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## Digital Atolls: Cultural Imaginaries and the Representation of the Maldives in Video Games

Cyfrowe atole – wyobrażenia kulturowe oraz reprezentacja Malediwów w grach wideo

### Summary

The aim of this article is to analyze representations of the Maldives in video games from a cultural studies and postcolonial perspective. The study treats the archipelago as a unique cultural phenomenon whose depiction in digital narratives is shaped by global discourses of tourism, media, and climate. The research methodology is based on a qualitative content analysis of selected games, considering both visual and narrative dimensions, and drawing on theories of orientalism, the tourist gaze, and the representation of “empty” spaces. The findings indicate that the Maldives are most frequently portrayed as a tourist paradise, but also as an exotic and dangerous adventure backdrop, a “playground” for the player, or a space threatened by climate disaster. Such representations reinforce stereotypes and contribute to the erasure of Maldivian culture, history, and everyday life. A few exceptions – mostly observed in indie games – demonstrate the potential to challenge dominant narratives. The article concludes that video games both reproduce and reinforce global imaginaries of small island states, while simultaneously offering the possibility for more diverse and equitable representations, including ethnic, landscape, and historical aspects. Directions for further comparative research, as well as implications for game developers and digital culture studies, are also outlined.

### Keywords

Maldives, video games, cultural representation, postcolonialism, game studies

### Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza reprezentacji Malediwów w grach wideo z perspektywy kulturoznawczej i postkolonialnej. Praca traktuje archipelag jako swoisty fenomen kulturowy, którego obraz w cyfrowych narracjach kształtowany jest przez globalne dyskursy turystyczne, medialne i klimatyczne. Metodologia badań opiera się na jakościowej analizie treści wybranych przez autora gier, uwzględniającej zarówno warstwę wizualną, jak i narracyjną, oraz na odwołaniach do teorii orientalizmu, spojrzenia turystycznego i reprezentacji „pustych” przestrzeni. Wyniki wskazują, że Malediwy najczęściej przedstawiane są jako raj turystyczny, ale również jako: egzotyczne i niebezpieczne tło przygodowe, „plac zabaw” dla gracza czy też przestrzeń zagrożona katastrofą klimatyczną. Reprezentacje te wzmacniają stereotypy i prowadzą do wymazywania malediwijskiej kultury, historii oraz codzienności. Nieliczne wyjątki – głównie widoczne w grach niezależnych – wykazują jednak potencjał do przełamania dominujących narracji. Artykuł wnioskuje, że gry wideo odtwarzają i utrwalają globalne wyobrażenia o małych państwach wyspiarskich, a zarazem mogą stać się przestrzenią bardziej zróżnicowanych i sprawiedliwych reprezentacji: etnicznych, krajobrazowych, historycznych. Wskazane zostają także kierunki dalszych badań porównawczych oraz implikacje dla twórców gier i studiów nad kulturą cyfrową.

### Słowa kluczowe:

Malediwy, gry wideo, reprezentacja kulturowa, postkolonializm, groźnawstwo

## Introduction

The representation of real-world geographies within video games has become a significant area of inquiry in game studies and cultural studies alike. As digital landscapes become increasingly detailed and immersive, the cultural, political, and ideological implications of virtual place-making demand greater scrutiny. This study focuses on one such geographical site that, while underrepresented in global media, has recently appeared in select digital games: the Maldives. Known internationally for its pristine beaches, luxury resorts, and climate vulnerability, the Maldives occupies a unique position in the global imagination. However, in the context of video games, its appearance is rare, and when it does occur, it is often filtered through the lenses of exoticism, environmental romanticism or escapist tourism. This study examines the representation of the Maldives in video games from a cultural studies perspective. It asks what discourses are mobilized when the Maldives is represented in games. What is included or excluded from these depictions? Who is imagined as the subject and who is rendered invisible?

