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"It's so normal, and … meaningful." Playing with Narrative, Artifacts, and Cultural Difference in *Florence*

Dheepa Sundaram and Owen Gottlieb

Abstract

This article considers how player interactions with religious and ethnic markers, create a globalized game space in the mobile game *Florence* (2018). *Florence* is a multi-award-winning interactive novella game with story-integrated minigames that weave play experiences into the narrative. The game, in part, explores love, loss, and rejuvenation as relatable experiences. Simultaneously, the game produces a unique experience for each player, as they can refract the game narrative through their own cultural, identitarian lens. The game assumes the shared cultural space of the player, the player-character (PC), and the non-player-character (NPC) while blurring the boundaries between each of these categories. Through textual analysis, semiotics, and globalization theory, we show how *Florence*'s designers use game mechanics and narrative artifacts to produce a dynamic, cosmopolitan game space that beckons the player to engage personally with the game's narrative. The result is that narrative objects function as nonspecific cultural signifiers, inviting players to see the game space as global, a place in which traditionally underrepresented groups (non-white ethnicities and non-male genders) can be posited as normative and ordinary. Specifically, the religious and cultural artifacts signify a game space in which an interracial, interfaith love story is the default narrative – a pathway into the ordinary, rather than these artifacts functioning merely as markers of difference. Thus, these artifacts signify a globalized community that welcomes the player into the game space of *Florence*. As such, *Florence* is a novel and important entry into video games' representation of culture and religion.

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Introduction. Normalizing the Cosmopolitan Game Space[i]

The study of religion and ethnicity can expand the understanding of video games in society by offering a cultural lens to examine integration and negotiations of race and identity. Research on identitarian politics within game spaces has often sought to understand grand emotions without considering the mundane and ordinary (Anable 2018). Using media studies (Deren 1963, Vogel 1970)[ii], semiotics (Barthes 1977, Silverman 1983, Yelle 2013), cosmopolitanism and *bricolage* (Wuthnow 2007), and globalization of religion (Roy 2010), we analyze the mobile game *Florence* (2018) as an example of how to negotiate the complexities of representation and authenticity while creating a broadly relatable story. We examine how the design of the game's narrative, which is interwoven with mini-game mechanics, transforms the quotidian into meaningful drama. We delve into how the storytelling of the game involves players in the transformation of religious and ethnic otherness into the ordinary rhythms of everyday life.

Florence is a hybrid interactive novella with integrated mini-games, that follows Florence Yeoh (often the player-character, or PC), a young Chinese-Australian woman through the ups and downs of her love story with Krish Hemrajani, a young South Asian-Australian musician (ostensibly, the non-player-character or NPC, though on occasion, the PC).[iii] In this narrative game, the game mechanics are integral to storytelling, with interactivity that provides pathways for individualized player experiences of the broader narrative including play-driven planting and pay-offs over the course of the story. The tale of *Florence* is one of negotiating love, heartbreak, and new horizons.

We construct our argument through the following sections: an overview of theory and methods, game design, narrative analysis of game mechanics, the player

manipulation of flattened narrative objects, and finally, how these elements produce virtual cosmopolitanism through the *bricolage*[iv] of religious and cultural markers of the globalized game space[v]. We frame our argument through textual analysis, semiotics, and globalization theory to show how *Florence*'s designers use game mechanics to produce a dynamic, cosmopolitan space that invites the player to engage personally with the game narrative through a signification process driven by narrative markers or objects. We argue that *Florence's* game space *flattens* cultural and religious trajectories in a cosmopolitan landscape to decenter difference and normalize cultural exchange to produce a relatable story through unique, but accessible characters. Flattening in this context refers to how the game's design includes religious and cultural symbols and markers without linking them to a structured religious discursive frame. The characters themselves are unique as lead designer Ken Wong (2019) notes: "By making these fictional characters specific, detailed, flawed, deep characters we honored the complex and the varied lives of real Asian Americans." The flattening to which we refer relates to objects in the game space and how those objects are deployed and can be manipulated. For example, sushi and painting identify Florence while Krish emerges as a skateboarding cellist who has a Gaṇeśa *mūrti* (Hindu deity icon).

