

# Harnessing Cultural Fragrance for Meaningful Game Development

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## Abstract

Games regularly represent fictional and real-world cultures through narrative and environmental design. This representation is sometimes designed and considered, and other times is an unintended outcome of creating an interactive game world. For real-world cultures, this can result in experiences that acknowledge and spotlight elements of culture but are often skin-deep representations. This paper examines games, and the development practices, where cultural representation is the core design pillar. For this, I introduce the concept of cultural fragrance (Pepe, 2015), distilling cultural identity into an essence, which drives all design decisions. This paper defines and contextualises cultural fragrance through analysis of narrative games that are culturally odourless, lacking in distinct cultural identity, or a mixture of cultural identities which combine to form an identity abstracted from a specific culture of origin. Game development processes and their role in mixed culture creation are also considered. Two case study projects are presented: a Scottish-Gaelic-themed game jam, *Kilted Otter*, that aimed to inspire game development through the provision of cultural narratives and an experience report of an ongoing game project based on Outer Hebridean cultural heritage, *Waulking the Tweed*. These games seek to outline key considerations for culture-first narrative game development.

In designing cultural fragrance, developers must first encapsulate a cultural experience — the fragrance, and then examine how this can be embedded in design and portrayed playfully. Developers should then navigate the extent to which they are prepared to abstract culture and as a result, compromise on the project's authenticity. I examine the lessons from media and case study analysis and share strategies for fellow practitioners to create culturally meaningful, fun games.

This paper discusses how real-world culture is represented in games, and the benefits of adopting a culturally fragrant identity to game development to enable more authentic cultural representation.

Pepe, F., (2015) 'Odorless, Fragrant and Spicy – The many flavours of foreign culture in gaming', *Game Developer*. Available at: <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/audio/odorless-fragrant-and-spicy—the-many-flavours-of-foreign-culture-in-gaming> (Accessed: 6th May 2024).

## Keywords

Culture, Authenticity, Cultural Representation, Games, Narrative, Indie Development, Cultural Fragrance, Cultural Scent, Cultural Odour, Essence

## Introduction

Video games regularly represent fictional and real-world cultures as an intrinsic element of their design. Through their interactive nature, video games can represent culture via narrative, rule sets, mechanics, audio, and environmental design. Culture is a contended and complex concept but within this provocation, culture is defined as the social practices, beliefs and locations belonging to a specific people. Mainstream or AAA video games tend to focus on the representation of fictional

cultures. Less often do we see direct authentic representations of real-world cultures and languages in games. The real world may sometimes be a consideration during the game's development process; used to help shape and form the game's final design, however, often, where the real world is used as an inspiration, cultural representation is frequently an act of artistic licensing rather than authentic curation to represent a culture. Such an approach is illustrated by games such as *Civilization VI* (2K, 2016), a turn-based strategy game. While the game casts a broad representation of real-world historical figures with elements of cultural contexts in the characters' play styles, their implementation is superficial and has little influence on the gameplay or overarching narratives of the game.

Games have the potential to document, spotlight, and celebrate real-world cultures or practices through authentic representation. They possess the capabilities to build and influence social connections and build empathy (Isbister, 2016) which can help to foster a greater understanding of underrepresented cultures and communities. Culturally inspired games such as BAFTA award-winning title, *Never Alone* (E-Line Media, 2014) and *Tchia* (Awaceb, 2023) showcase indigenous folklore, narratives and locations. These titles have been praised by media outlets for their representation of authentic culture (Walker, 2014) (Watts, 2023). The success of these titles illustrate that games have the capacity to portray deeper, authentic in-game representations of real-world cultures. Through deliberate design choices they can enrich the voice and perspective of the experiences and stories video games can offer audiences. We propose that such deliberate design choices and production approaches draw from the concept of Cultural Fragrance. We propose this notion to interpret the extent to which a game's embodiment of culture is intentional and grounded in authentic representation of the culture and how much of it is influenced by the creativity and specific needs of the developers of the game. Introduced by Pepe, who uses the term to denote games that have evidence of cultural influence (Pepe, 2015). We expand the definition to the distilling of cultural identity into an essence and propose that it can be used throughout game development processes to drive and underpin all design decisions. Cultural Fragrance stands in contrast to the concept of culturally odourless design, which is used to describe products that do not indicate a clear country of origin (Iwabuchi, 2007). Though the phrase "culturally odourless" is traditionally defined in the context of the design of Japanese exports, this paper proposes that games can be seen to be Culturally Odourless where they lack in distinct cultural identity, or where the game presents a mixture of cultural identities which combine to form an identity abstracted from a specific culture of origin.

