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Tracing the Evolution of Video Game Culture in Malaysia: A Sociohistorical Analysis

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Abstract

Recent times have witnessed a surge in the popularity of video gaming among Malaysians. In this article, we explore the evolution of video game culture in Malaysia from the 1980s to the early 2020s, illustrating its transformation from a casual pastime to a growing contributor to the nation's digital economy. We aim to delineate the sociohistorical development of video gaming in Malaysia, examining its emergence and integration into everyday contemporary culture. We conducted an online search for relevant academic work, government and industry reports, media coverage, and digital platforms that specifically addressed the Malaysian context and more broadly the Southeast Asian context. Following this, we performed qualitative content analysis, initially to establish a chronological overview by decades, and thematically to identify the four key agents of the players, the audiences, the industry, and the society. Our findings highlight the dynamic interplay between these agents and detail the transformative impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on gaming practices. We conclude the article by reiterating the cultural significance of video games for Malaysians and identify opportunities for further research.

Keywords Video games; Video game culture; Gamers; Contextual analysis; Malaysia.

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Introduction

Video game culture concerns the video game practices, experiences, and meanings in contemporary society, characterized by the features of diverse, complex, and constantly evolving (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Due to its non-homogenized nature, the ways video games are produced, played, and experienced can be different across countries.

Malaysia is a multicultural country located in the region of Southeast Asia, with a population of 34.1 million as of 31 July 2024 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). There is currently a nationwide interest in the promising future of video games for Malaysia's digital creative industry (BERNAMA, 2024). In the context of game market and consumption, Southeast Asia region is considered as "the world's fastest growing games market" and Malaysia is publicly imagined as one of the "Big 6" country, together with Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (K. T. Wong, 2023, p. 50). Therefore, in this article, we argue that the optimistic prospect of video games in Malaysia should not just be determined by technological and economic developments, but also by the sociohistorical and contextual factors.

This study is a sociohistorical analysis with an exploratory qualitative approach. Given the limited existing academic work on this topic, we conducted content analysis on a wide range of sources including academic work, government and industry reports, media coverage, and digital platforms. The flexibility of an exploratory approach allowed us to trace the evolution and current state of play, thus contributing to the gap in knowledge about Malaysian video game culture. Theoretically, we draw on perspectives of media ecology which point to the dynamic interplay between various social actors mediated through technology or the 'environment' of video gaming. This study is guided by the following research question: "What are the factors that shaped the evolution of video game culture in Malaysia?" We framed the discussion with an introduction or a general overview of the emergence and development of video game culture in Malaysia. This is followed by an examination of the key factors that have shaped it, including the impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic lockdown towards Malaysian gaming practices.

Methodology

This study is exploratory in nature. For data collection, we conducted online search using keywords such as "video game", "gaming", and "Malaysia". Our aim was to gather a wide variety of sources to trace how video game culture has evolved in Malaysia. Hence, flexibility is important in the inclusion of data. All data included were up to 2024 to ensure the study reflects the most recent developments. The data had to be published in either English or Malay and should specifically address the Malaysian context or more broadly, the Southeast Asian context. Therefore, we collected relevant data as

follows: (1) academic articles and theses on gaming culture or media studies from Google Scholar search engine, (2) government reports and industry publications on the game industry, and (3) media coverage and media archives related to gaming events, trends, and habits. Additionally, we also collected data from (4) websites and social media platforms as they served as primary communication channels for game developers and organizers, representing expert voices within the field. The non-academic sources have been evaluated based on the checklist of Currency, Relevancy, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose (Blakeslee, 2004). All data were collected, stored, and labeled using the open-source reference management software, Zotero.

From the data collected, we conducted qualitative content analysis to identify significant milestones and to connect them with broader sociohistorical events in Malaysia. First, we utilized the chronological approach by discussing the emergence and development of Malaysian video game culture by decade, starting from the 1980s through the 2020s. We then focused thematically and identified the four key agents of Malaysian video game culture: the players, the audiences, the industry, and the society. Finally, we analyzed the recent COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and how this period shaped Malaysian gaming culture. We cross-validated our findings by using multiple data sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis while maintaining accuracy and credibility.

The Emergence and Development

The literature on the history of Malaysian video game culture is noticeably scarce. Loh (2013) attributed this to the fact in which companies and the mass media “do not keep proper archives or records of past events, making local literature very sparse with information” (p. 11). Understandably, Malaysian gaming scene is a much smaller market thus received less attention compared to other regions. Given that Malaysian gaming industry is only recently undergone rapid technological advancement, it is only a matter of time before more literature will fill in the gaps. As of now, we chart the most important historical developments of Malaysian video game culture by the decades.

