual, visual, or auditory narratives integrated into the game world grant the narrative structure a non-linear quality, and these mini-narratives—often tied to the main storyline—can be accessed by the player at any time (Domsch, 2019: 113). An example of a game employing this type of narrative is *BioShock Infinite*, developed by Irrational Games and released in 2013. Although the main character progresses toward a predefined ending, the game embeds complex thematic elements—such as religion, racism, parallel universes, revolution, and class division—through symbolic layers, allowing for the construction of multifaceted meanings.

Similar to embedded narrative, spatial narrative is a type of storytelling that emerges through the meanings uncovered by the player's exploration of the game environment. In such games, players discover the narrative through experiences that rely on perceiving details such as traversing the space, examining the environment, and interacting with objects. In reference to spatial narrative, Attademo discusses the concept of "post-narrative spatialization," asserting that space has evolved from being merely a visual extension of classical narrative structures into a direct means of organizing the story itself (Attademo, 2023). In an article published in *Killscreen*, Biswas notes that carefully constructed environments enable a distinct form of storytelling and that the concept of “environmental storytelling,” wherein spatial elements are used to reveal or advance the narrative, has become something of a buzzword in game development circles (2016). With the advancement of computer and game design technologies and the evolution of game design into a multidisciplinary field, the possibilities in game development have significantly expanded. Consequently, game environments can now be created with greater detail, realism, and complexity. As a result, game spaces have moved beyond being mere settings in which gameplay unfolds; they have become central components through which the game and its narrative are shaped. From pavement textures to architectural structures, from in-game vehicles to items, a multitude of details within the space—along with their positioning and design—reflect narrative elements. Cultural symbols, previously defined in the preceding section, also appear within game environments as narrative components and await discovery by the player, contributing to the construction of the game’s narrative.

Cultural symbols in digital games are elements that players may encounter both in the user interface and within the game environment. These symbols function as significant components of environmental design, directly influencing gameplay, perception, and the overall coherence of meaning. Gülleb emphasizes that spatial design in game narratives is not merely a visual process; rather, it can directly shape the flow of the narrative, its diversity, and the player's experience (2024: 55). As elements of both spatial design and gameplay, cultural symbols become integral to game mechanics and design, symbolizing specific meanings. “As a form of presentation, games are narratives of cultural reenactment. By their very structure, games reflect parallels between narratives and the conditions experienced within them” (Bolat, 2023: 166). Games that embody cultural characteristics and

incorporate elements from real life provide virtual spaces in which cultural symbols become visible through the environments they construct.



Figure 1. Vinewood placeholder in GTA San Andreas.

Figure 1 displays the Vinewood landmark featured in the game *GTA San Andreas*. This landmark also gives its name to the neighborhood in which it is located. It symbolizes Hollywood—the center of the American film industry—and represents the broader cinematic culture of the United States. Within the game, the Vinewood district includes film studios and mansions belonging to artists. The main character, Carl Johnson (CJ), undertakes various missions in these film studios and villas. As the player advances through the city streets toward the Vinewood sign, the sense of entering a space loaded with specific cultural meanings drawn from the real world becomes increasingly apparent. Considering that the three cities featured in *GTA San Andreas* are inspired by Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Las Vegas, it can be argued that this element transposes the Hollywood landmark—along with the cultural meanings it embodies such as cinema, actors, actresses, film, art, fame, and wealth—into the game world through the fictional Vinewood sign.

Cultural symbols featured in games can manifest as spatial elements, contributing to both the environment and the narrative, or they may appear within the game space through various graphic symbols. As one of the most significant representatives of cultural symbols, graphic images are encountered by players in numerous aspects of games—from icons and graphical user interfaces to promotional visuals and in-game environments.

These graphic images play a crucial role in shaping the game's narrative by conveying cultural meanings into the game world.



Figure 2. A hieroglyph image from Serious Sam The First Encounter.