To explore, define, and illustrate the application of the concept of Cultural Fragrance this paper will present an analysis of three popular narrative-based games and explore how Cultural Fragrance may be used as a framework to produce games with a culture first design approach. This analysis will map games across a continuum from those that could be considered Culturally Odourless, to Culturally Scented and through to Culturally Fragranced with regards to the degree of cultural representation demonstrated within their respective designs. We will consider game development processes and their role in mixed culture creation. This paper will focus on narrative games because the benefits of storytelling and offers an easily identifiable foothold to include real-world cultural influence in a game design though this concept is intended to be transferable across a range of genres. Following this, we present an example of how cultural fragrance can inform culture first design methods to enhance authentic representation of culture in games. We propose that the development process is a key factor in the intentional representation of a culture in a game.

## Cultural Fragrance in Games:

### Culturally Odourless:

As discussed earlier, Culturally Odourless games offer players games that lack a distinct cultural identity or origin. *Final Fantasy XV* (Square, 2016) offers players a distinctly Culturally Odourless

game. Based in the world known as Eos, it offers resemblances to the real world without being specifically distinct. The player traverses through deserts, beach resorts, and built-up cities that lack ties to ground it to any one specific definable location beyond the world of Eos. There are references to real-world cultures in the game world through the naming of in-game gods (Astrals) that share names with real-world religious figures, such as Shiva, Ramuh and Bahamut. Though the depictions of the in-game gods do little in providing their context in the real-world beyond an artistically licensed visual representation. This brief inclusion with no grounding of contextual offering and drawn from a mixture of cultures serves to offer the player a Culturally Odourless representation. Instead, it is presenting a fictional culture inspired by real-world culture and leans heavily on Final Fantasy game conventions developed throughout the series of games. The inclusion of these figures does not provide the player with a clear understanding of the real-world contexts.

### Culturally Scented:

A Place for the Unbound (Toge Productions, 2023) is a distinctly Culturally Scented game. The game follows two high school students in a dramatic, slice of life puzzle adventure narrative. The narrative of the game does not strictly follow traditional Indonesian folklore or traditional narratives, though it does feature a distinctly Indonesian setting and makes references to cultural and religious celebrations within key narrative moments leaving the player with insight into a distinct and Indonesian identity (Packwood, 2023). In an interview, the development team discussed the major aim of conveying a clear Indonesian setting (Sergeev, 2023) and expressed an interest in developing a game which encouraged players to engage with the game-world space in a direct comparison to the real-world inspirations (Castle, 2022). The development team had a clear vision of incorporating their lived experiences and cultures folded into a game to give players an authentic flavour of their culture without it necessarily being the focus of the game. A game developed with the intention of being Culturally Scented proposes to provide developers and players with an authentic representation of underrepresented groups and stories in a more traditional game format.

### Culturally Fragrant:

In contrast to Culturally Odourless games, Venba (Visai Games, 2023) is heavily rooted in Indian and South Asian influences offering players a Culturally Fragrant narrative game. The overarching narrative of the game follows an Indian family, having immigrated to Canada in the 1980's and the struggles of maintaining a sense of cultural identity and practices in their new home and through generations. The game looks to engage players in a narrative that takes the experiences of first and second-generation immigrants and highlights the transfer of traditional practices within the game mechanics and transfer of language through generations and physical landscapes within narrative delivery. The game was developed by a team who have lived experience of cultural transference and who were able to interpret this into the narrative and gameplay mechanics to allow the game to carry the cultural fragrance authentically. Culturally Fragrant games extend the capacity to represent and spotlight a stronger culturally identity throughout the game, allowing developers to share more practices and experiences specific to a culture.