In the 1980s, one of the earliest game consoles available in Malaysia was Atari 2600 Video Computer System with games such as *Pong* and *Breakout* (C. W. Lim, 1990). At that time, Malaysia used the PAL analogue color television standard, so local players needed to import Atari cartridges from PAL-compatible countries. In this decade global competitions of ‘console wars’ began between hardware manufacturers. Sega introduced Sega Master System and Sega Mega Drive (also known as Genesis) while Nintendo introduced Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) (Md Nor, 2015). Sega marketed its consoles for the more mature audiences which made the Nintendo offerings seem childish in comparison (Maulana, 2016). Classic

video games published in this decade including *Pac-Man*, *Mario Bros*, *The Legend of Zelda*, and *Final Fantasy*. However, local game distributors of such consoles were limited.

In the 1990s, the console wars continued between Sega and Nintendo (AFP, 2020). Sega was deemed more popular from its *Sonic the Hedgehog* franchise. Malaysia, as part of Southeast Asian market, was rampant with piracy which led companies such as Nintendo to focus solely on the rich markets in the west instead (Vince, 2014). The low purchasing power and market availability in this region gave rise to pirated game cartridges, floppy discs, compact discs, as well as cloned or bootleg consoles. Because there were no official distributors for Nintendo consoles in Malaysia, the gaming market was dominated by a Taiwanese company with the console Micro Genius. Micro Genius is a clone of Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) which became the most popular video game console of the decade in Malaysia (Ariff, 2009). This allowed Malaysians to experience games such as *Super Mario* and *Contra* (M. Lee, 2016). The first official game console brought into the Malaysian market was the PlayStation 1 by the principal company itself, the Sony Malaysia Sdn Bhd, as they established their own copyright protection.

The entertainment centers of arcades were prominent in the Malaysian cities especially in the shopping complexes (Mohd Zohdi, 2021). Arcade games such as *Street Fighter 2* became a huge hit. However, arcades were shrouded with public stigma and moral panics, which blamed these venues for an increase in loitering and violence among Malaysian youngsters (Yoong, 2001). The time and money wasted in arcades by the youngsters also worried the parents. The authorities viewed arcade centers as a front for gambling and money laundering, with games such as horse-racing deemed as the main culprit (Yoong, 2001). Then Deputy Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi advocated for a ban and to shutter the booming business, calling arcades as “dangerous and large social problem” (Yoong, 2001). Muslim extreme groups even likened the call for arcades ban as *jihad* or holy war against moral corruptions. Perhaps to mitigate the calls for bans, modern arcade centers have evolved and are now regarded as more family friendly.

At the turn of the 21st century, a new era of console wars emerged on the global stage, featuring the next generation of home systems. The competitors included Sony PlayStation 2, Nintendo GameCube, and a new player in the market, Microsoft Xbox (AFP, 2020). The PlayStation 2 emerged victorious and became the best-selling console globally. Nintendo GameCube however did not get off the ground in Southeast Asia due to the rampant game piracy that plagued the region (Bashir, 2020a). In contrast to the Nintendo consoles, Nintendo handhelds received greater local demand. The Game Boys in the 1990s and the Nintendo DSes in the 2000s were widely available in

Malaysia. This shifted the gaming scene from playing video games in arcades to consoles and handhelds. What was once public and static became a personal and portable gaming experience.

As personal computers became more accessible for Malaysians, computer gaming began to gain its steam. Besides that, more LAN shops or cyber cafes opened across the country, giving access to more Malaysians for computing purposes. However, similar to arcades, cyber cafes were also deemed threat leading to moral corruptions among the youngsters, particularly for the potential exposures to online gambling, pornography, and cybercrimes (L. T. Lee, 2014). In 2009, the city of Cyberjaya set the world record for the longest LAN party for 40 hours, as participants competed in *DOTA*, *Call of Duty 4*, and *FIFA* (Albakri, 2023). Video game emulators were also popular during this time. By using emulators, Malaysians could play games intended for consoles on personal computers instead. Emulators are therefore piracy, although they afforded Malaysians to play myriads of games at a low cost.

In the 2010s, as internet access became more accessible to most Malaysians, there was a notable shift in how they engaged with video games. Players were able to go online and transitioned from one-on-one matches at home to competing against numerous players across the world. Video games such as *Call of Duty* and *World of Warcraft* were a hit. Online gaming became a profitable industry, and this era set the stage for the explosive growth of competitive e-sports. In 2013, Sony and Microsoft released their new game consoles of PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, both featured revolutionary graphics, offering players immersive and cinematic experiences of titles such as *The Last of Us* and *Uncharted*.

