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South Korean videogame narratives: exploring historical trauma through interactive memory

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Date of submission: February 2024

Accepted in: July 2024

Published in: February 2025

Recommended citation

Trigo Maldonado, Álvaro. 2025. «South Korean videogame narratives: exploring historical trauma through interactive memory». *Artnodes*, no. 35. UOC. [Accessed: dd/mm/aa]. <https://doi.org/10.7238/artnodes.v0i35.423991>



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Abstract

In contemporary times, video games have evolved from mere entertainment to forms of artistic expression, prompting increased academic scrutiny of their narratives and cultural significance. South Korea has emerged as a global hub for competitive e-sports, particularly within its vibrant Internet Café (PC Bang) culture; yet, the recognition of its video game industry's significance, especially in the mobile sector, has only recently come to light.

This research explores the interplay of hegemony and memory in East Asian video games. It examines how the dominance of the United States and Japan shapes the narratives and tropes found in triple-A titles. Additionally, it investigates how the economic rise of countries like South Korea empowers them to challenge prevailing discourses, especially regarding historical events such as the Japanese Colonial Rule.

It analyses contemporary Korean independent video games that engage with painful national memories, examining how these games convey historical narratives and their significance in shaping collective memory. Additionally, the study explores the potential impact of these narratives on users, offering insights into the evolving landscape of video games as potential carriers of historical memory.

Keywords

South Korean video games; Korean history; video games and memory; historical trauma; interactive history

*Narrativas en los videojuegos coreanos: exploración del trauma histórico a través de la memoria interactiva***Resumen**

En tiempos contemporáneos, los videojuegos han evolucionado de mero entretenimiento a formas de expresión artística, lo que ha provocado un mayor escrutinio académico de sus narrativas y su importancia cultural. Corea del Sur se ha convertido en un centro global de deportes electrónicos competitivos, especialmente dentro de su vibrante cultura de Internet Café (PC Bang). Sin embargo, el reconocimiento de la importancia de su sector de videojuegos, especialmente en el sector móvil, ha salido a la luz recientemente.

Esta investigación explora la interacción de la hegemonía y la memoria en los videojuegos del este asiático. Examina cómo el dominio de los Estados Unidos y Japón da forma a las narrativas y temas que se encuentran en los títulos de triple A. Además, investiga cómo la potencia económica de países como Corea del Sur les permite cuestionar los discursos predominantes, especialmente en relación con eventos históricos como la ocupación japonesa.

La investigación analiza los videojuegos coreanos independientes contemporáneos que interactúan con dolorosos recuerdos nacionales, examinando como estos juegos transmiten narrativas históricas y su importancia en la conformación de la memoria colectiva. Además, el estudio explora el impacto potencial de estas narrativas en los usuarios, ofreciendo información sobre el panorama cambiante de los videojuegos como posibles portadores de la memoria histórica.

Palabras clave

videojuegos surcoreanos; historia coreana; videojuegos y memoria; trauma histórico; historia interactiva

1. Background

Since the 1980s, Japan has held a dominant position in the global video game market, supported by a network of Japanese, American and European holding companies (Chen 2022, 25). The origins of the Korean video game industry are linked to the Sewoon Sangga (세운상가) and Cheonggyecheon (청계천) electronics markets where piracy and copying enabled the public to access foreign imported video games (Jo 2020). This bustling gaming culture, which began in the 80s and lasted until the 90s (Jo 2023), can be regarded as the precursor to the Korean e-sports that would develop decades later, fostering a community of players alongside the gaming industry. Since its emergence, the global gaming industry has been predominantly dominated by the United States and Japan, even though local gaming industries have developed in parallel in several countries. This has prompted scholars to criticize their centrality in historical narratives (Jo 2020).