Through a close analysis of selected titles that feature the Maldives either explicitly or thematically, this study interrogates the ideological underpinnings of these virtual representations. The aim is to explore how video games, as cultural texts, contribute to shaping global perceptions of peripheral or small island nations. In doing so, this article contributes to broader conversations in game studies about spatial representation, digital tourism, and postcolonial media critique. By focusing on the Maldives, a location both hyper-visible in global tourism imagery and yet underexplored in interactive media, this study highlights the complex interplay between digital aesthetics, geopolitical narratives, and cultural identity.

Whereas the initial scope of this research was to analyze and compare representations of the Maldives across three distinct layers of video game narratives—namely, the construction of the islands as a touristic paradise, the depiction of their complex environmental and ecological vulnerabilities, and the portrayal of endangered cultural heritage and language—the material under analysis has demonstrated the limitations of this approach. The selected games did not consistently engage with these three dimensions. Instead, the dominant and often conflicting narratives surrounding the Maldives in video games were shown to be more closely tied to postcolonial discourses and the global tourism economy, with the nature of these representations varying significantly according to the production scale and market orientation of the respective titles.

### 1. Literature review

The depiction of geographic and cultural spaces in video games has emerged as an increasingly significant area of inquiry within game studies, media geography, and cultural studies. This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the relevant

scholarship across three interrelated domains. First, it considers the cultural studies of video games, focusing on how digital narratives construct, mediate, and sometimes distort social and cultural realities. Second, it examines the cultural imagination of islands and tourism in media, exploring the ways in which insular spaces are often framed as exotic, idyllic, or consumable sites for leisure and adventure. Third, it situates the Maldives within global cultural and postcolonial contexts, highlighting how representations of small island states are shaped by broader discourses of tourism, climate change, and postcolonial power dynamics. Together, these three strands provide a robust conceptual framework for analyzing the depiction – or systematic erasure – of the Maldives within digital game spaces, revealing the complex interplay between visual aesthetics, narrative conventions, and global cultural imaginaries.

### 1.1. Cultural Studies of Video Games

Video games are not merely entertainment artifacts but powerful cultural texts that construct and circulate ideologies. Cultural studies scholars have approached games through frameworks that foreground representation, power, and meaning-making. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980) remains foundational for understanding how meaning is embedded in game texts and interpreted by players within specific social contexts. Games can function as "texts" that encode cultural assumptions about race, gender, space, and identity, which players negotiate through interaction.

This insight has driven significant analysis of how games depict non-Western spaces, often reinforcing orientalist or exoticist worldviews (Said, 1978; Mukherjee, 2017). As Nakamura (2002) and Shaw (2015) have argued, the digital body and its environment are constructed through race, class, and imperial histories. In this vein, games set in non-Western locales often serve as playgrounds for Western fantasies, in which local cultures are flattened or commodified. These analyses are critical when interrogating representations of the Global South or postcolonial geographies in global game production.

Furthermore, recent work in ludonarrative theory (Hocking, 2007; Murray, 1997) emphasizes the way game mechanics, world design, and narrative combine to produce ideological effects. Even when games appear "neutral" or apolitical, their spatial design and objectives may naturalize particular visions of power, order, and desire. This is particularly salient for games that simulate real-world environments – such as islands or tropical paradises – that are loaded with cultural meaning.

### 1.2. Island Imaginaries and Tourism in Media

Islands occupy a unique position in cultural imagination, long associated with utopia, escapism, and the boundaries of civilization. From Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) to modern travel advertising, islands have been portrayed as isolated spaces

of fantasy, reflection, or peril. In media studies, this “island imaginary” is often linked to the legacy of colonialism and tourism (Baldacchino, 2005; Sheller, 2003).

Video games frequently draw upon these established motifs. Games such as *Far Cry 3*, *Dead Island*, or even *Animal Crossing* portray island environments as liminal spaces-detached from political reality, governed by nature or personal freedom, and often devoid of indigenous voices. These spaces become what Dean MacCannell (1976) calls “staged authenticity,” constructed to satisfy external fantasies rather than reflect lived cultural experiences.