Besides that, many Malaysians started to actively play mobile games like *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang* and *PUBG Mobile*, driven by the affordability and accessibility of mobile phones and internet data. This can be seen by the trend of Malaysia's mobile gaming revenue which increased by approximately US\$100 million between 2017-2019, achieving a growth rate of 17.7% in 2019, thus surpassed PC games in demand and revenue (Lai, 2020a). Meanwhile, PC gaming revenue continued to grow at a slower pace, with a rise of around US\$35 million over the same period and a growth rate of 15% in 2019 (Lai, 2020a).

Another notable mobile game that took Malaysians by the storm was *Pokémon Go*. From news about road accidents and injuries while playing the game (BERNAMA, 2016b) to workers dismissals and suspensions from excessive gaming (Meikeng, 2016), Malaysian reportedly were obsessed with *Pokémon Go* (S. A. Abd Wahab et al., 2017). These incidents resulted in calls to ban the game especially in schools, workplaces, and places of worship, for example by the Islamic Legal

Consultative Committee in the Federal Territory, supported by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) (Malay Mail, 2016). However, such calls for ban were deemed too extreme, and players were only issued general security guidelines (BERNAMA, 2016a).

In the 2020s, the global pandemic COVID-19 gave rise to the interests and demands in video gaming. Online platforms such as Discord, Twitch, and YouTube are widely utilized in the gaming culture for discussions and livestreaming. The console wars continue with more contenders in the market. Although facing fierce competition from PC gaming, mobile gaming, and changing players' habits, the demand for consoles is still healthy. The year 2020 saw the highly anticipated launch of the latest consoles generation: the Xbox Series X and the Xbox Series S by Microsoft, and PlayStation 5 by Sony. However, the supply chain of these consoles was limited worldwide as production and logistics were affected by the pandemic. This has prompted the emergence of price scalpers and scammers in Malaysia (Chapree, 2021). Nintendo Switch is among the top selling consoles in 2020 with 28.8 million units sold (Reuters, 2021) and among the most sought-after console in Malaysia (Najmi, 2020b). Another new console in the market is Steam Deck by Valve, although this hasn't been officially offered in the Malaysian market (Lai, 2022). Concurrently, the pandemic lockdown affected Malaysian cyber cafes as most closed shops, citing the public health concerns and the decline of PC gaming interests among the mobile gaming-centric patrons (Zulkifli, 2021).

The latest trend in the Malaysian video game culture is the incorporation of non-fungible tokens (NFT) and blockchain games (BERNAMA, 2022b). The first Malaysian-developed video game using such technology is by Metabond titled *Soulbond: Rebels Arise*, a free-to-play MMORPG (BERNAMA, 2022a). Proponents of such technology touted the possibilities of developers and players to earn income in the metaverse – through working, playing, and living in the game (BERNAMA, 2022b). The trend also emphasizes the collection of digital assets such as cryptocurrencies and digital skins. However, the trend has received backlash from local industry leaders such as Wan Hazmer (2022) of Metronomik who is against the abusive nature of the NFT tech and business model towards the industry workers. There were also reports of scams involving the selling of gaming currencies and tokens, which resulted in loss of thousands of ringgits among Malaysian players (D. S. Abd Wahab, 2022).

In 2020, Malaysia is the third largest and most lucrative video game market in Southeast Asia with the value of US\$786 million (Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation, 2021). As the Malaysian market continues to grow, we identified the four factors or more appropriately termed, key agents that shaped the local video game culture: the players, the audiences, the industry, and the society.

The Players

We consider Malaysian video game players as having agency to make decisions and engage with the video game culture. They navigate and influence sociocultural contexts through their interaction with other key agents. The statistics reported on Malaysian video game players vary. In a survey done in 2020, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported that from all internet users, 42.8% of them engaged in online video gaming, an increase from 35.2% in 2018 (2020, p. 44). Meanwhile, as reported by an international localization company, Allcorrect Games (2021b), Malaysia had 20.9 million video game players in 2020. The majority of players were aged 25-34 (38.1%), followed by aged 18-24 (25.8%), aged 35-44 (22.7%), and the least active group in gaming, aged 45-54 (9%) (Allcorrect Games, 2021a).