However, in recent years, other locally created games have increasingly competed with traditional hegemonic game creators. For example, in 2021, the Poland-based company CD Project Red's videogame *Cyberpunk 2077* was the most-played game on the Steam platform, and it sold more than 25 million copies worldwide. In the case of South Korea, *Lies of Pi*, a Korean videogame, won three awards at Gamescom 2022 (Kang *et al.* 2022), an important annual trade fair for video games held in Germany. While such cases can be perceived as exceptions to the rule, it can also be said that the videogame industry in South Korea is changing and developing, especially in certain areas, such as Android-based video games. The diversity of the markets is

also notable, and it is important to emphasize that while in the Western and Japanese markets a console-oriented industry led by Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft occupied the biggest market segment from the 2000s, the East Asian market and more specifically Korea consumed PC games with a focus on competitive online multiplayer gaming (Chen 2022). This helps explain the early emergence of the e-sports industry in South Korea.

This paper aims to analyze recent Korean video games in which narratives deal with the nation's traumatic past and the controversies surrounding them. Considering that the hours dedicated to video game consumption have steadily grown in recent years, they have gained importance equal to that of other mass media such as television (Venegas 2020, 15). As Venegas claims in his work, video games can be perceived as a sort of memory rather than history (*ibid.*, 46-47). When compared to the portrayal of history in other media, such as cinema or literature, historical video games share the fact that there is a strategy of selecting specific historical facts while discarding others according to the developer's intentions and objectives. Thus, inevitably, the resulting historical video games constitute representations of a past elaborated from the present in which the insights and thoughts of developers are reflected. In that regard, they differ from historical facts, but as with any other popular media, they have the potential to shape the collective memory of the historical episodes they represent. Consequently, their narratives do not only have a potential impact on the ways that Koreans remember their past but can also influence the perception that consumers from other nationalities may have of the country. A fundamental and much-debated difference between video

games and more traditional forms is their interactivity, which arguably allows players to reach a higher degree of immersion in the narratives proposed by historical games. Chapman defines this greater degree of interactivity as “doing” or taking actions within a game’s rules. On the contrary, “reading” is defined as those activities in games like those involving more conventional media such as books or films (Chapman 2016, 31). In non-linear games, our “doing” is understood as the actions taken that can affect the development of the plot and thus, our “reading” as players. On the more basic levels, even linear games require us to succeed in completing a series of tasks to advance in the story, giving players both a higher level of implication and a sense of reward whenever they manage to complete such tasks.

In video games, history can be conveyed through a variety of genres; for example, action games set in historical wars have often been criticized by scholars for being oriented towards the players enacting violence, offering glorified inaccurate representations of events (Hartman *et al.* 2021). On the other hand, it is common to find stronger narratives in the graphic adventure genre due to its characteristics, which makes it a genre prone to narrative-oriented games. Before dealing with recent specific examples, in the next sections I will argue how changes on the global stage have made it possible for smaller industries to produce counter-hegemonic discourses and how video game narratives have not been exempted from controversies in Korea and other East Asian countries when dealing with the past.

2. Video games: hegemony and memory in East Asia

The predominance of specific narratives and stereotypes in triple-A video games, those with the biggest budgets and distribution, mainly produced in the United States and Japan, is arguably due to the significant influence these countries hold over the global gaming industry. In his work, Enzo Traverso distinguishes between strong and weak memories. Weak memories are upheld by nations and groups lacking such power. Traverso exemplifies this by referring to the memory of the victims of the Nanjing massacre perpetrated by the Japanese army in 1937. Similarly, South Korea’s ascent as one of the world’s most powerful economies has dramatically enhanced its ability to introduce historical and cultural elements to a global audience. Moreover, it has enabled South Korea to challenge the narrative space of memory, shedding light on the suffering of its people during the Japanese Colonial Rule (1910-1945) and demanding apologies from Japan. This is well represented in the case of the “comfort women”, a euphemistic term that refers to women who were victims of sexual slavery at the hands of the Japanese army. The system inflicted institutionalized sexual violence by imprisoning women to provide sexual services to the Japanese military at the war front. It is estimated that around 200,000 women, mostly of Korean origin, were forced into this system (Kim 2016, 147), though exact numbers remain subject to controversy. In recent years, their story has been presented