The game mechanics position flattened narrative artifacts, some of which hold religious or cultural significance, as identity pieces that can be assembled and configured as the player progresses through the game narrative. Nearly every time the player is asked to move an object or complete a puzzle in the love story, they contribute to (or are positioned to perceive that they are contributing to) an interactive, cosmopolitan world which fashions cultural difference as part of the normative[vi] fabric of the game space. By flattening the cultural specificity of narrative objects, the design team creates characters that are unique in spite of cultural

differences rather than because of them, producing a potentially universal[vii] and therefore, broadly relatable experience. We see this in how the game depicts Florence and Krish's relationship through ordinary activities such as how they brush their teeth together, take family photos, and unpack or pack items, some religiously and culturally laden – when they move. In this sense, these mundane aspects of their relationship normalize ethnic and cultural difference, centering their story, while dramatic and moving, as quotidian or slice-of-life.

Theory and Methods

Our analysis considers both how the player can operate within the game space as well as the design of the game space itself. To that end, we employ a media studies approach to textual analysis to interpret the narrative, mechanics, and cultural framing of *Florence* while drawing on, game design practices, and globalization theory in context of religious studies. We mobilize Maya Deren's concept (Deren 1963, Vogel 1970) of the horizontal and the vertical in order to understand *Florence*'s mixture of mini-games and narrative. Just as young people today often pick and choose aspects of identity to coalesce, we see Krish and Florence do so with various cultural objects and identitarian artifacts (e.g., Gaṇeśa, skateboard, sushi, and painting) allowing the player to do so as well with some of these objects. In this way, we show how the story is designed to be a particularly relatable narrative through which players can formulate their own meaning. In other words, the game offers space for individualized player experiences. Further, our analysis focuses on narrative objects in *Florence* that permit the player to, in effect, create their own story. In this context, narrative objects operate as semiotic markers which can become "interchangeable placeholders for dramatic moments in a given gameworld"[viii] (McDaniel et al. 2009, 88). These semiotic markers in *Florence* produce what Robert

Wuthnow calls "a "cultural *bricolage*, constructed improvisationally, by those building their identities, from the increasingly diverse materials at hand"[ix] (Wuthnow 2007, xvii).

In *Florence*, analyzing the semiotic fabric of the game narrative shows how narrative objects function as nonspecific cultural signifiers. Semiotic theories of language hold that "a text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication" (Chandler 2007, 10). Further, as Daniel Chandler (2007, 2) explains, the central feature of semiotic systems are "signs" which can be anything which "stands for" something else. The terms *text* and *sign* have been broadened to consider a variety of media including film, television, and photography as well as other systems of signification, e.g., games, culture, religion, etc. (Barthes 1977, Yelle 2013).

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Further, we examine how the manipulation of objects are part of guiding the player through the emotional negotiations that both Florence and Krish engage as their relationship progresses. They also provide pathways for the player to suture[x] into the narrative (Silverman 1983). While Silverman focuses on the concept of suture within film studies and psychoanalysis, the relationship between the *speaking subject* and *viewing subject* is useful for understanding how the player in a video or mobile game becomes a formative part of the game space. Building on Louis Althusser's conception of ideological apparatuses, she explains:

> "Interpellation designates the conjunction of imaginary and symbolic transactions which results in the subject's insertion into an already existing discourse. The individual who is culturally "hailed" or "called" simultaneously identifies with the subject of the speech and takes his or her place in the syntax which defines that subjective position. The first of these operations is imaginary,

the second symbolic. The concept of interpellation would thus seem to be intimately related to that of suture." (Silverman, 1983, 219)

Silverman (1983, 232) conceptualizes "suture" as the

"sleight-of-hand [which] involves attributing to a character within the fiction qualities which in fact belong to the machinery of enunciation: the ability to generate narrative, the omnipotence and coercive gaze, the castrating authority of the law."

We use this formulation to examine how players can come to see themselves within the game space and potentially identify with the experiences of Florence and Krish. The *existing discourse* Silverman identifies can be understood as the game's cultural playing field. In this sense, the game produces a culturally multivalent love story in which the player can become a part through the manipulation of objects. Just as an audience member, when watching a film, works to weave their own positionality into the narrative, a player whose actions change the events in a game, participates in a potentially even more impactful level of textual change and at least in the context of that play, changes the game-text itself. The manipulable religious/cultural objects *hail* the player into the game space, inviting them to see the cultural otherness of the PC and NPC as relatable and normative.