The overlap between island imaginaries and tourism is especially pertinent to representations of the Maldives. As a luxury travel destination marketed through images of overwater bungalows, crystal-clear lagoons, and total seclusion, the Maldives has become symbolic of paradise lost or preserved. Digital media, including games, often inherit and replicate these representations, offering “virtual tourism” that collapses cultural specificity into aesthetic consumption (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Games thus function not only as leisure experiences but also as engines of touristic desire, mediating access to distant locales through affective and visual regimes.

### 1.3. The Maldives in Global Media and Postcolonial Contexts

The Maldives occupies a complex space within global cultural discourse. Known internationally for its vulnerability to climate change, its Islamic identity, and its exclusive tourism industry, the Maldives is often depicted through simplified binaries: paradise vs. apocalypse, tradition vs. globalization, purity vs. political unrest. These narratives are seldom shaped by Maldivian voices themselves and are instead curated through external geopolitical and economic lenses (Alexander, 2018).

Academic attention to the Maldives in media has been sparse, with most studies focusing on climate communication or tourism marketing (Shakeela & Becken, 2015; Fulu, 2007). There is a marked absence of critical media scholarship on Maldivian representation in interactive media. This absence reflects broader patterns of cultural marginalization in global digital production. While countries like Japan, South Korea, and India have growing gaming industries and visibility, smaller nations such as the Maldives remain underrepresented both as creative producers and as narrative subjects.

From a postcolonial perspective, this erasure has material and ideological consequences. As Spivak (1988) warns, the subaltern’s inability to “speak” in dominant cultural forms results not only in exclusion but in misrepresentation through others’ fantasies. When games use the Maldives merely as a picturesque background – as seen in titles like *Hitman 2* or *Fishing Planet* – they often reinforce neocolonial logics of consumption, surveillance, and environmental detachment.

However, countercurrents do exist. Indie games such as *Rannamaari* attempt to reclaim Maldivian mythology and history from within, offering alternative modes

of engagement and cultural storytelling. These examples highlight the need to recognize and support localized game development as a mode of cultural resistance and narrative sovereignty.

This literature review establishes the theoretical and analytical scaffolding for the study that follows. By situating video games within cultural, postcolonial, and media-tourism frameworks, it becomes possible to interrogate how the Maldives is constructed as a digital space – and what is at stake in these constructions.

## 2. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework guiding the analysis of Maldivian representations in video games. Building on the theoretical foundations discussed in Chapter 1, the chapter presents the research approach, criteria for game selection, analytical lenses, and the theoretical orientation that underpin the study. It also addresses the limitations inherent in examining a relatively small corpus of games and reflects on the positionality of the researcher. Each subsequent section elaborates on specific methodological components, demonstrating how qualitative, interpretive tools are applied to examine visual, narrative, and ludic aspects of game worlds. By systematically detailing the study's methods, this chapter provides a transparent account of how the analysis was conducted and situates the findings within broader discourses of cultural representation, postcolonial critique, and media tourism.

### 2.1. Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in cultural studies and postcolonial theory. The aim is not to measure the frequency of representations, but to analyze the meanings embedded within specific portrayals of the Maldives in digital games. The approach draws upon critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and ludonarrative analysis (Hocking, 2007), enabling the examination of both visual-narrative content and gameplay mechanics as carriers of cultural meaning.

### 2.2. Selection of Games

The corpus was assembled through a targeted search across multiple platforms – Steam, itch.io, Good Old Games, and Epic Games Store – supplemented by secondary sources such as Wikipedia's category listings and developer press releases. Games were included if they met at least one of the following criteria:

1. The Maldives is explicitly named and depicted as a location within the game.
2. A fictional setting is strongly modelled on the Maldives in terms of geography, architecture, or cultural motifs.
3. The game engages directly with Maldivian history, mythology, or socio-political context.

The final selection includes: *Hitman 2* (2018) – “Haven Island” DLC; *Fishing Planet* (base game) and relevant Maldives-based DLCs (*Atoll Scout Pack*, *Chamaeleon Cruiser Pack*); *Maldives in Dream* (2025); *Rannamaari* (2023); these titles reflect both mainstream and indie production, offering a spectrum from AAA to small-scale projects.