through different popular media, perhaps one of the most representative cases being *Grass*, the bestselling comic by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim, which has been translated into several languages. Such narratives have sometimes caused diplomatic strains between Korea and Japan, as it occurred during the 2014 comic exhibition in Angoulême (France). The event included an exhibition on Korean comics addressing comfort women, which prompted a protest from the Japanese ambassador in France, Suzuki Yōichi, who lamented in a press conference that the comics festival was becoming a site of international politics (Berndt 2016, 144). The embassy attempted to counter the discourse of Korean comics by distributing their own informative flyers, and certain revisionist artists in Japan even created comics to deny the existence of comfort women. Considering such examples, as argued by Ahn, it is possible to conclude that the rise of China and the Korean wave have radically transformed the Japan-centric model of imagined regional integration, which has led to a decrease in Japan’s influence over regional politics, a geopolitical shift that has caused or renewed tensions and conflicts within the region (Ahn 2021, 124). Similarly, as video games have the potential to convey historical narratives, they can become significant transmitters of memories for society and may undeniably impact what Maurice Halbwachs defined as collective memory. This concept departs from the idea of memory not just as an individual mental construct but as something that can be shared and serve as a source of collective identification (Berenskötter 2023, 20). It is essential to note that the creation process of collective memory implies a process of recollection or remembering. Therefore, the resulting narratives are always something different from the individual memories they intend to reproduce. For that reason, as will be seen in the next section, popular media representations of the past become controversial when they challenge the constructed collective memory of a community. Eventually, this may even lead to censorship, sometimes imposed by states and at other times by the pressure of consumers.

3. Controversies and censorship in video games

Dealing with history in cultural products can become controversial even though carefully made. In the field of video games, bans or censorship can also occur for different reasons. Among them, the depiction of excessive violence, together with sensitive historical or political content, are frequent reasons for law enforcement against video games. It is important to distinguish between two kinds of censorship: “hard censorship” or the one exerted by the state authorities and a “cancel culture” promoted by consumers that has been gaining weight in recent years as state enforcement is generally not that frequent in most countries. As an example of the first category, it is known that in Germany, elements associated with Nazism have been traditionally censored in several games. Related to this, the producers of the Spanish bestselling RTS *Commandos 2 HD* remake decided to censor Nazi imagery beforehand to avoid breaking the law in countries that forbid such imagery (Tamburro 2020).

In East Asia, different games have been censored for their historical portrayals or political stances. In the case of Korea, it is well known that Japanese culture, including video games, was banned for decades until 1998, and these were mostly consumed through illegal copies. However, after the democratization process, state bans on video games in South Korea have been limited to particular instances, especially those war games that contain portrayals of North Korea that could be controversial or raise tensions with the North. In comparison, China has been stricter in banning video games for several reasons. A few years ago, the independent Taiwanese company Red Candle Games, which developed *Detention*, a successful horror game set during the 1960s martial law that was later adapted into a Netflix series, also developed *Devotion*. Only three days after its release, a player reported a meme mocking Chinese Prime Minister Xi Jinping, which led to the game's withdrawal from the international platform Steam. The developers claimed that they took down the image within an hour of the report, but the damage had been done (Liao 2021), and as of 2024, the game has not been distributed again, allegedly due to the pressures received from many Chinese users who complained to Steam. Nowadays, it is possible to find similar instances in which negative consumer reviews lead to bans or censorship of video games in Korea. This would be the case of *The Wednesday*, a Korean video game set during the Japanese colonial period and produced by Gamebridzy. Its title alludes to the protests for comfort women that used to take place every Wednesday in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The game was based on the story of Kim Bok-Dong (김복동, 1926-2019), a real victim of sexual slavery who became a notable activist in demanding apologies from Japan for its crimes against women. The game was supposedly inspired by her saying that if she could go back in time, she would try to save her friends. For that reason, the game's protagonist, Suni, has the power to travel between 1992 and 1945, using her knowledge of our age to change the past and escape the camps where she was held. According to its developers, they wanted to empower victims as protagonists who directly rescue their friends and raise their voices (Ha 2020). Initially, the game was cheered, and the funds for its development were raised online.