In this sense, we analyze how the game narrative strives to be a universal story, one unrestricted by cultural particulars that necessarily becomes individualized through player interactions with the mobile device or computer. Specifically, we examine how seemingly eclectic cultural and religious markers in the game gain meaning over the course of the story, while the individual players are implicated in that process through their play. We build on the idea of game spaces as cultural/religious worlds in making, defined by rules, exclusions, and customs (Plate 2011) and how the player's play experiences are woven into the game narrative through mini-games and how an

individualized, unique experience is enabled by the flattened, globalized space (Roy 2010). Building on Plate's (2011) concept of *worlds* in the context of globalization, we argue game mechanics offer players a tactile decision-making mechanism to mold a game space which remains culturally ambiguous while inviting a relatable, personalized experience. By playing the game, the player is invited to overlay and intermix personal moments onto Florence and Krish's story, making each decision to move an item into a box or click on an image potentially a personal one. In doing so, the player can create their own unique version of the narrative and/or refract the story through their play history and potentially personal history.

The Story/Stories of Florence

Arc of the Game Story

When the game opens, Florence is in the doldrums in a job she finds boring, with a mother who nags her about dating. The days seem repetitive and somewhat dreary, though the game hints at Florence's inner desires, such as when she finds a finger painting/collage from her youth (which the player is invited to paint themselves). One day, Florence happens upon Krish, a South Asian-Australian cellist whose playing entrances Florence and she (we) floats towards him along the street.

As Krish and Florence draw together, their relationship develops. With few words, but rather through the game mechanic of talk bubbles, the game emulates the rhythms, colors, and shapes of conversation, like a dance. When the player shakes Polaroid snapshots until significant moments of Florence and Krish's relationship appear, suturing into their world with each snapshot. When Florence and Krish move in together and integrate their lives, they (and the player) must decide what gets packed and what remains in the apartment, each item a window into the characters and a decision by the player. Krish and Florence negotiate a shared space, growing together

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while maturing as individuals, for a time, bringing out the best in each other. Eventually, the drama rises, there is friction in the relationship, and Florence and Krish begin to grow apart. Conversations are harder; arguments are unavoidable, with the game mechanics enacting these challenges as word-bubble puzzles shift in pace. The mechanics also lead the player on a journey of heartbreak when puzzle pieces drift and no longer fit and letting go is the only way forward. Eventually, Florence and the player find dawning wisdom as loss turns to memories and the relationship once blossoming leaves behind growth, learning, and even fond memory, memorialized in a single Polaroid.

Designer Perspectives

The creative director of *Florence*, Ken Wong[xi], describes creating the two main characters in his talk at the Game Developer's Conference in 2019:

> "My first instinct was to try and make them as blank as possible, maybe never give them names and their particular character traits and make them ethnically ambiguous. I thought at the time that making them as generic as possible would sort of make them…relatable… we…realized that creating an average person is just impossible." (Wong 2019)

The overall approach of the designer is to use cultural particularities to *broaden relatability*. Wong notes he was inspired by an interview with Constance Wu about creating her television series *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-2020) and the pressure to portray all aspects of the Asian American cultural experience since this was the only program attempting such an endeavor at the time (Wong 2019). What they *could* do "was tell an authentic story about one particular Asian American family" (ibid.). Wong and the *Florence* design team use this model to create flawed, individualized characters that represent a unique experience that seeks to situate cultural difference in a normative, familiar frame. In other words, players might not connect to the

identities of the characters, but the experiences and emotions are accessible, and therefore, relatable. Since Wong (ibid.) notes creating an "average person" was not practical, the only option was to peculiarize the ontology to make space for shared phenomenology.[xii] In other words, while the characters are unique, their experiences are not. Rather than creating a set of *blank* characters for players to imbue with specifics, Wong and the design team produce pan-Asian characters and cultural markers to broaden representation. Indeed, Wong (ibid.) explains, "Establishing our characters' ethnic backgrounds helped anchor their identities and inform their relationship." The impact of such an approach is to make these non-white, Asian characters ordinary, and ultimately relatable. When their extraordinary inner selves are revealed, the players have already had an opportunity to suture to them.