In a separate report by gaming analytic Newzoo, mobile is the most popular gaming platform in Malaysia (75%), followed by PC (66%), and console (55%) (Elliott, 2020). A whopping 87% of players tend to spend real money on in-game items or virtual goods such as power-ups. The most popular mobile games include puzzle game *Candy Crush Saga* and multiplayer online strategy *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang*. The zero-entry fee to access these mobile games makes them attractive to mid to low-income earners as well as young adults. Although the virtual goods in free-to-play games are relatively cheap, they do compound and add up over time, which might lead to an overspend (Chua, 2021). Meanwhile, based on a report by market research firm Niko, Malaysians and other Southeast Asians prefer games with social elements and team-based gameplay (Tariq, 2020). Niko further reported that players show a preference for games from Asian developers such as Singapore, China, and South Korea, who better grasp local nuances, customs, and beliefs, extending beyond language or art style.

The internal factors that influence youth participation in online games including interest, addiction, stress reliever, entertainment, income generation, and escape from reality (Yunus et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the external factors including social interaction, social control, mass media influence, and social media influence (Yunus et al., 2021). Based on Bartle Player Taxonomy, Malaysian youths who play video games have a higher tendency of being an Achiever, followed by Explorer, Killer, and Socializer (Sanmugam, 2021). Despite nationwide concerns on potential of aggression and violent behaviors, it has been found that action video games do not have significant adverse effects on adolescents (Kanasan, 2024).

The popularity of video games in Malaysia has given rise to the number of local gaming content creators, broadcasters, and live streamers. According to the 2020 report released by Facebook

Gaming, the top five most streamed video game among Malaysian creators are *PUBG Mobile*, *Mobile Legends*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, *PUBG Lite*, as well as *Dota 2* (Nyny, 2020). One of the notable Malaysian video game streamers is known as Soloz whose success aspire more Malaysians to venture into e-sports streaming.

E-sports have been increasingly popular in Malaysia through various events including The Legends Circuit, Malaysia Cyber Games, Selangor Cyber Games, and ESL Genting. Some of the notable icons of Malaysian e-sports are known by their nicknames such as NothingToSay, xNova, Mushi, and Oli, all of whom have successfully put the nation's name in the international arena. In 2021, Malaysia organized its first e-sports competition for persons with disabilities through Para Malaysia E-sports League in its aspiration of providing an inclusive ecosystem for the local players (Yeoh, 2021). Meanwhile, Malaysian female e-sports players faced various challenges including gender stereotyping and discrimination, as they encountered disparaging comments in both text and voice chats from the audiences (J. Lim, 2021; Yusoff & Mohd Yunus, 2021).

Malaysian players form fandoms based on their favorite video games. For example, Malay Muslim women who play social network game *The Sims Social* formed a Facebook group for discussions, and in doing so, they negotiated aspects of local culture such as gender roles and religion when participating in a globalized media context (Faizal, 2017). Another example is the existence of several high-profile Malaysian guilds in the widely popular international MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Loh, 2013). One of the guilds is called the 'Mamak Alliance'. This is in line with the notion of *Mamak* (Malaysian Muslim Indian) eateries being the site of cultural exchange and the unity symbol of Malaysians, as per Malaysian anthropologist Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2016). Loh (2013) noted the puzzling aspect of Malaysian players to join guilds with their fellow countrymen, as online-based video games such as *World of Warcraft* are international by nature and thus borderless. Loh (2013) further noted that perhaps it is the familiarity and the fear of the foreign that draws Malaysian players together. They also organized weekly offline gatherings that tie the ephemeral online community to a physical locality. However, the offline events did not receive many attendees, as most players hesitated to come out of the anonymous network or were very non-committal.

Besides that, classic fighting and arcade video games of *Street Fighter*, *Tekken*, and *King of Fighters* also have their own fans and followings in Malaysia. Although the commercial viability of video game arcades is declining, the 'metaphysical significance of arcades' (Skolnik & Conway, 2019) persists with the establishment of gaming communities such as 'Malaysia Fighting Games Community' and 'Malaysian Tekken Society' (Md Nor, 2017a). In collaboration with game studios, these communities often organize social gatherings for clan matches, road shows, and practices for

international esports tournaments (Md Nor, 2017c). Community members also participate in video game festivals by cosplaying as their favorite game characters, buying and selling game merchandise and fan arts (Md Nor, 2017b). Additionally, game communities such as the ‘Malaysian Counter Strike’ also raise fund for charities by organizing e-sports competitions (Md Nor, 2018). Other notable community gatherings include the local Nintendo enthusiasts ‘Malaysia Ninty Gathering’ (Maulana, 2016) and Malaysian *Pokémon* gamers of ‘StreetPass Malaysia’ (Vince, 2013). The annual game convention, ServerDNA was touted as the largest player gathering in Malaysia with over 10,000 participants (Lai, 2020b). It features tech brands, prominent streamers and cosplayers, VR gaming showcases, and prizes to win.