As shown in Figure 1, in three months, the developers raised more than 95 million KRW from 3,551 supporters, which, together with the government funding of 300 million, constituted a portion of the total 700 million development cost. However, upon the game's release on the distribution platform Steam, users criticized it. The main reasons behind this were not only the inaccurate treatment of history, but also the alleged lack of gameplay quality and the several unfulfilled promises by its developers. Among others, they promised to donate half of their profits to projects related to comfort women, and the company's CEO attended a parliamentary audit facing criticism about the unfulfilled

promises (Lee 2022). Soon after, the developers requested Steam to withdraw their game due to the controversies and closed their official website and the company's related SNS. As of 2024, the game has received 62 negative reviews out of a total of 117 on Steam. When reading the comments, it becomes obvious that the issues surrounding the promises made by the developers to the users and the fact that donations and government funding were used to create the game may have negatively impacted its reception.

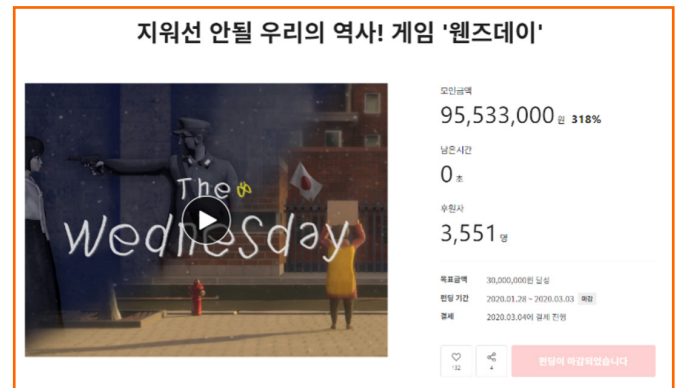


Figure 1. The fundraising campaign result for the game under the title “Our history must not be erased! Game Wednesday”¹

Source: *tumblrbug*

However, objectively speaking, the immersion experience is poor, and many users pointed out in their reviews the outdated technology, lack of voice acting and plot inconsistencies. The user “Metalkim” summarizes the gameplay experience as a cyber museum experience listing events related to comfort women, but not a game.² Similarly, the user “Tuna” questions the gamification of this painful past, arguing that the game presents a heavy emphasis on historical pain to the point of extenuation, without a reflection on why this material, which belongs to a museum, should be gamified.³ Other users pointed out that while developers sought to emulate the success of the above-mentioned Taiwanese game *Detention*, the narrative was too plain and direct in presenting the game's plot. Some of the users felt that contrary to what the developers claimed, the game was not about teaching the comfort women story to a global audience, but about making profit from the victims' suffering.

The outcomes are unsurprising, considering that in Korea, historical inaccuracies alone have sometimes led to the cancellation of specific products due to pressure from the audience. For example, regarding Korean dramas, the case of *Joseon Exorcist* by SBS became notorious just a few days after its release. The drama was criticized for including

1. The capture details that in a period of barely two months, 95,533,000 KRW were raised, corresponding to the donations of 3,551 people and reaching 31.8% of the developer's goal. Proof of the fundraising campaign can still be accessed at: <https://tumblrbug.com/wednesday>.
 2. Original review published on Steam by Metalkim on 3 December 2020: “위안부에 대한 사건을 나열해 놓았을 뿐인, 게임이 아닌 사이버 박물관 체험기”. It is important to note that Metalkim is a notorious Korean game streamer who has been criticized for his game reviews. However, in this particular case, 245 users have marked his review as “useful” in the platform.
 3. Fragment of the review published on Steam by “Tuna” on 3 December 2020: “게임 내내 역사적 아픔에 대한 뜨거움은 질릴 정도로 어필합니다. 근데 박물관이나 전시될 자료를 게임화 하는 이유에 대해선 조금도 생각하지 않았어요”.