## The Benefits of Culture Fragrance in Culture First Design

In designing games with distinct Cultural Fragrance, developers must first encapsulate a cultural experience -- the fragrance. They must take a holistic look at what the key factors to explore in the game are. An important factor at this stage is to identify core themes, narratives or practices that are complementary to one another and to avoid distilling cultures into stereotypes or approaching culture too broadly (Swami, 2024). The purpose here is to observe the core values from the previous stage and look at what practices are important to that community and how they can meaningfully be tied in. This will mitigate the demonstration of inauthentic or meaningless cultural

representation in games and will serve to create a harmonious vision that lends itself to positive game feeling (Swink, 2008).

The Cultural Fragrance, once understood, can be embedded into the design and portrayed playfully. In doing this, developers should consider the extent to which they are prepared to abstract culture and as a result, compromise on the project's cultural authenticity. An important facet of building culture first design is undergoing an appropriate level of research. The concept of inviting cultural natives into the design process is one approach to research and has been successful in the past, as seen with *Never Alone*, but there is a need to examine how developers can include the representation of minority cultures in a meaningful way.

The concept of categorising games as Culturally Odourless is not to view them negatively, in fact, many highly successful fictional culture games might fall into this category. The application of this term helps to offer a definition that is distinct from games which utilise a culture-first design approach. The purpose and methodology of utilising Cultural Fragrance in the game development process are not in creating game worlds that are necessarily accurate in totality to a specific culture - though more in the curation and development of authentic representation that captures not specifically the look of a culture or cultural artefacts, but the feeling. For example, the development team of *Venba* identified the importance of distilling the “essence” of South Asian cooking without compromising on the authenticity (Swami, 2024). This allowed for the game mechanics of the cooking process to be abstracted, simplified and stylised to better capture the spirit over accuracy. The aim of the game was not to teach players how to cook South Asian dishes, but to incite and inspire players to appreciate another cultures practice.

## Practice

The Kilted Otter Initiative (KOI), a game jam that took place September 2021, aimed to inspire the development of games that celebrated Scotland and Scottish culture, with a focus on Scottish Gaelic. The Initiative was run by academics and game developers and open to the public, offering mentorship from professional game developers, support from members of the Gaelic speaking community and a research pack. The research pack was released to all the participants of the game jam and consisted of various artifacts from cultural practices, folklore, and music to act as inspiration for the participants. This allowed a wider audience to explore a range of topics within the cultural space to choose for themselves what any or all cultural artefacts they wanted to include within their practice. The winner of the competition, ‘Wulver - by Aon-Adharcach games (Figure 1), a game following an anthropomorphic wolf who lives in a cave and helps the people of Scotland with their mythical creature problems, spotlights major elements of Scottish folklore with traditionally inspired music from The Bothy Society.