On Facebook, Malaysian players form online communities or groups based on aspects such as game titles (‘Animal Crossing Malaysia’), consoles and peripherals (‘PS5 Malaysia Gang’), localities (‘Nintendo Switch Penang Malaysia’), as well as e-sports teams and gaming personalities (‘Squad Missrose’). Malaysians are also interested in video game collection and the nostalgic aspect, as evident in groups such as ‘Retro Console Malaysia’ and ‘Malaysia Retro Gaming Mania’ (Zamri, 2020). Some of these groups require moderator approvals for admission, while some are open for public viewing. The discussions in these communities are somewhat similar, with thousands of members showcasing gameplay livestreams and screenshots, seeking advice, sharing information, buying, selling, or swapping physical and digital items. Evidently, Malaysian players form fandoms of shared interests. All these findings demonstrate that Malaysian video game players as key agents exercise agency in their engagement with video games, not just for entertainment but also for income generation and socialization. Therefore, the players play an important role in shaping the evolution of Malaysian video game culture.

The Audiences

Video game audiences are made up of individuals who primarily interact with video games by watching rather than playing. Elliott (2020) reported that 61% of the Malaysian urban online population watches video game content on social media sites. In 2020, Facebook was the most widely used social media site in Malaysia (91.7%), followed by YouTube (80.6%), Instagram (63.1%), and Twitter/X (37.1%) (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2020, p.48). Most video game audiences around the world are gamers themselves. However, some audiences express no desire to play. Yet, they are avid spectators of other’s gameplay, both virtually and in-person. In an international study, Orme (2021) found that these audiences are averse to the act of playing due to factors including lack of time, mental and physical toll, lack of skills, lack of access to games, and

toxic online communities. The study also postulated that despite merely spectating, the audiences tend to consider themselves as part of gaming culture.

Malaysian video game audiences watch gaming-related content primarily to learn new techniques, to be entertained, and to stay updated with gaming news (Soya Cincau, 2021). Generally, the audiences watch walkthroughs and Let's Play videos. Walkthrough videos are informative in nature, providing audiences tutorials or a comprehensive overview of video games. This includes information on level designs, enemies, and shortcuts. Walkthroughs also help audiences to find secret messages and Easter eggs in video games. Meanwhile, Let's Play videos show the gameplay sessions, often accompanied by humorous player's commentaries through audio or a picture-in-picture frame showing the players in action (Glas, 2015). These videos offer non-ludic engagement for audiences through an experience of vicarious play. Nylund (2015) proposed that both video game paratexts – walkthroughs and Let's Play videos – as ways of preserving the current context of playing video games. Technological advancement may preserve video games in a playable form for future generations, however, preserving the ways people play games now is equally as important.

Interactive spectatorship plays an important role in e-sports. Much of the revenue in e-sports is powered by the growing audiences through ticket sales, views, donations, subscriptions, and merchandise. The increase in spectatorship also leads to revenue in the form of player deals and sponsorships. Additionally, there are also e-sports betting among the spectators, although such gambling and wagering online remains unclear under the Malaysian law. In sum, Malaysian video game audiences play a key role in shaping the evolution of video game culture, primarily contributing to the revenue of spectatorship and driving demand for gaming content creation.

The Industry

The video game industry is part of the Malaysian National Creative Industry Policies, governed by the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia. The industry is growing fast, with a forecast revenue of US\$649 million in 2024 and a steady compound annual growth rate of 7.55% to reach US\$807 million by 2027 (BERNAMA, 2024). This healthy revenue is in contrast with an earlier report by Chong (2004), when the local industry was still very much in its infancy with fewer companies, technology, grant schemes, and local talents available. The first video game development company in Malaysia is Motion Pixel, founded in 1992 by an Englishman, Andrew Carter (Chong, 2004, p.20).

In the early 2000s, instead of developing Malaysian own titles, local companies were setup to license video games particularly of MMORPG from developers around the world. Local companies then repackaged them for the Malaysian market, also known as localization of games in foreign

language into either Bahasa Melayu or English. Publishers also needed to take into account the religious, racial, and local culture sensibilities such as the dominant Malay Muslims' negative views on characters of pigs, "so as not to offend potential users" (Loh, 2013, p. 44). Perhaps this is why publishers of online games in Malaysia often prioritized players of Chinese ethnicities when selecting titles for release, due to the existing availability of games in Chinese, which eliminates the need for further localization (Chung, 2016).