Chinese elements and food despite being based on Joseon Dynasty and for improperly portraying King Taejong (태종, 1367-1422) and the crown prince who later became King Sejong (세종, 1397-1450) (Kim 2021). Other recent dramas have faced similar criticism from the audience.

4. Exploring trauma through recent video game narratives

As said before, most of the recent attempts to convey historical trauma in Korean video games have been made from a graphic adventure genre perspective, like *The Wednesday*, as it seems the most convenient choice for plot-centered games that seek to convey historical narratives.

In 2023, GrowingSeeds launched their game *Pechka* on the Steam platform. The game was originally designed for mobile devices, being available on Google Play and the App Store as well. It is part of the MazM series, which, according to their website, “starting from famous stories and classics, aims to make a game for every story in the world including historical events or figures, mythology, and religion”. GrowingSeeds is oriented towards educational games, and their MazM series aims to provide an experience similar to book reading “for those who are unprepared to commit themselves to the long and steady running involved in reading a book”.⁴ Once again, *Pechka* delves into the painful colonial memories with twentieth-century Russia as a backdrop. The protagonist, Petyr, is an interpreter whom the Japanese blackmail to help them gather intelligence on Koreans and eliminate targets. Even though he is Korean, he does not identify with any of the countries, but at the same time, he lives a miserable life full of guilt because of the actions he is forced to commit by the Japanese. The whole atmosphere is gloomy and includes real historical figures, such as An Jung Geun (안중근, 1879-1910), the Korean pro-independence activist who assassinated Hito Hirobumi⁵ in 1909. As happens with similar games, there are a series of collectibles that serve users to get to know additional historical details about specific events or characters. Overall, it is possible to feel that GrowingSeeds wanted to escape the common portrayal of Korean freedom fighters against Japanese oppressors to offer a more psychological story centered on the issue of collaboration, which also became one of the inherited issues of colonialism that remained largely unsolved in the South. The product offers a solid plot, but, similarly to *The Wednesday*, lacks voice acting that could result in a deeper immersive experience for users. Being a game with an interface that heavily relies on displayable menus, from the user’s perspective, one of its main weaknesses is that it does not allow an option to skip dialogues or

run them faster. Since it is a long game that allows changes in narrative according to the dialogue choices made by players at specific points, this characteristic makes it tedious and difficult to replay. Despite this, the game has been mostly praised in the Google Play store with an accumulated rate of 4.1 points out of 5, more than 8,600 reviews and half a million downloads.⁶

In 2021, the independent company Busan Sanai Games launched the action-stealth video game *Wonhon: A Vengeful Spirit* (원혼:복수역). The video game is set in 1920 during the Japanese colonial rule. Its protagonist, a young girl killed by the military, embarks on a quest to seek vengeance. Interestingly, the video game’s narrative departs from the concept of *han* as a characteristic of Korean identity. *Han* (한, 恨) is a cultural construct popularly understood as a uniquely Korean collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief and anger (Kim 2017, 254). It is also understood as related to a history of oppression and injustice that stems from the turbulent history of Korea partly due to its sensitive geopolitical location. However, as pointed out by Kim, it does not just encapsulate collective trauma but also individual hardship originating from one’s life circumstances (Kim 2017, 255).

Even though the concept has been widely debated and rejected as an outdated social construct by some scholars, its circulation prevails to this day. The concept has its origins, or at least its creation was influenced by Yanagi Sōetsu’s (1889-1961) theories on Korean art, such as for example, his theory of Korean “whiteness”, through which he suggested that people wore white hanboks because they were mourning for eternity due to difficult experiences and much suffering (Kim 2007, 31). Thus, it was during the colonial period (1910-1945) that emerged the idea of an essential Korean sorrow that later would be also appropriated by Koreans as a quintessential characteristic of Koreaness related to ethnonationalism. Considering this, it is interesting that the game developers decided to bring *han* as a central element of their video game narrative.