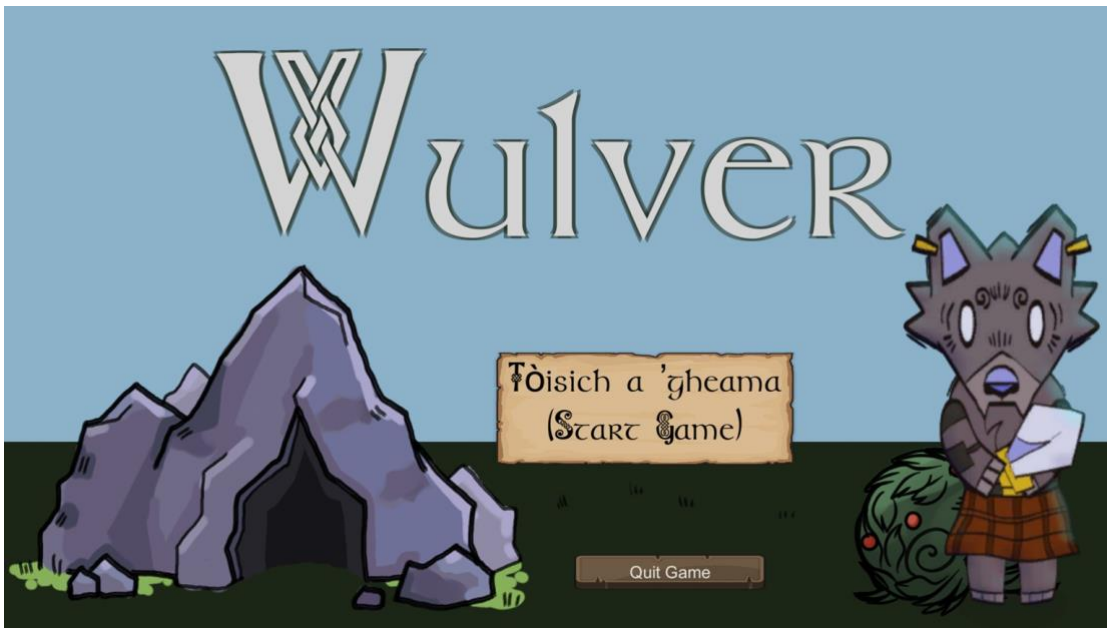


Figure 1: 'Wulver - by Aon-Adharcach games

While *Wulver* captures elements of the initial research pack provided to the teams it, and the range of games produced during the game jam, had largely adopted narratives and aesthetics as their core design pillars. Opting to cast a wide net that delivered games with a distinct Scottish scent but ultimately was a shallower approach to development and could be reskinned to represent a different culture. KOI encouraged developers to produce games through a cultural lens, though it was observed that the games developed offered a surface level approach to the inclusion of culture.

### Waulking Simulator

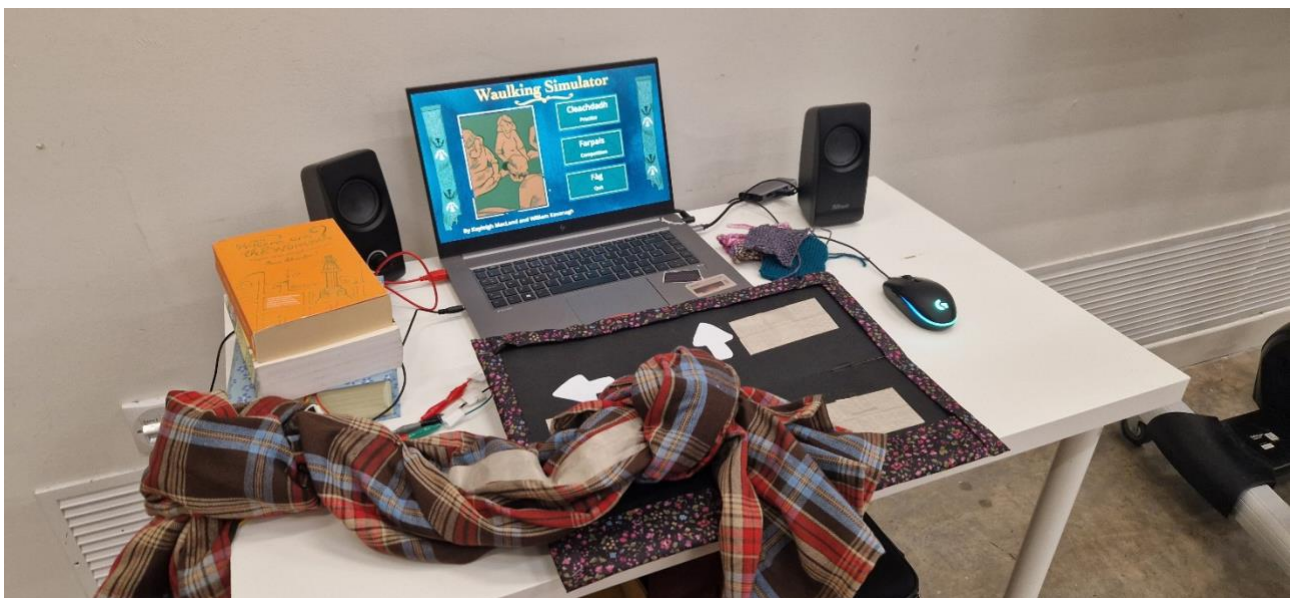


Figure 2 *Waulking Simulator*

"*Waulking Simulator*" (Figure 2.) is a rhythm game that pays homage to the traditional Scottish art of waulking tweed (Figure 3). This cultural practice, found in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, involved a group of women rhythmically beating freshly woven, wet tweed against a long table, passing the tweed in a clockwise motion as a method of finishing and shrinking the cloth shrink it and make it waterproof and suitable for garments. This practice was often accompanied by singing songs of recent events or news and often reflect on the social lives of the community that practiced

the labor (Cheape, 2018). The game, *Waulking Simulator*, looked to emulate the language and physical aspects of this cultural practice. The game uses a cloth controller as is the primary input for the rhythm element of the game to emulate a more immersive and tactile approach to the game. Players must use the cloth controller to hit against the arrows printed on the board component of the controller in time with arrows on the screen to gain points (figure 4). This action is accompanied by the choice of two authentic Scottish Gaelic waulking songs (*Òrain Luaidh* in Scottish Gaelic) to accompany their gameplay in either a relaxed practice mode or a more fast-paced competition mode.