In recent times, Malaysian-based game development studios are abundant and highly competitive; with mostly provide outsourced services such as game art and co-development for well-known studios abroad. The examples including Passion Republic (*Diablo IV*, *Uncharted 4*, and *Dark Souls 3*), Streamline Studios (*Street Fighter V* and *Final Fantasy XV*), and Lemon Sky Studios (*Marvel Spider-Man*, *The Last of Us Part II*, and *Warcraft III: Reforged*).

Although such outsourced services are a viable income-generating venture, to truly make a mark in the global game industry, Malaysian studios also developed their own titles. For example, Kaigan Games, a studio specializes in narrative games developed *Sara is Missing* (2016), *Simulacra* (2017), and *Simulacra 2* (2020). Magnus Games developed *Re:Legend* (2019), a simulation RPG which is the most funded Kickstarter video game in Southeast Asia (Handrahan, 2018). Metronomik developed *No Straight Roads* (2020), an action-adventure with a focus on electronic dance music (EDM). All these titles are available across platforms of mobile, PC, and consoles. Meanwhile, some notable Malaysian mobile game developers are REV Media for *Ejen Ali: Agents Arena* (2021), Kurechii for *PostKnight* (2017), and Mediasoft Entertainment for *Roll Spike Sepak Takraw* (2016). These titles have received significant success worldwide, thus making Malaysia a developing global industry player.

To showcase the Malaysian rich cultural heritage to a global audience, there is a need for developers to integrate local cultural elements into their work such as the character designs (Muharam et al., 2023). Cultural heritage such as folklore have been incorporated in animation and digital games, to instill appreciation and recognition of local identity (Abd Rahman & Sidek, 2023).

Local studios also form their own gaming communities. By doing so, they can focus their marketing more efficiently, while providing access for players to communicate feedback and technical issues related to the games. In the early 2010s, video game marketing was done through pure advertising using magazines, websites, or the use of buntings at local cyber cafes (Loh, 2013). Publishers also organized 'on-ground' events for visibility and networking purposes by setting up

booths at larger festivals. Additionally, some companies fostered community growth using online forums and social media.

To realize the country's potential as a gaming development hub, the agency Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) provides financial incentives, regulatory frameworks, and various support for local developers. For example, Level Up Inc in Kuala Lumpur serves as a content accelerator hub for games and interactive media. The hub provides early-stage content incubation, mentoring, console development kits, and help for IP commercialization. MDEC also hosts Level Up KL, a premier game conference and business platform to attract, nurture, and drive growth of the Malaysian and regional ecosystem. The SEA Game Awards was also established to recognize the best game offerings from Southeast Asia developers. Moreover, pitch sessions and game jams were organized to encourage creativity and collaboration within the local game development community. The Malaysian gaming industry is poised for continued expansion with an increasing number of studios and creative professionals rapidly venturing into the sector. Commenting on video games as Malaysia's digital creative industry, Digital Minister, Gobind Singh Deo said, "Collaboration is key. The gaming industry is inherently global, and the achievement in this field requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, locally and abroad" (BERNAMA, 2024). Additionally, the widely available higher education courses in game development and media technology also attract students to learn and venture in this industry. In the recent 2024 Budget, an allocation of RM30 million (\$6.3 million) was announced, to boost the industry and to attract foreign studios coming to capitalize on the competitive local talent pool (The Star, 2023). All these findings indicate that the local video game industry is experiencing rapid growth, driven by a rising number of developers, increasing investments, and enhanced infrastructures, contributing to a positive outlook. Clearly, the video game industry is a key agent to the evolution of video game culture in Malaysia.

The Society

Adapting the sociological level of analysis, the society of video game culture in Malaysia can be analyzed through three levels: micro, meso, and macro. Micro level looks at small-scale interactions related to gaming. Individuals interested in gaming usually play together and form cliques, whether from school or work setting. Malaysian families also spend time together to play video games (Jacob, 2021). Meso level refers to groups including gaming teams, communities, and organizations. Gaming teams usually play together in casual sessions, and some take it a step further by joining competitions. Video game communities are formed whether on Discord, Facebook, or other social media platforms.