### 2.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeds through three complementary lenses:

1. **Spatial Representation:** Examining the design of landscapes, architecture, and environmental details to assess how the Maldives is visually constructed. This includes attention to aesthetic tropes, color palettes, and environmental interactivity.
2. **Narrative & Thematic Analysis:** Investigating the stories told (or not told) within these settings. This includes how characters interact with the Maldivian setting, whether locals are represented, and what role the environment plays in the plot.
3. **Mechanics & Player Agency:** Considering how gameplay systems position the player in relation to the Maldivian setting: as tourist, intruder, savior, or resident. Mechanics can reinforce or subvert dominant ideological framings.

### 2.4. Theoretical Orientation

This study is informed by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing together insights from cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and media tourism scholarship. At its core, the project treats video games as cultural texts-sites where ideologies are encoded in visual, narrative, and ludic forms, and where players negotiate meanings through interactive engagement. Following Hall’s (1997) conception of representation, games are understood as systems of signification rather than transparent reflections of reality. The environments, mechanics, and stories presented in games do not merely depict places such as the Maldives; they actively construct them as meaningful cultural objects.

Postcolonial theory provides an essential lens for interrogating these constructions. Building on Said’s (1978) notion of Orientalism and Spivak’s (1988) critique of subaltern silencing, the analysis attends to how the Maldives is framed by external perspectives and how local voices are excluded or marginalized. Mukherjee (2017) has argued that games often replay colonial logics, casting non-Western geographies as exotic backdrops for Western agency. This study extends that critique by considering how small island nations – often peripheral in both political and media economies – are positioned within global gaming cultures.

Finally, concepts from tourism and media geography offer further insight. Urry and Larsen’s (2011) *tourist gaze* provides a useful framework for understanding how game environments replicate the dynamics of tourism: privileging visual

consumption, simplifying cultural realities, and framing destinations as products for leisure. This is particularly salient for the Maldives, a country whose global identity is dominated by tourism imagery. By combining these perspectives, the study situates game representations within broader cultural economies of visibility, power, and desire.

## 2.5. Limitations

As with any qualitative cultural analysis, this study is shaped by both methodological choices and structural constraints. The decision to focus on four key titles (*Hitman 2*, *Fishing Planet* with its Maldives DLCs, *Maldives in Dream*, and *Rannamaari*) reflects the scarcity of games that reference the Maldives in any explicit way. While this limited corpus enables detailed, close reading, it also means that conclusions must be framed cautiously. These games cannot be taken as representative of the medium as a whole, but rather as indicative of certain recurring discourses in global game production.

A further limitation arises from the positionality of the researcher. As Spivak (1988) reminds us, questions of voice and representation are never neutral. This analysis is conducted largely through secondary access to the games, developer materials, and the cultural theories that frame them. Without direct interviews with developers – particularly Maldivian creators – the study cannot fully reconstruct production contexts or authorial intentions. Instead, it treats the games themselves as cultural artifacts, analyzing their textual features and the discourses they evoke.

Another methodological challenge lies in distinguishing depictions of the Maldives from generic “tropical island” aesthetics. The homogenization of island environments in popular media means that even games explicitly set in the Maldives often recycle visual codes common to Caribbean or Pacific settings. This raises questions about specificity and authenticity: when does a game truly depict “the Maldives,” and when is it simply drawing on globalized iconographies of paradise? Rather than attempting to resolve this ambiguity, the study embraces it as analytically productive, revealing how cultural distinctiveness is flattened by global media economies.

Finally, the research is constrained by asymmetries of visibility. AAA productions like *Hitman 2* are extensively documented, reviewed, and discussed, making them easier to analyze. Indie projects such as *Rannamaari*, by contrast, have limited circulation and fewer secondary sources. While this imbalance mirrors the structural inequalities of the industry itself, it also highlights the importance of including smaller projects in scholarly inquiry, since they offer counter-narratives that would otherwise remain obscured.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust framework for understanding how the Maldives is imagined in video games. By combining textual

analysis with theoretical insights from cultural studies, postcolonial critique, and tourism studies, the study is able to situate these digital representations within the broader cultural and political dynamics that shape global perceptions of small island nations.