Figure 2 presents a screenshot from the game *Serious Sam: The First Encounter*, designed by Croteam in 2001. In this screenshot, the environment is viewed from the perspective of the primary character, and the weapons carried by the character are also visible. The character is about to enter an architectural structure. On the front facade of the building, divine illustrations from Egyptian culture and hieroglyphic inscriptions above the entrance can be seen. Since the game is set in Egypt, the environment is richly adorned with architectural elements and graphic illustrations that support the narrative. As the game progresses, players encounter numerous cultural symbols located in both indoor and outdoor spaces—symbols that carry meanings associated with Egypt's prehistoric culture. These symbols render themes such as ancient Egypt, gods and goddesses, pyramids, communication, and power visible within the game space. Among these illustrations, hieroglyphs—one of the earliest known forms of symbolic writing, originating in Egypt—hold particular significance. In this respect, these graphic symbols function as cultural signifiers within the narrative and are integrated into the game space, thereby enhancing the game's narrative through spatial and design elements.

Alongside graphic symbols such as landmarks and hieroglyphs, architectural structures are among the key elements that shape the game environment and render cultural symbolism visible within the space. Architecture constitutes one of the primary components with which players interact in the game world. Through these structures, players are able to complete game-related tasks, navigate the environment, and interpret the various meanings embedded within the spatial design.



Figure 3. Notre Dame Cathedral in Cities Skylines 2.

Figure 3 displays the Notre-Dame Cathedral, one of the iconic landmarks featured in *Cities: Skylines II*, a city-building simulation game developed by Colossal Order in 2023. Similar to titles like *Transport Tycoon* and *SimCity*, *Cities: Skylines II* does not follow a linear progression, nor does it assign a specific character to the player. Instead, players are given the opportunity to construct a city from scratch on a chosen map. During the city-building process, players are responsible for placing essential infrastructure and services such as roads, zoning regulations, electricity, water, heating, education, security, healthcare, waste management, fire departments, parks, and green spaces. As residential, commercial, office, and industrial zones are designated, the population and workforce grow—bringing about challenges similar to those faced in real-world urban planning. One of the player's objectives is to address these challenges and maintain the livability of the city. Within the game, players can place landmark buildings selected from real-world cities, which enhances the visual appeal of the urban landscape and increases the city's tourism potential. These landmark structures—such as the Notre-Dame Cathedral shown in Figure 3—not only bring architectural value but also transfer cultural codes from the real world into the virtual space. In

Cities: Skylines II, where narrative emerges as the space is shaped by the player, such landmarks can be considered cultural symbols that influence both the spatial and narrative dimensions of the game. By contributing historical, touristic, and theological significance to the cities in which it is placed, the Notre-Dame Cathedral exemplifies how cultural meaning from the real world can be embedded into the game environment through symbolic architecture.

Cultural symbols in digital games influence both the direct construction of narrative and the player's re-creation of that narrative. Through this influence, the narrative within the game becomes enriched, layered with realistic and meaningful dimensions. Moreover, cultural symbols in digital games provide a multi-dimensional and functional structure in which different domains of experience—such as traditional knowledge and folk narratives—can be expressed through game storytelling (Arslan, 2022, p. 227). Through this multi-dimensional structure, games can, at times, explicitly incorporate symbols from specific cultures to imbue the game space with culturally specific meanings. At other times, symbols from various cultures coexist within the game, laying the groundwork for a culturally diverse, international narrative. *Euro Truck Simulator 2* stands out as a noteworthy example of a game that enables the creation of such multicultural symbolism and thus merits closer examination in this context.

International Cultural Symbols In Digital Games: Case of Euro Truck Simulator 2

Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2) is a truck-driving simulation game developed by SCS Software and first released in 2012. In the game, the player’s main objective is to earn money by delivering cargo from one location to another using a truck. The game allows players to purchase trucks from various brands and customize them according to their preferences. Additionally, as players earn money, they can hire virtual drivers to work for their company and expand their truck fleet. The game includes a leveling system, and as players progress through levels, they gain the opportunity to enhance skill-based attributes. However, this leveling system eventually reaches a point of completion—although all upgrades may be unlocked, the player's level can still continue to increase. From a gameplay perspective, the game does not have a definitive ending or final goal. Rather, its core purpose is to simulate the experience of truck driving and being on the road within a digital environment. The developers of the game have also permitted the player community to create and integrate unofficial mods. Mod developers

can add various elements to the game, including truck accessories, new vehicles, cities, and special missions. For instance, with map mods such as ProMods, developers design and add regions that are not originally present in the game. However, players are required to manually download and install these unofficial mods on their computers. Furthermore, with mods like TruckersMP, players also have the opportunity to engage in online multiplayer gameplay through different servers. In online maps, there is no artificial traffic within the game, but up to 5,000 players can play simultaneously on the same server.