Macro level looks at large-scale processes related to gaming. This involves government ministries, legal system, and economies. Video games and e-sports in Malaysia are generally under

the purview of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. In Malaysia's Budget 2022, a total of RM20 million (\$4.2 million) has been allocated to develop and support e-sports athletes, an increase of RM5 million (\$1.05 million) from the previous year (The Star, 2021). This is the continuation of the government aspiration for Malaysia to be the e-sports hub in the region. To further incentivize local e-sports athletes, the cash prizes won at selected e-sports tournaments will be exempted from tax. Meanwhile, the newly developed Malaysia's E-sports City in Kuala Lumpur is the largest e-sports facility in Southeast Asia and will be the host of local, regional, and international tournaments, thus making the country at the center stage of e-sports events.

Besides that, the exposure and acceptance of e-sports gaming as a career is developed at school level. A school textbook by the Ministry of Education has a section about e-sports and the prominent local e-sports athletes (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2019, pp. 6–7). There are also gaming events by Education Departments across states for primary and secondary school students such as *Generasi E-Sukan Sekolah* (A. Wong, 2021). All these findings contributed to the increased exposure and acceptance of video game culture in Malaysian society, not only as a casual pastime at the micro and meso levels, but also at the macro level as a growing contributor to the nation's economy. It is evident that society plays a key role in shaping the evolution of Malaysian video game culture.

Gaming During the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown

In the first quarter of 2020, considering the global and rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Malaysian government had to enforce extreme containment measures known as the Movement Control Order (MCO). The measures included lockdown, travel restrictions, physical distancing, and stringent personal hygiene. The MCO was first implemented on 18 March 2020 (New Straits Times, 2020a) following a sudden increase of infections linked to a religious gathering (Che Mat et al., 2020). The highly restrictive MCO period has affected the citizens' quality of life in various domains, particularly towards their mental health and well-being (H. Hassan, 2020; Yee et al., 2021).

Realizing these negative impacts, many Malaysians turned to video games for reasons such as passing the extra free time at home (Zack, 2020), unwinding (Rajaendram, 2021), socializing (Shah, 2021), and participating in the worldwide gaming campaigns of #PlayApartTogether (Business Wire, 2020) and #YANA (Webb, 2020). All these are in line with the positive role of video games for escapism, cognitive stimulation, and mental health benefits, as demonstrated in international studies of the global pandemic (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Caro & Popovac, 2021). Evidently, a surge in gaming hours and console purchases were recorded among Malaysians during the MCO (Musa,

2021). The former world top-ranked Malaysian badminton player, Lee Chong Wei, shared on Instagram how playing video games with his family during the MCO helped maintain his mental health (Ibrahim, 2020). Livestreaming also attracts celebrities such as the Malaysian singer-songwriter, Yuna, who livestreamed gameplays on Twitch to interact with her fans (Bashir, 2020b). Consequently, all these established video gaming as an important part of Malaysia's COVID-19 and MCO social imaginary.

Under the global gaming campaign of #PlayApartTogether, many games were made free or heavily discounted, including *King's League: Odyssey* and *Tiny Guardians* by Kurechii, a Malaysian studio (Najmi, 2020a). In support of the campaign, YouTube Malaysia hosted 'Battle of the Brands' that featured local tech companies in friendly e-sports tournaments, and localized the hashtag into #JomMainBersama to appeal to Malaysian audiences (Google Malaysia, 2020). Facebook Gaming also supported the campaign by hosting e-sports tournaments during the MCO period (Nyny, 2020). Throughout the fasting month of Ramadan 2020, Malaysian game personalities hosted livestreams from dawn for *iftar* (fast-breaking) until dusk for *sahur* (pre-fasting) on the platform. In 2020, the viewership of Facebook Gaming among Malaysian audiences has grown by over 87% (Nyny, 2020), making it one of the most popular platforms for gaming spectatorship.

For the gaming campaign #YANA, the day consisted of a 20-hour content broadcast and events from various gaming brands, publishers, and e-sports organizations. The broadcast was kick started in Southeast Asia before spanning other regions, streamed on Facebook Gaming and Twitch platforms. Specifically, Malaysia was chosen to be the collaborator of #YANA under MDEC (New Straits Times, 2020b). According to MDEC's former Vice President of the Digital Creative Content and current Head of PlayStation Studios Malaysia, Hasnul Hadi Samsudin (New Straits Times, 2020b), the event helped Malaysians and folks from around the region to feel less isolated while living under the pandemic lockdown. During the event, MDEC through its online platform Level Up broadcasted local and regional gaming content of various titles and genres to Malaysian and Southeast Asian audiences. Proceeds from the gaming campaigns provided relief for those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Approximately RM2.7 billion (\$570 million) revenue was reported from Malaysian players in 2020, an increase from RM2.5 billion (\$527 million) in 2019 (M. S. Hassan, 2021). Many reportedly would not mind spending RM200 (\$42) or more each month to purchase power-ups, cosmetics, and unique characters, making the country one of the highest spending power in Southeast Asia (M. S. Hassan, 2021). In the first month of the MCO period, the majority of Malaysian players spent between one to two hours in one gaming session (Hirschmann, 2021a) with most preferred the genres RPG and

