

“Maid of Sker” and the Folklore of Wales

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Developing a game that incorporates a country’s folklore, traditional songs, art, and language creates an immersive experience that can keep an ancient culture alive. This research based paper explores features of culture and heritage in the 2020 first person horror game ‘Maid of Sker,’ developed by indie company Wales Interactive, with a focus on the recontextualisation of Welsh traditional music. It answers the question, “How is Welsh culture transmitted in ‘Maid of Sker?’”

A review of the literature shows that Welsh language and culture declined rapidly during the 1960s and 70s. Since the Welsh language is so closely tied to the national identity, the fear of losing it all was very real (James 2005). With a national revival taking place, the number of Welsh speakers has increased, and the Welsh assembly has set a goal of one million Welsh speakers by the year 2050, about one third of the population (Government of Wales 2023). Cultural heritage video games are an immersive way to learn about the history and culture of a region, whether their own or one that is unfamiliar (Camuñas-García, Cáceres-Reche, and Cambil-Hernández 2023,11). Arnold and Kramer (2015) state that composers can use folk elements to convey a sense of national identity and pride through their music (Arnold and Kramer 2015, 106). Traditional music evolves to carry myths, legends and even language, from past to present.

‘Maid of Sker’ is a game based on Welsh folklore, Welsh geography, the Welsh language, and Welsh traditional music sung by Welsh personality Tia Kalmaru. It was released during pandemic lockdowns and provided an immersive virtual cultural experience for both native Welsh gamers and gamers worldwide. The founders of Wales Interactive have a vision to put Wales on the map in the games industry and to showcase Wales on a global stage, supported by the Welsh government (Government of Wales 2022). This game received the prestigious TIGA (The Independent Game Developers Association) Heritage award in 2020 and a sequel is currently in development (Government of Wales 2023).

Although the geography of South Wales, the real Sker House, and the origins of the legend are significant features of this research, I take notice of the Welsh-language traditional songs Calon Lân, Suo Gân, and Ar Hyd y Nos, and their recontextualisation. It is advantageous to include traditional music in game development. Also called folk music, it has been transmitted over time by oral tradition - owned by no one but belonging to everyone. In-game commercial music requires licensing fees and

permissions, while newly composed music requires many hours of gameplay to become familiar to the player.

The use of traditional music in video games is not new. Perhaps the most famous example is the A theme in 'Tetris' (Korobeiniki, The Peddlers) (Shaver 2017). The 2022 game 'Skábma: Snowfall,' by Red Stage Entertainment, features Sámi joik singing by an indigenous artist, while an authenticity consultant was hired by Rockstar Games for 'Red Dead Redemption 2' to ensure the accuracy of campfire songs in the hills of the American southwest (Amaker and Lima 2019). In the case of 'Maid of Sker,' the traditional music does not sound the way we would expect it to. Changes of key, mood, and orchestration present the songs as totally befitting the horror genre while still being identifiable as beloved Welsh songs.

In conclusion, I establish that the game 'Maid of Sker' makes a significant contribution to the preservation of Welsh language and culture through the portrayal of folklore and folksong. When game developers are backed by their governments, the resulting partnerships can reinforce goals held in common.

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