The game's playable environments are primarily centered around continental Europe. When the game was first released in 2012, the map was limited to countries in Central Europe, the United Kingdom, parts of Italy and France, and regions of Poland. However, the developers have continually expanded the game world by releasing expansion packs (DLCs) nearly every year. Over time, regions such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Scandinavia, France, Italy, the Baltic states, the Eastern Balkans, the Iberian Peninsula, the Western Balkans, and Greece have been added to the game, significantly extending the map. The Heart of Russia DLC, which was scheduled for release in 2022, was postponed due to the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war.

In the countries featured in the game, cities and towns are selected by the developers. Since the game world is scaled down to 1:20, the environments are not designed on a one-to-one basis. Instead, a method of selection and simplification is employed, whereby significant locations and elements representative of each city are incorporated into the game. In the early years following the game's release, the design language and spatial elements of the added cities were largely similar to one another. What distinguished these cities were their realistic placements on the map and a few symbolic structures positioned in the background. However, over time—and particularly with the release of new DLCs—the game's realism has significantly increased, and the variety of symbolic and iconic elements featured in the game environments has expanded. In place of a limited number of skyscrapers, the game now includes historical buildings, natural formations, realistic streets, public buildings, urban furniture, graphic design elements, and a broader array of cultural symbols. This development can be seen as having contributed positively to the game's sense of realism.

Although Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2) does not follow a fully linear or open-ended narrative structure, it still contains narrative elements. Missions, world details, cities, and truck customization contribute to a symbolic narrative layer. Cultural symbols—such as architecture, graphic elements, roads, and geography—deliver embedded narratives that players uncover through exploration, shaping a spatial narrative. Trucks, as part of the environment, further reinforce this structure. Culturally symbolic paint jobs and color choices become tools for narrative expression, made visible through screenshots, videos, and multiplayer interactions. Thus, ETS2 offers more than a driving simulation; it enables players to integrate personal and cultural narratives into the gameplay.



Figure 4. A paint job showing Icarus in ETS2 Greek Mythology Pack.

In Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2), players can purchase a wide range of international truck paint job packs. Each of these packs is designed to represent a specific country and contains illustrations or photographs featuring national flags and elements that symbolize the culture of that country. On the ETS2 store page on Steam, there are a total of 36 such paint job packs available for purchase. While the majority of these packs are related to European countries in which the game is set, there are also packs that representing countries from other continents, including Brazil, China, Australia, South Korea, Japan, and Canada. As shown in Figure 4, one of the paint jobs included in the Greek Mythology Pack features the winged horse Pegasus, along with other designs depicting Medusa, Hydra, Cerberus, and the Minotaur. Against a dark blue background with a light blue stripe and snowy mountains, the Pegasus figure positioned toward the rear of the truck creates a semantic association with Greece and Greek mythology. Through such

liveries, players are given the opportunity to incorporate mythological and cultural meanings into the narrative of the game environment.



Figure 5. A paint job showing a drawing from Altamira in ETS2 Spanish Paint Jobs Pack.

Figure 5 displays the Altamira paint job, which is part of the Spanish Paint Job Pack offered as purchasable content in Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2). The pack also includes Across the Oceans, representing exploration ships; Toro Bravo, symbolizing bullfighting; Flamenco; and two variations of the Spanish flag. The Altamira paint job features the depiction of a bull figure from the cave wall. This cave holds a significant place in art history as it contains some of the earliest known examples of human artistic production. "According to experts, the paintings in Altamira Cave—one of the first caves to be discovered—are estimated to have been created around 20,000 years ago" (Batur & Kuyucuk, 2022: 81). Furthermore, the inclusion of the bull figure evokes Spain's famous bullfighting tradition, thereby enriching the layers of meaning associated with this cultural symbol. Through the combination of bullfighting, flamenco dancing, the Spanish flag, and ship imagery presented in the pack alongside Altamira, Spain's historical, artistic, and cultural symbols can be integrated into the game's narrative via the trucks.