In the first scene of the game, the girl who wears a white hanbok meets a death deity who defines the concept of *han* as “the anger and resentment you feel when someone wrongs you”. The God of death is unable to bring the protagonist’s soul to the afterlife due to her excessive *han*, a feeling which he ironically points out may take a “thousand years or so” for her to overcome. To manage her own *han* through revenge, the protagonist offers to assist other tormented souls if the God of death grants her a chance to return to the world of the living, a wish that he concedes together with certain supernatural powers such as possessing other people’s souls.

From this premise, players use their newly acquired powers to help tormented souls, like the protagonist, who was assassinated by a Jap-

4. The information about the series goals and descriptions can be accessed through their website: <http://mazm.me/>

5. Hito Hirobumi (1841-1909) was a prominent Japanese politician and statesman who served as the first Prime Minister of Japan for several years. Following the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 he became the first Resident-General of Korea in the new established protectorate until he was forced to resign on 14 June 1909 by the Imperial Army months before the full Annexation of Korea in 1910. He was assassinated by the Korean Independence Activist An Jung-geun (1879-1910) on 26 October 1909 who in his trial gave a list of 15 reasons for his action before being sentenced to death.

6. Rating and game reviews can be seen in the game’s Googleplay store page: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.Gseeds.Pechka&hl=en_US [Last accessed: April 2024].

anese general. The tormented souls give the protagonist a series of missions that emphasize the brutality of Japanese soldiers who kill, torture and rape innocent victims. Some of them also allude to Korean independence fighters. Facing rising casualties, the Japanese soldiers hire a Korean shaman to end the situation, diversifying game mechanics since shamans require different approaches than other enemies to be dealt with. Overall, the gameplay reminds us of the popular saga *Commandos* created by the now-defunct Pyro Studios, particularly in its use of vision cones for the enemies, as can be seen below in Figure 2. Players have the ability to check an enemy's range of vision, which is represented by a green cone that may turn red whenever an enemy is alert, either because the player has been detected or because a corpse has been found. Due to its genre, what Chapman defines as “doing” is prevalent over the “reading” in this game, the narrative being mostly presented in the interludes between missions where players have conversations with the wronged souls requesting revenge. This approach contrasts with the games analyzed so far and may attract the attention of players less interested in the niche point-and-click adventure genre.



Figure 2. Capture from *Wonhon: A vengeful spirit*. Soldiers' red vision cone indicates that they are on alert

Source: [YouTube](#), (July 2021). Copyright by Busan Sanai Games. [Accessed: April 2024]

Throughout the game players must adopt different strategies to complete the missions and confront a variety of enemies with varying skills. However, unlike the aforementioned *Commandos*, there is only one playable character. Since there is a cooldown time whenever a supernatural skill is used, players are forced to adopt strategies to hide from enemies when the main character is in human form and, thereby, more vulnerable to attacks.

The protagonist of *Wonhon* seems to metaphorically represent the fate of the Korean nation under Japanese oppression, embodied in a

young, innocent girl who wears a hanbok as a symbol of her Koreaness. To date, this game has received mixed reviews on the Steam distribution platform. While many users have rated it positively, the main weaknesses pointed out by others are the repetitive nature of the tasks from a user experience perspective. Even though the game integrates new enemies and challenges, most of the missions rely on the same patterns (eliminate enemies, retrieve objects or rescue hostages), and there is a lack of development of the protagonist's skills that remain the same from the beginning. However, similarly to *Pechka*, different users emphasize its original plot and historical setting in a positive light, which is significant as they convey narratives of the colonial period from a Korean perspective that may be unfamiliar to many international gamers.⁷