Figure 3: A live demonstration of waulking tweed

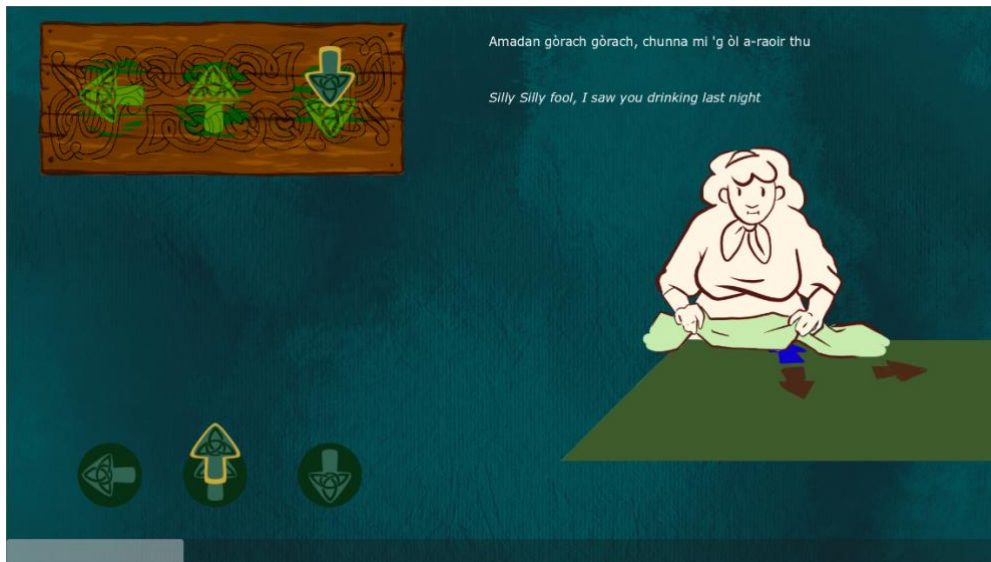


Figure 4 *Waulking Simulator* screenshot

The design of *Waulking Simulator* looked to capture the sense of rhythm that is exhibited through waulking the tweed but also included elements of the cultural practice such as the community building, the use of the Scottish Gaelic language throughout the game and the critical component of song. Music and singing are vital components of Scottish culture and identity historically (Wilkie, 2023) and the combined cultural practice and traditional song elements of *Waulking Simulator* have helped to create a more Culturally Fragrant gameplay experience. While the final game captures what was identified as key elements of the cultural practice, it offers a ludic, novel

approach which abstracts the practice in a playful way. Though continuing development of the game aims to explore the community aspects of waulking circles to bridge to a wider audience.

## Conclusion

Abstraction of culture and the capturing of a cultural essence to shape the Fragrance and design process is an area of game development that merits further consideration to increase the voices represented in game development and the role of video games as cultural artifacts.

Taking a more considered approach to cultural representation lends itself to developing more nuanced representations of underrepresented communities and cultures in games but also gives scope to blends that can engage a wider audience through shared emotional connections and experiences. A narrative base in digital storytelling can also act as a structure to underpin the exposure to an underrepresented culture which has been seen to help address issues of inequality and inequity (Gkoutsioukosta, 2023).

The aim for Cultural Fragrance in the design of games is not the inclusion of a specific act or practice need not necessarily be completely accurate - unless the intention is to teach the player how to do that action in the same way one might expect a simulation game to bear a strong correlation to real-world applications. However, the culture-first process aims to encourage a wider understanding of the practice in a spiritual sense that may act as a springboard to inspire the player to want to learn more about the culture themselves.

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