### 3. Material Analysis

This chapter applies the analytical framework outlined in Chapter 2 to four selected video game titles (and associated DLCs) that depict the Maldives either explicitly or through close fictional analogues. Each case is examined through the lenses of spatial representation, narrative framing, and mechanics/player agency.

The aim is to capture the multidimensional character of video games as cultural texts. Spatial representation allows us to consider how environments are visually constructed and what kinds of landscapes are foregrounded or erased. In the case of the Maldives, this includes attention to architectural detail, environmental design, and the extent to which local specificity is retained or replaced by generic tropical imagery. Narrative framing, by contrast, examines the kinds of stories told within these environments, the roles assigned to local or foreign characters, and the ideological implications of the plots that unfold in Maldivian settings. Finally, mechanics and player agency address the procedural dimension of games: how rules and systems position the player in relation to the environment, whether as tourist, consumer, intruder, or cultural participant.

Together, these three lenses enable a more comprehensive reading of representation in games. Visual aesthetics, narrative structures, and gameplay systems do not operate in isolation; they intersect to produce a coherent cultural imaginary. By examining them in tandem, it becomes possible to reveal how different titles mobilize the Maldives as a symbolic space and to identify the ideological work that these representations perform.

#### 3.1. Spatial representation

Across the corpus, the Maldives is consistently rendered as an environment of extraordinary natural beauty. *Hitman 2*'s Haven Island DLC presents turquoise waters, overwater villas, and manicured beaches that mirror the iconography of luxury resorts. Similarly, the *Fishing Planet* DLCs emphasize photorealistic seascapes and reef systems, transforming the islands into an immersive fishing environment populated by scientifically accurate species. *Maldives in Dream* amplifies this imagery further, presenting a tranquil shoreline that functions primarily as a contemplative space.

While these depictions succeed in evoking the Maldives' touristic branding, they simultaneously homogenize it into a generic tropical paradise. Architecture, material culture, or signs of everyday life are conspicuously absent, reinforcing a visual

economy that privileges nature and luxury while erasing society. In this respect, these games replicate what Scheyvens (2011) observes in real-world Maldivian tourism: a strict spatial division between tourist enclaves and inhabited islands, where the former are designed to appear isolated from local communities.

Only *Rannamaari* departs from this pattern. By drawing on Maldivian folklore and religious history, it situates its settings in culturally specific spaces such as villages and ceremonial sites. Although less graphically sophisticated, the visual novel emphasizes local motifs, demonstrating how spatial design can resist the homogenizing tendencies of the global tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

### 3.2. Narrative Framing

The narrative use of the Maldives is similarly polarized. In *Hitman 2*, the islands are framed as a “haven” for global elites engaged in illicit activities. This framing ironically mirrors the country’s reputation for exclusivity, but the plot foregrounds foreign actors while excluding Maldivians altogether. The setting thus becomes a backdrop for stories of secrecy and privilege rather than local history or culture, echoing Said’s (1978) observation that orientalist discourse often silences indigenous voices.

*Fishing Planet* and *Maldives in Dream* go further in effacing human presence: neither contains a narrative in which locals appear, nor do they acknowledge the Maldives’ socio-political or ecological challenges. Instead, both games reproduce the abstraction of the islands as pristine wilderness or dreamlike retreat, aligning with MacCannell’s (1976) concept of staged authenticity – an experience designed to satisfy visitor expectations rather than reflect lived reality.

By contrast, *Rannamaari* explicitly centers Maldivian voices and stories. Its narrative retells the legend of a sea monster and situates the country’s conversion to Islam as a formative historical event. Unlike the other titles, it positions the Maldives not as a passive setting but as an active cultural agent. In doing so, it illustrates Mukherjee’s (2017) claim that postcolonial game narratives can resist imperial framings by reclaiming indigenous perspectives.