Figure 6 below shows the Mascatii (masks) paint job included in the ETS2 Romania Paint Job Pack. In addition to Mascatii, the Romania Paint Job Pack also features Wings of the Night illustration and two Romanian flag-themed paint jobs. Mascatii refers to masked figures that appear in various traditional ceremonies in Romania. These masked characters vary in appearance from village to village; for instance, in the village of Caila, they are known as hâzi. They wear garments made from rags, while their face masks and helmets are

typically crafted from tree bark. They also wear bells (talăngi) around their waists and carry whips or sticks in their hands (Sigmirean, 2018, p. 139).



Figure 6. A paint job showing a Mascatii masks in ETS2 Romanian Paint Jobs Pack.

The inclusion of the Mascatii figure into the game environment through vehicle paint jobs introduces a powerful cultural symbol into the spatial narrative. Similarly, the Wings of the Night paint job from the same pack visually references Dracula, thereby incorporating another culturally resonant Romanian symbol into the game space. The examples presented in Figures 4, 5, and 6 function as elements of spatial narrative that players can integrate into the game environment, facilitating the inclusion of symbols from various nations and cultures into the gameplay experience. As a result, players are given the opportunity to introduce new narrative layers beyond the embedded storylines of the game world. On World of Trucks, a platform operated by the game's developers, players share in-game photographs of their trucks and the



Figure 7. Mostar Bridge in Bosnia & Herzegovina in ETS2 West Balkans DLC.

surrounding game environment. Additionally, some players record gameplay footage to create video content for platforms like YouTube, or stream their sessions live across various platforms. By sharing their gameplay experiences, these players add new narrative dimensions to ETS2—a game primarily structured around embedded and spatial storytelling—particularly through the cultural symbolism embedded in the paint jobs they apply to their trucks.

Figure 7 depicts the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina, featured in the West Balkans DLC, which was added to ETS2 in 2023. "In addition to being one of the most significant Ottoman architectural works in the Balkans, the Mostar Bridge also serves as a symbol. Built over the Neretva River, the bridge has connected people from both banks—each side home to communities with distinct ethnic and religious identities" (Orhan & Türk, 2018, p. 255). This symbolic structure, imbued with numerous cultural meanings, is included in ETS2 as an embedded narrative element. While driving through Mostar, players can observe the bridge and examine its designed details. Through its presence in the game, players indirectly gain an awareness of the structure and its cultural significance. As a site that reflects traces of the Ottoman past in Europe and symbolizes the union of diverse ethnic communities, the Mostar Bridge functions as a prominent cultural symbol within the narrative of the game space.



Figure 8. Reichstag in Germany in ETS2 (after 1.53 update).

Figure 8 shows the Reichstag (parliament building), which was added to the in-game representation of Berlin, Germany, through a 2024 update to Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2). As both the former and future seat of the German parliament, the Reichstag has played a significant role in Germany's history over the past century and is today regarded as a monument, a symbol, and a site of remembrance (Andra & Fink, 1997). Given its monumental and

symbolic significance, the Reichstag can be considered a cultural symbol for Germany. By integrating this structure into the game environment, ETS2 embeds a culturally significant narrative element within its virtual space. When players encounter the building during their in-game exploration, they are simultaneously exposed to the architectural and historical meanings associated with the city in which it is located.

Similar to the various graphic paint jobs applied to trucks and the architectural structures encountered within the game world, statues and monuments can also be regarded as cultural symbols that contribute to the narrative and spatial composition of the game. In real life, statues that possess monumental qualities and commemorate significant historical events or figures associated with a society's culture can similarly render cultural meanings visible when represented in digital games. Monuments and statues that have become symbolic of the cities in which they are located can, when integrated into the game environment, allow players to engage with those same cultural meanings. Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2) features numerous examples of such statues and monuments embedded in the game space, each contributing to the cultural narrative experienced by players during gameplay.