Indeed, Wong (2019) then goes on to describe how, as the primary writer, he decided to build the characters with details of his own friends and family, building a globalized vision of *normal*-"Like me, Florence was born in Australia to ethnically Chinese parents who emigrated from Malaysia." He then explains that Florence's surname 'Yeoh' was his mother's maiden name while her challenging, sometimes contentious interactions with her mother which, often took place in Cantonese, mirror the experiences of his Asian-Australian female friends (ibid.). Similarly, Krish is based on a Sri Lankan high school classmate of Wong's and his surname is taken from an Annapurna producer (ibid.). Here, we see how the particularities of Wong's childhood shape the dynamics of Florence and Krish's relationship making their story simultaneously authentically unique and broadly relatable.

Perhaps, most notably, Wong (2019) describes both the mundane nature of Florence and Krish's relationship, yet the novelty of such a depiction in video games:

"Our couple happened to be two people of color of different faiths and the children of immigrants, this is such a mundane ordinary thing in Australia...we exist, we have lives, and we fall in love. It's so normal, and yet this representation is meaningful because we're not we're still not used to seeing [characters like Florence and Krish], as...central...in the stories that we tell."

It is worth noting that Wong speaks from the position of a professionally successful artist, writer, and game designer whose game company, *Mountains*, is in Melbourne, Australia. Yet, Wong generalizes the notion intercultural relationships as *normal* to the entirety of Australia which perhaps obscures how such relationships operate regionally (e.g., urban cosmopolitan spaces vs. provincial areas). In many ways, the game skillfully does the work of representing such relationships as commonplace and quotidian within a globalized, western context. However, by suggesting that "it's so normal" in Melbourne Wong (2019) does seem to minimize the friction intercultural relationships can invite as well as the anxiety of negotiation multicultural spaces require for those not seen as *ordinary* or *average*. While this is a concern, the game's   77 unapologetic focus on the broader narrative of a love story told through the lens of those traditionally painted as cultural *others* advances a narrative that intercultural *is* normal.

In this sense, *Florence*'s intercultural game space functions as a flattened, cultural *bricolage*. It decenters cultural specificity by asking players to customize Florence and Krish's love story through their individual play experiences. Thus, the game narrative, which incorporates disconnected, flattened cultural and religious markers without a discernible frame, operates simultaneously as an original story that is quintessentially human.

Game Mechanics and Artifact Manipulation, Building Meanings

While the previous section considered how the design team sought to create a game narrative which uses non-specific cultural markers to produce a broadly accessible story, here we examine how the game mechanics produce this aspect of the narrative. In *Florence,* the game mechanics and numerous objects in the game environment, including ritual and ethnically marked items, are necessarily inter-related. This is because the player often manipulates objects in order to progress in the game, but the player can, at times, suspend or reverse game time by choosing to remain in the minigame to continue to manipulate objects. Designer Ken Wong (2019) has described how the origin of what would eventually become *Florence* started out as a 3D puzzle manipulation game, but over the course of the evolution of the game became influenced by vignette games. Wong (2019) says:

> "In vignette games, mechanics are often about evoking a feeling or an idea or perhaps bringing up similar memories, that the player has, and thereby creating an empathetic connection with the character."[xiii]

To better understand some of the approaches to the numerous evocative mechanics in *Florence*, here is a sampling: In the beginning of the game, Florence is stuck-in the monotony of her job and her personal life, Depicted through minigames of spreadsheet work and toothbrushing. Then, the first minigame with bright colors arises. Traveling back in time, the player creates and *paints* a collage as Florence when Florence as a child, but also necessarily, as themselves. The player makes the choices of color and design as the music[xiv] suggests simple delight. There is freedom within the narrative for the specific collage work of the player. Later in the game, the art object returns, carrying the player experience. The art object reprises later in the game when Florence's relationship with Krish helps her rediscover her love of creating art and painting – a reorientation that will last even beyond their romance. The player is brought along, as it is specifically the digital object that the players has created that

travels through the game. The player's imprint in the game remains through the playthrough.

The player takes on the role of Florence during the ordinary moments in her life as she brushes her teeth, moving the toothbrush back and forth in the morning. Manipulating the toothbrush gains meaning when Florence brushes after a great date with Krish. After Florence and Krish's relationship develops and they move in together, the brushing has a different meaning as the two brush together. As Florence and Krish experience more adventures, the player takes Polaroids of Florence and Krish together, role playing as the characters or bystanders, and documenting the growing relationship. The Polaroids return later with more meaning as the story progresses.