### 3.3. Mechanics and Player Agency

Gameplay mechanics further reinforce the divergent ways in which the Maldives is imagined. In *Hitman 2*, player agency is structured around infiltration and assassination. The Maldivian setting is reduced to a tactical space – an elaborate stealth playground – rather than a culturally inhabited world. Similarly, *Fishing Planet* channels agency into resource extraction, namely sport fishing. Here the Maldives is a renewable reservoir of marine life, devoid of human presence or ecological contestation.

*Maldives in Dream* offers the opposite extreme: almost no agency beyond walking, running, and swimming. By limiting interaction to contemplative movement, the game positions the player as a tourist-flâneur, consuming vistas without altering

them. This mechanic reflects Urry and Larsen's (2011) tourist gaze translated into ludic form, where the player's role is that of a passive observer.

*Rannamaari*, however, employs the mechanics of a visual novel – branching dialogue and choice-based progression – to immerse the player in cultural storytelling. While agency is limited compared to open-world or simulation titles, the player is invited to engage with local myth and history rather than to consume nature or luxury. The mechanics thus reconfigure the player's role: not as outsider, but as participant in a culturally grounded narrative.

### 3.4. Synthesis

When considered through these three analytical dimensions, a pattern emerges: mainstream and simulation games replicate external perspectives that aestheticize and depoliticize the Maldives, while independent or locally rooted projects attempt to reclaim cultural specificity. Spatially, the Maldives is almost always presented as paradise; narratively, it is either silenced or subsumed under foreign plots, with rare exceptions like *Rannamaari*; and mechanically, it is framed as a site of consumption, whether through stealth, fishing, or contemplation, rather than as a lived space of history and politics.

This comparative analysis highlights not only the scarcity of Maldivian representation in games but also the structural asymmetries of global cultural production. The dominance of outsider perspectives ensures that the Maldives circulates primarily as a visual fantasy, while indigenous voices remain peripheral. Yet the presence of counter-narratives, however marginal, demonstrates that alternative framings are both possible and necessary.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The four case studies analyzed reveal a clear pattern in how the Maldives is constructed within digital game spaces, with variations depending on production scale, narrative orientation, and target audience. This discussion highlights three dominant themes: cultural erasure through environmental spectacle, the Maldives as a site of virtual tourism and consumption, and counter-narratives emerging from independent or local creators. Across these themes, it becomes evident that video games function as powerful cultural texts, shaping perceptions of the Maldives in ways that often reinforce global hierarchies of knowledge, power, and visibility.

### 4.1. Cultural Erasure and Environmental Spectacle

Mainstream/AAA titles such as *Hitman 2* and simulation-based products like *Fishing Planet* depict the Maldives primarily as an aesthetic backdrop, stripped of social and political complexity. In these portrayals, the islands are an object of the *tourist gaze* (Urry & Larsen, 2011) – visually stunning yet culturally empty. The absence

of Maldivian characters or societal structures is not an incidental omission but a structural act of representation that aligns with patterns of “orientalist silence” (Said, 1978), where the local is erased to privilege the outsider’s narrative.

This tendency parallels real-world tourism geographies in the Maldives, where resort islands are physically and socially segregated from inhabited islands (Scheyvens, 2011). In replicating this spatial separation, these games mirror the unequal dynamics of access and visibility embedded in the country’s tourism economy.

#### 4.2. Virtual Tourism and Consumptive Play

In titles like *Maldives in Dream*, the Maldives becomes a passive object of visual consumption. While marketed as meditative, the experience reaffirms the consumptive logic of tourism economies, where destinations are tailored to meet visitor expectations rather than reflect lived realities (MacCannell, 1976). Whether players are catching fish, admiring sunsets, or infiltrating luxury compounds, the underlying framework casts the Maldives as an inexhaustible resource for leisure and spectacle.

By removing or minimizing human presence, these games present an unproblematic version of nature that sidesteps pressing issues such as climate change, coastal erosion, overfishing, and cultural preservation. The environment becomes a set piece, untethered from its social and ecological contexts.

#### 4.3. Counter-Narratives and Cultural Reclamation

*Rannamaari*, by contrast, centers local mythology and history, positioning the Maldives as a living, storied space. By drawing from indigenous narratives and embedding them in interactive form, it resists the exoticist and consumptive framings of larger productions. This reflects the potential of games as cultural archives and tools for self-representation.