Figure 9. Pehlivan Statue in Edirne in ETS2 Road to the Black Sea DLC.

Figure 9 depicts the wrestler statue located in the city of Edirne, featured in the *Road to the Black Sea* DLC added to *Euro Truck Simulator 2* (ETS2) in 2019. Edirne is a historically significant city, renowned for hosting the traditional Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival for centuries. Özdemir and Çalışkan emphasize the cultural significance of oil wrestling for Edirne, noting that it was inscribed in 2010 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as a unique cultural asset (2018: 518). The inclusion of a statue representing this tradition within the game space embeds the cultural codes of oil wrestling—an event of profound

historical and cultural value for both Edirne and Turkey—into the narrative of the game in an implicit yet meaningful way.



Figure 10. Partisan's Glory Memorial in Luga in ETS2 Beyond the Baltic Sea DLC.

Figure 10 shows the Partisan's Glory Memorial monument and statue located in the city of Luga, featured in the *Beyond the Baltic Sea* DLC added to *Euro Truck Simulator 2* (ETS2) in 2018. This monument was erected in honor of the military units that fought for the Soviet Union. "Monuments dedicated to soldiers who fought in the Red Army during World War II are the most common type of war memorial in the world" (Gabowitsch, 2024). Such monuments are dispersed across nearly every part of the former Soviet Union, with Russia being the most prominent example. Although some countries have chosen to remove these monuments, many still remain throughout the region. The inclusion of this particular monument in the Russian city of Luga references Russia's history, its wartime past, and the Soviet era within the game environment. These culturally significant elements of Russian heritage are symbolized through the memorial, and through this symbolic presence, historical and cultural meanings are embedded within the game's spatial narrative, thereby enriching the embedded storytelling structure.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored how narrative in digital games is shaped by various symbols that are graphical and design-based products interwoven with cultural meanings. Cultural symbols are communicative signs that represent numerous elements formed by societies—such as customs, understandings, teachings, and productions—and in doing so, they signify and convey the culture to which they belong. These symbols carry and transmit semantic messages specific to their associated cultures, serving as crucial elements in cultural representation. They communicate the cultural codes not only to individuals within that culture but also to those from other cultural

backgrounds. In this way, numerous characteristics of a given culture can be represented through cultural symbols.

In various aspects of our lives, we frequently encounter cultural symbols. As semantic representations of a culture, cultural symbols can appear in many forms and complexities—ranging from simple shapes to intricate graphic illustrations, from architectural structures to verbal and linguistic narratives. Digital games, which have become one of the most commonly engaged platforms today—serving not only entertainment but also a variety of needs—also incorporate cultural symbols in diverse ways. These symbols may appear in the emblems representing the game, in its graphical user interface, in promotional materials, or directly within the game environment as elements carrying cultural meaning. Once embedded into the game world, such elements may take the form of architectural structures, wall paintings, graphic motifs, patterns of urban development, vegetation, music, or sound effects. In Euro Truck Simulator 2 (ETS2), one of today's most popular simulation games, cultural symbols have likewise been integrated into the game environment in various forms.

In *Euro Truck Simulator 2* (ETS2), which does not follow a linear or open-ended narrative structure, narrative elements are instead presented in spatial and embedded forms. Architectural structures, works of art, and graphic designs found within the game world contribute to the emergence of an international narrative that reflects various countries and cultures. Paint jobs applied to trucks by players, as well as architectural features and artistic monuments such as sculptures—especially those located in city centers—enrich the spatial narrative by bringing symbolic meanings from diverse cultures into the game environment. Through their personal choices, players integrate culturally meaningful narratives into the game world by selecting paint job sets that reflect specific traditions or identities. At the same time, pre-existing elements within the game—such as architecture and sculptures based on real-world references—render cultural meanings visible through an embedded narrative structure.

The visual examples and explanations provided above aim to offer a clearer understanding of how cultural symbols can shape both the environments and narratives of digital games. This study is also considered significant in terms of illustrating the relationship between digital games and various disciplines such as architecture, symbolism, and graphic design.

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