The game seldom uses dialogue with words. Instead, it uses puzzles made of word bubbles whose shape, speed, and pacing reflect the tenor of the conversation. Krish responds with a word bubble, and the player as Florence constructs her response through connecting world-bubble puzzle pieces on the touchscreen. The lack of words leads to an open interpretive space for the player as the conversation is tonally represented rather than specified through words. These puzzles evolve as Florence and Krish's relationship evolves. As rapport builds between them, the better the two relate, the easier and more fluid the word bubble puzzles become. Later as the relationship begins to fall apart, they begin to talk over one another as bubbles overlap. The word bubbles unbalance on the screen as the player responds, anger and frustration are depicted through the overlap, imbalance, and shape.

Early in the game, the player must participate in mini-games (e.g., eating sushi, brushing teeth, finger painting/collage making) in order to advance the narrative.

Later in the game, player action becomes an impediment. *Inaction* becomes a counterintuitive key to progress; one the player has been trained not to expect through the whole game. This represents the hard road to acceptance at the end of a relationship and is a powerful use of the unique affordances of play-mechanics through the self-reflexive use of interactivity or rather the lack thereof.

Early in the game, puzzles advance the narrative, but when Florence and Krish break up, the puzzle cannot be fully reassembled. The puzzle pieces are manipulable; but they continue to move apart on their own, making the puzzle impossible to fully assemble. The breakup puzzle, like the inaction moment mentioned above are both self-reflexive and Brechtian game play experiences, allowing for distancing and reflection. The game mechanic itself conveys both the narrative event of Florence and Krish's break up as well as the emotional poignancy and frustration, and sadness of the moment. This is all tied together through the design team's deep awareness of the nature of game mechanics and meaning-making.

Characters' belongings and the movement of belongings plays an important role in the game. At times, the player role changes perspective, such as when the player cleans up and organizes Krish's room to impress Florence. This includes cleaning up the space on his shelf around his Gaṇeśa. When Florence and Krish move in together, the player selects objects to place on the shelves – which objects are displayed, which get packed away. When they part ways, the player packs Krish's belongings-notably his skateboard and Gaṇeśa-two objects consistently shown as part of his identity.

Through manipulation afforded through game mechanics, the digital objects are very much a part of the cultural *bricolage* of the game space. The player plays, manipulates, and marks the artifacts – changing them – like the picture collages –

creating a personalized story. Such a design frame encourages reflection, allowing the player to weave, or suture, themselves into the story. Jady van Leusden (2019) notes that as a niche cultural space and community, video games and gamers respectively have been dominated by white men; though recently, several games are "turning towards a more accurate representation of our globalized society (and past) [particularly through] characters." In *Florence*, there are novel opportunities, provided through the integration of game mechanics and narrative, for players to weave themselves into a more globalized and diverse society, one of more quotidian rhythms.

Narrative Artifacts: Negotiating Player Cultural Identity through Objects

Narrative in Games

Video games do not always involve narratives. When they do, they can tell these stories in unique ways. Just as television is often more dialogue driven than cinema, radio uses soundscapes differently than film, and composition in a painting can draw the viewer's eye through a narrative, video games' particular affordances and attributes likewise lend differences to the modes of storytelling. Ian Bogost (2010) has argued that games use *procedural rhetorics* particularly effectively to make their arguments. Games model and emulate systems, and procedures are a core aspect of systems. Bogost argues that rhetorical arguments in games are particularly compelling when the procedure or procedures players follow carries the rhetoric. One example of such procedural rhetorics can be experienced in Lucas Pope's game *Papers, Please* (2013). The game explores bureaucratic structures; and, makes its arguments about totalitarian systems by having the player take the role of a guard at a checkpoint who must work the challenging, laborious, and fraught task of checking

the papers of people trying to enter or return to the country of Arstotska. The process of following the oppressive procedures emulates the position of a functionary in a totalitarian state. At the same time, heavily narrative games can fall outside of procedural rhetorics. Games such as Tell Tales' *The Walking Dead* (2012-2019) series or *The Wolf Among Us* (2013-2014) for example, do not necessarily function by modelling systems. Their rhetorics mimic the style of Aristotelian storytelling and branched narrative. *Florence* does something different than either of these methods of rhetorical structure: it is a game that weaves an emotionally compelling narrative of modern cross-cultural love with internal minigames that both deepen the narrative and personalize the story for the player.