At last, among recent games that explore Korean historical traumas, it is important to mention *Unfolded Camellia Tales* (언폴디드 동백이야기), a game developed by Cosdots and distributed on Steam since 2021 which seems to be a further development of their shorter mobile phone games titled *Unfolded: Old Wounds* (2018) and *Unfolded: Massacre* (2019) distributed on Google Play. The game is a point-and-click graphic adventure set on the Korean island of Jeju that reminds players of LucasArts classics. According to the developers, this specific genre was selected as the most appropriate for narrative-oriented games (Cosdots 2020, 2, 26). Its beautifully crafted visuals stand out in comparison to other games. In the prologue, players control a man whose father has disappeared. Upon registering his apartment, we discover a diary, and a flashback takes us back in time to 1948 to experience the story of the protagonist, a boy who wanted to become a poet and lived in Uigwi village on the Korean island of Jeju. Through the protagonist's memories, the video game addresses the Jeju massacre, one of the most traumatic events in the recent history of Korea. According to *The Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report*, between 25,000 and 30,000 people died during this massacre, which constituted 10% of the island's population (Yang 2018, 41). The Jeju 4.3 Incident or Jeju Uprising emerged as a protest against the elections that were going to be held in the United States-occupied half of Korea, which were considered likely to lead to a permanent division of the country. From 1945, the island had been ruled by people's committees without much mainland interference, and President Syngman Rhee⁸ (이승만, 1875-1965) blamed the uprising on alien communist agitators, though the committees had no significant ties with the North (Cumings, 2005, 219). The crimes committed by the South Korean authorities and the US-AMGIK (United States Army Military Government in Korea) were silenced and censored for decades. Recognition and reparation for the victims only began in the early 2000s with the establishment of the Jeju 4.3

7. For example, among others, the user DirectionChallenged remarks: “Each episode is SO heart-tearing, worst of all, they are all TRUE STORIES of Korean history. The darkest time in history. Yes the characters and specific events are fictional but these kinds of things really happened.” (15 July 2021), user Ivolkova: “I was very hooked by the fact that the game raises important social problems such as domestic violence, child abuse, and the cruelty of war. Since I prefer to follow the plot of the game, I'm not so picky about the gameplay mechanics...” and other users such as BITEME!XD or Overseer Nicolai quoted the interesting plot as a positive aspect of the game in their reviews (posted on the 20 August 2021 and 24 March 2023 respectively). All of them are available at the Steam platform: https://store.steampowered.com/app/1294340/Wonhon_A_Vengeful_Spirit/#app_reviews_hash. [Accessed: 2 May 2024].

8. Syngman Rhee (이승만) was the first President of South Korea from 1948 until 1960 when he was forced to resign and fled to spend the rest of his life in Hawaii (USA) in the context of the widespread student-led April Revolution against his authoritarian rule.

Committee, which was tasked with investigating the truth surrounding the massacre.

In an interview, Kim Hoemin (김희민), Cosdot's CEO, explains how he drew inspiration for this game after watching the presidential speech on the 70th anniversary of the Jeju 4.3 Incident on television in 2017, when he realized how this story had been superficially overlooked during his secondary education and headed to a bookstore to buy the bestselling novel *Suni Samchon* by the Jeju writer Han Giyeong (한기영) (Cosdots 2020). It is important to note that the author suffered repression for his writings on the massacre. In fact, after the publication of *Suni Samchon*, he was arrested and tortured by South Korean authorities in 1978. Thus, until more recently, it has not been possible to access much of the information related to this massacre, and even now, as pointed out by Kim, many people in the peninsula do not commonly know the details. Raising awareness about it was one of the main reasons for him to propose and develop this project (Cosdots 2020).

Perhaps, *Unfolded Camellia Tales* is the simplest among the previously analyzed games in terms of “doing” because, although we need to accomplish a series of interactive tasks, they do not impact the development of the plot. The lighthearted dialogues and characters in most of the scenes contribute to making users feel a sharper contrast when the dark and tense moments related to its traumatic historical background unfold.