However, such counter-narratives face structural barriers to global visibility. While they demonstrate alternative possibilities for depicting the Maldives, their limited resources and reach mean they cannot easily disrupt the dominant imagery produced by high-budget titles.

#### 4.4. Structural Inequalities in Representation

The analysis of these games also draws attention to the structural inequalities that shape which voices and perspectives gain visibility in global gaming cultures. The Maldives appears most prominently in high-budget productions or simulation platforms produced outside the region, and in these cases its representation is mediated entirely through external lenses. These depictions are not created to reflect Maldivian experiences or cultural realities, but rather to satisfy the expectations of international audiences who are familiar with the country as a tourist destination or as an exotic backdrop. Such a dynamic reflects broader patterns within

the cultural industries, where small or peripheral nations are seldom positioned as narrators of their own stories but instead appear as stages upon which external actors perform their narratives.

The absence of Maldivian perspectives in mainstream titles is not a coincidence but a consequence of global asymmetries in resources and access to production networks. Major studios such as IO Interactive possess the financial and technical capacity to produce highly detailed environments and distribute them worldwide, while creators from small nations like the Maldives often lack both the funding and the infrastructure necessary to bring their projects to international audiences. The contrast between the visibility of *Hitman 2* and the relative obscurity of *Ran-namaari* exemplifies this disparity. The latter demonstrates the potential of locally grounded storytelling but circulates primarily within niche communities, unable to disrupt the dominant imagery disseminated through mainstream gaming markets.

This imbalance resonates with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) well-known question of whether the subaltern can "speak." The difficulty is not that Maldivian creators lack stories to tell, but that the cultural and economic structures of the games industry make it difficult for those stories to reach beyond limited circles. What emerges, then, is a hierarchy of representation in which the Maldives is present in global gaming consciousness, but only in forms shaped by external consumption. Local agency, when it does appear, remains peripheral to the dominant flow of imagery that circulates through the blockbuster titles and global distribution platforms.

Recognizing these inequalities does not diminish the significance of the independent projects that attempt to reclaim cultural specificity. On the contrary, it highlights the importance of supporting such initiatives and of situating them within critical scholarship. By doing so, researchers and cultural practitioners can help to counterbalance the asymmetries of visibility that currently characterize the field. Until such interventions are made more systematically, the Maldives in video games will remain a space of external fantasy rather than an arena where local narratives can be expressed with equal weight.

## 5. Conclusions

The Maldives' rare appearances in video games offer insight into how global media frames small island nations. Across the case studies, three conclusions emerge:

- Mainstream games privilege spectacle over substance, using the Maldives as a visual commodity devoid of cultural specificity.
- Virtual tourism reinforces existing tourism imaginaries, presenting the islands as pristine, apolitical playgrounds for outsiders.
- Local and independent games offer vital counterpoints, embedding cultural narratives that challenge the dominant tourist gaze – yet these remain marginal in global circulation.

For cultural studies and game scholarship, the Maldives serves as a valuable case for examining how underrepresented geographies are imagined in interactive media. Interest in this area points to a broader need to investigate how other small island nations and archipelagos – such as Fiji, the Seychelles, or the Caribbean – are represented in games, as well as how ethnic and cultural minorities are depicted in digital media more generally. Comparative perspectives may reveal recurring strategies of exoticization, commodification, or erasure, while also drawing attention to counter-narratives produced within these communities.

Future research should not only critique these dominant framings but also actively document, support, and amplify Maldivian-led game projects. Extending this approach to other island nations and minority groups can illuminate structural inequalities in cultural production and shed light on how global gaming cultures reinforce or challenge dominant imaginaries. Without such interventions, digital representations of the Maldives – alongside those of Fiji, the Seychelles, the Caribbean, and other marginalized geographies – will continue to mirror, and thus perpetuate, the structural imbalances of the global tourism economy and media landscape, leaving local voices at the periphery of interactive storytelling.

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