Verticality through Game Mechanics

Though Florence's story is a linear progression with acts, reversals, rising tension, crisis, climax, and resolution – all playing out chronologically, with no alternative endings or paths, the minigames provide ways in which the story becomes unique for each player. The player primarily, though not exclusively, takes on the role of Florence, playing minigames that move the story along while also serving as metaphors. At times the minigames become meta to the story as the player is placed in a position to react to the story as a spectator or an audience member, somewhat dissociated from Florence, such as when the player tries to patch together a puzzle made of a ripped-up drawing of the two romantic partners – is this Krish's perspective, is it Florence's? Is it the player's perspective? Part of the novelty of the use of game mechanics and narrative is how the narrative can move forward on its own, yet suture in and involve the player through minigames that emulate the emotion of the story.[xv]

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Avant-garde filmmaker and theorist Maya Deren's notion of verticality[xvi] is helpful in considering the ways in which minigames function within *Florence* (Vogel 1970). For Deren, the horizontal refers to narrative development with forward even-to-event progression. Verticality refers to movements of poetic exploration, suspended from the event-to-event progression – deeper exploration of a moment. The vertical moments of game and puzzle play in *Florence* allow the player to explore the quotidian moments and dramatic moments in Florence and Krish's romance – some, for as long as the player wishes to play.

But then – the horizontal and vertical merge as minigames return later in the game with new meaning born of the advancing narrative. The games are used, as playwrights say, for planting and pay-off. As we have illustrated above, the mini-games and the actions the players take early in *Florence* have different, more laden meaning when they re-appear later. In this sense, the vertical moments themselves take on *narrative* qualities because they return having gained new meaning – an arc. The meaning in the game is built both from the narrative's horizontal progression and, also by the player's vertical exploration. Because the mini-game moments draw upon previous player choices and participation, the player's behavior, choices, and memories are woven into the narrative. This combination moves beyond the most advanced contemporary branched game narratives by incorporating a wide variety of player experiences, including more free-form play experiences.

The various objects in the game environment travel through these horizontal and vertical paths, gaining meaning over time. While in some ways representationally flattened, the objects become more meaningfully rich with each reprise of their appearance or manipulation.

Reading *Florence* as Normalizing Multicultural Representation

The narrative, characters, mechanics, and digital artifacts in *Florence* present important avenues for reading how cultural representation works within globalized modernity. Further the game design team allows for the possibility of normalizing cultural difference by rendering objects connoting this difference as manipulable. Both Florence and Krish are both racially and culturally marked as other, but this otherness is presented as relatable through the narrative as well as the manipulation of objects.

Both Krish and Florence are marked by an eclectic collection of cultural and religious markers connoting their Asian identities. Krish is marked through specific objects and practices as South Asian, while Florence is framed as *pan-Asian*. While Krish's racialized difference was a deliberate design choice to center a "dark skinned hairy creative guy... [as the] object of desire" (Wong 2019), it is notable that the game also works to mitigate this difference through the specificity of cultural norms and normalizing them as relatable. As their relationship blossoms, Florence and Krish are shown in a series of photographs that depict the coming together of their respective worlds. For example, the family photo which includes Florence could be seen as an attempt to integrate Krish's difference through a common practice – people in relationships seek to blend families. Wong also notes that the design team sought to spotlight cultural differences between Florence and Krish, explaining that his "South Asian friends" noted that Krish should have a tight-knit relationship with his family (Wong 2019). In the game, Krish includes Florence in several family gatherings early in their relationship, "while Florence keeps the whole relationship a secret from her mother" (Wong 2019).

This strategic design choice invites the player to see these characters as individuals rather than representative of all Asians. Further, it reinforces the game space as a

multicultural backdrop for a quintessential modern love story that centers the characters' quirks and normalizes cultural difference. In doing so, Florence and Krish's story becomes familiar while simultaneously being unique.