casual video games (Hirschmann, 2021b). It was during this time that local retailers saw an increase in delivery orders across Malaysia (Yeoh, 2020). The most popular and in-demand gaming console in Malaysia during the MCO was Nintendo Switch followed by PlayStation 4 (Trùng, 2020). Due to its popularity, the Nintendo Switch was initially out of stock. As MCO restrictions were imposed in Malaysia, Nintendo struggled to procure the locally printed circuit boards for the Switch, thus limited the console production and impacted the global market (Wu & Mochizuki, 2020). The pandemic lockdown was also attributed to the increase of digital streaming of e-sports games among Malaysians (BERNAMA, 2020; C.-N. Lim et al., 2022).

Based on media coverage, Malaysian players actively implemented their cultural identity in their gameplay. For example, players recreated a seemingly accurate depiction of a Malay-themed wedding on popular action-adventure video game, *Grand Theft Auto V* (Zikri, 2020). The gameplay livestream was praised by the audiences for its sense of realism, both in material items such as traditional wedding attire as well as the processions of exchanging ‘pantun’ and ‘silat’ performance. Adding to the realism and somewhat humorous is the appearance of a GrabFood delivery rider at the wedding reception. In another news report, Malaysian players created a scale replica of the iconic Petronas Twin Towers in the world of *Minecraft* as part of the global project Build The Earth (Tan, 2020). The project requires true to scale measurements, including height, length, and decorations of the landmark, making it a challenging yet fulfilling creative venture for the participants.

Besides that, Malaysian players also found creative ways to lift their spirits during the fasting month of Ramadan. As inter-state travels were prohibited during the MCO, many Malaysians found themselves longing of ‘balik kampung’ or going back to hometown for the upcoming Eid celebration. Consequently, they recreated their ‘kampung’ houses with wooden stilts and rattan furniture on popular simulation games of *The Sims 4* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Ashaari, 2020; Dorall, 2020). The trend started and was picked up by Malaysian Twitter/X users, as more players began sharing their builds of traditional Malaysian ‘kampung’ abodes in the video games.

Another example of Malaysian players being creative is through their social commentary. During the MCO, Gardenia made the news when the widely loved bakery brand could not keep up with the skyrocketed consumers demand, thus leaving shelves empty across the country (Chan, 2020a). This is because Malaysians were buying Gardenia bread and snacks more than usual in anticipation of the prolonged MCO and fear of supply chain disruption. In following news, it was reported that a Gardenia transport truck was stolen (Chan, 2020b). The incident was dubbed as the Gardenia heist, prompting public interests across the nation amid the bread scarcity. A Malaysian gamer creatively responded to the news by recreating a Gardenia truck in the popular driving

simulation video game, *Euro Truck Simulator 2* (Chapree, 2020). While driving the truck, the honk was to the tune of popular children's song *Baby Shark*, making the gameplay stream more amusing to the audiences.

All these examples point to the fact that the MCO period is an 'affordance' that shape distinct creative endeavors of Malaysian players. There is a need to empirically study this phenomenon of creativity and video gaming, particularly through the creations of game paratexts by the players.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the evolution of the video game culture in Malaysia, focusing on the dynamic interplay between the key agents of players, audiences, industry, and society. Our findings also revealed the impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on Malaysian gaming practices. Clearly, Malaysian video game culture is shaped not only by technological advancement and economic factors, but also by sociohistorical and contextual factors. This article makes an original and novel contribution to knowledge of Malaysian gaming culture and the broader conversation on the role of digital technology in contemporary society. We have seen how the state of play in Malaysia was perceived morally and religiously corruptive, but we also have seen pushbacks from the players as gaming became normalized and pervasive across diverse demographics. As the landscape of video gaming in Malaysia evolves, it is imperative to further explore the central role and agency of players in the domains such as content creation, social interactions, and cultural negotiation. As seen during the pandemic lockdown, players actively participated and shaped the trajectory of video game culture in Malaysia. Further insights on this could deepen our understanding of the interplay between digital entertainment and cultural formation.

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