Figure 3. Herman hiding from soldiers in a capture of *Unfolded Camellia Tales*' promotional trailer in Steam

Source: Capture. Copyright by Cosdots

As shown in Figure 3, throughout the adventure Herman is a witness to the tragic events unfolding on his home island. This scene, featuring soldiers aiming at innocent locals, contrasts with others where the protagonist has innocent conversations with friends. At a certain point, the game allows us to compose poems inspired by the protagonist's experiences, which can be seen as a strategy to

help players feel more emotionally connected to him. Historical references can also be found in certain conversations and collectibles. When Herman enters the academy (formerly the village assembly hall until committees were banned), the narrative touches upon Yo Un-hyung (여운형, 1886-1947), a political activist who became the president of the short-lived People's Republic of Korea (1945-1946), endeavoring to bridge the gap between the opposing factions until his assassination. When interrogated about the soldier's behavior, the same character, a war veteran, mentions that: “Uniforms have the power to paralyze people's thoughts. In a military uniform, even a normal person becomes a monster.” (Cosdots 2021). This quote is an example of the ways in which developers did not just seek to raise awareness on the topic of the massacre, but also invite to reflect on human condition.

While the interface is very artistic, from the user's experience perspective, some puzzles may be tedious to accomplish as there are no hints on what to do, and most of the time, there is only a single correct approach to the solution. Another issue often mentioned by gamers is the quality of the translation. The game offers translations into a few languages, but according to reviewers, there is room for improvement, especially considering that the plot is a crucial element in this game. Like in *Pechka*, skipping or stopping dialogues is not possible. However, the plot develops immersively, particularly in the second half of the game.

Considering all this, it can be argued that video games like *Unfolded Camellia* play an important role in conveying this long-silenced traumatic narrative to both local and global gamers even though its reception has been modest compared to the previous games. If we look at reviewers' opinions in Steam, some Korean users even recognize that experiencing this game was their first time learning about the Jeju 4.3 Incident, and others emphasize the importance of its historical message.⁹

Conclusions

In recent years, an increasing number of Korean independent game developers have committed to portraying historical narratives in their video games. The economic development and expansion of Korean popular culture, coupled with the emergence of international distribution platforms like Steam, have created conditions that allow larger global audiences to access these games and gain insights into the Korean perspective on certain traumatic historical events. While the analyzed games may not enjoy the widespread distribution of triple-A games, their value in presenting specific stories to both global and local audiences should not be underestimated.

9. Among others, Korean user Hyungjunseo100 mentions: “I learned about such events in Jeju Island for the first time while playing this game” (27 March 2021); user VasoKolbaso concludes his review saying: “Definitely worth taking, providing aesthetic pleasure, enlightenment, mental stimulation and setting an anti-war tone” (25 March 2024); Harle mentions: “I didn't know anything about this incident before playing this game, but it seems that a lot of care was put into depicting it. Even for people with no interest in history, there is still a good story to be found, about surviving with your family through trying times” (27 March 2021), Lucky Shot says: “It has a really compelling storyline and an interesting encyclopedia” (14 August 2021). Available at: https://store.steampowered.com/app/1357990/Unfolded_Camellia_Tales/#app_reviews_hash. [Accessed: May 2024].

From an international perspective, the analyzed games offer significant insights into events that may not be well-known outside Korea. Particularly, all of them give a voice to fictional victims of a traumatic past. From a local standpoint, these games hold significance for Korean gamers as they contribute to the existing collective memory of the past they portray. It is precisely this significance that often creates tension within East Asia, especially regarding sensitive issues like the Colonial Period, where the circulation of Korean memories has become more pronounced than in the past.

In today's rapidly changing contemporary society, where the creation and consumption of stories are evolving, these video games provide an interactive experience of historical trauma that engages gamers differently from other media such as novels or films, giving them an active role in the events. At a local level, considering the robust Korean gaming community, there is a growing demand for narratives like those analyzed in this paper. However, it remains challenging to predict whether these desires will be addressed by more game developers, potentially leading to more video games that challenge the dominant American and Japanese narratives prevalent in most mainstream video games.

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