While the photographs of Krish and Florence with Krish's family visually underscore Florence and Krish's racial difference, the game mechanics invite the player to see this moment as normative. Specifically, the game mechanics allow the player to refract Krish and Florence's relationship through their own personal lens – cognitively through decision making and emotionally through results of their decisions. The mechanics hail the player in intimate ways through the manipulation of quotidian objects. In the next few sections, we will discuss these objects, how their manipulability carries emotional weight, and how they help create an interactive multicultural game space. These objects are not only meaningful for Krish and Florence; they also invite the player to invest emotionally in the game's outcome through the player's cultural location and position. In this sense, these narrative objects function as meaning-making mechanisms which operate through their recurrence in game mechanics, the narrative, and player memory. It is specifically their recurrence that builds meaning, ultimately making these narrative objects into signs. In this sense, the game space does not merely reflect the global, but helps produce it (Williams et al. 2009, 829). Thus, the design team's choices of particular manipulable narrative objects (and others which are not) can shape how the player connects personal memories of play, love, loss, cultural identity with the characters' experiences in the game (McDaniel et al. 2009, 92-93).

Game Objects: Meaning through Manipulation

Previously we have discussed meaning building through the reprisal of mechanics in the game. Here we explore how meaning is built through interaction with objects in

the game. The player helps fashion the game environment and moves the game narrative forward through the manipulation of objects. These objects serve as deculturated signifiers, delinked from specific religious and ethnic associations, which we understand as signaling a generalized sense of *globality* through the characters' association with these objects (Roy 2010). We believe this in part because of the stated lead designer's intention, but also because of the way the objects are unmoored from other specific anchors, such as the pan-Asian and more global/cosmopolitan associations of sushi, as opposed to Florence's specific Chinese heritage. Rather, they gain meaning through the player's interaction with them, manipulation of them, and how they are woven into the broader narrative. For example, objects that are left out upon move-in, can later be packed up (and what is left out may have changed in the intervening time). In this way, the objects function metonymically for dynamics of Florence and Krish's relationship.

Three particular moments clearly show how *Florence* invites players to engage with the multicultural game space: when the player takes photographs of Florence posing with Krish's family, the occasions when the player can move and pack or store some of Krish's and Florence's possessions, and the player's ability to clean Krish's apartment. In each case, the player's ability to manipulate these objects marks them as culturally significant. For example, when the player cleans Krish's room, the Gaṇeśa is displayed prominently rather than partially hidden under clutter. Interacting with these narrative artifacts offers players the opportunity to universalize difference in the context of a mundane activity (e.g., putting up family photographs, packing/unpacking, etc.). By allowing the player to write themselves into the story through these vertical minigame experiences, Florence's and Krish's story can be refracted through *player*'s history and experiences. In other words, Florence and Krish

operate as normative, relatable signposts that mitigate their cultural difference by effacing such difference within the grand narrative structure of a modern love story.

Let us now consider the connection between the narrative objects and their function within the emotional tenor of the game narrative. The moments in which objects are manipulable often mark significant, emotional points in Krish and Florence's relationship (e.g., ability to clean Krish's apartment, moving in with Florence and moving out of their shared apartment, and taking family photographs). These moments invite the player to associate the objects with not only Krish and Florence, but also with the emotional valency of the moment itself. The player participates in memorializing their budding relationship by snapping photos. This moment both emphasizes the relatability of their story while marking Florence and Krish's racial and cultural difference as incidental to the narrative. As their love blossoms, the player is also permitted to clean Krish's apartment by packing and organizing objects. With each manipulation (e.g., moving an object, taking a photo), the player is imbricated further into the game space and participates in normalizing Krish and Florence's cultural positions. Through the use of manipulatable game objects including particular cultural objects, the game designers invite the player to suture, *play*, and reflect.

The vertical moments in which time is dilated, usually in the control of the player are particularly notable opportunities for reflection, as reflection requires such extension of time. This process of player-agent manipulation, participation, and reflection allows for the co-constituting of a multicultural, globally oriented, interactive cultural game-space. The player must move objects both into and out of Florence's home, in part, making choices about what is packed, stored, and left behind. These two moments mirror an earlier scene in which the player is able to clean Krish's apartment for

Florence's first visit. These parts of the game show how the object manipulation functions as a synecdoche for the story as a whole – signifying the broader, quotidian patterns of the coming together and falling apart of their relationship, in specifically cultural terms. In other words, cultural difference operates as a normative function of Florence and Krish's original love story. In this way, we see how the narrative requires the kinetic and tactile involvement of the player to complete the story by moving objects, completing tasks, and moving the game forward. In doing so, the player operates in a liminal space, one that is at once both inside and outside the mandatory narrative.

Virtual Cosmopolitanism in *Florence*

Florence operates as a virtual cosmopolitan, a globalized game space which involves the player through their kinetic movement and manipulation of objects. In this section, we consider how *Florence* decenters cultural difference through the flattening of narrative artifacts to produce individualized, original characters and a story that is broadly relatable.

These cultural identity markers and objects associated with Florence and Krish become abstract symbols of religious/cultural difference in the game. Wong points to this in his interview when he emphasizes the mundane nature of the story and how the characters just happen to be "two people of color of different faiths and the children of immigrants" (Wong 2019). In other words, he and the design team were invested in creating a game in which the story was *normal* and relatable with Asian characters. The concept of *dis-embedding* coined within globalization scholarship, refers to the cultural unmooring process that occurs as religious praxis moves into the unfettered global marketplace. Olivier Roy (2010, 7-8) suggests that this process

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requires "deculturation" or the "loss of social expression of religion" coupled with a simultaneous "market of different religious products," which results in a homogenizing and standardizing of belief and praxis). Taking the game space as a global market of cultural exchange within which, the player manipulates objects to advance the game narrative, we see how the player participates in normalizing cultural difference as a quotidian function of the game world. Players can locate narrative objects in a cultural frame that is relatable since the game space is a flattened multicultural arena that lacks cultural specificity. As such, we see how the game invites players to see the uniqueness of the characters beyond their Asian heritage and relate to their familiar, yet original love story. Therefore, the objects can be seen as identity *products* that the player can fit together to perhaps, best reflect their personal experience. In this way, the player determines how these identity markers can and should make sense, mirrored in many puzzles, minigames, and activities, in essence, fashioning an individualized cultural *bricolage* of sorts through game play.

The diegesis of *Florence*, the world experienced within the game, creates an interactive narrative framework that asks players to participate and become a part of the game's narrative world, in effect, normalizing the cultural difference of the characters. This design choice resonated with players according to Wong (2019) who notes the "many tweets and emails [they received] from people who played Florence who felt themselves represented in a video game, for the first time." The characters in the game are individualized with unique foibles, interests, and an eclectic mixture of cultural markers. This design approach makes the characters relatable while mitigating the pressures of cultural representation (Wong 2019). This emerges visibly in the narrative artifacts-Krish's Gaṇeśa *mūrti*, a reference perhaps to Krish's Hindu roots and his *khara* or iron bracelet which symbolizes the Sikh belief in an

unbreakable attachment to God as well as the dIvine's unending power. Taken together, these objects vaguely reference South Asian religious traditions in a way that is deliberately nonspecific, but uniquely representative of Krish. In the case of Florence, the markers are more subtle cultural cues – eating sushi, rice is pointedly displayed in her kitchen, and she holds several phone discussions with her mother about her tepid love life, a point Wong (2019) notably includes to reflect his personal family experience and those of his Asian female friends. Here, we again see the pan-Asian markers of Florence's identity, individualized with specific identity markers such as her love of painting.

It is worth noting that Florence's rediscovery of her inner artist at the end of the game does not consider her positionality in terms of race; but rather, this moment highlights the game's grand narrative theme of finding one's true passion. In Chapter six "Dreams" (*Florence* 2018) the player learns about Krish's dream to become a concert cellist and how he inspires Florence to rediscover her love of art. The player moves their finger over the bubble to fill in both Florence and Krish's dreams to make them visible and advance the game. A point emphasized in the subsequent chapter "Inspiration" (*Florence* 2018) in which Florence begins drawing Krish. Similarly, in the same chapter, Florence (through the player) *pushes* Krish to apply to the music academy. Both examples show how the game narrative is personalized while becoming quotidian, in essence, normalizing a storyline otherwise marked as representative of diversity. Moreover, what we see here is what Rachel Wagner characterizes as "a cosmopolitan outlook [which]…sits with discomfort, motivated by curiosity and a willingness to let difference be expressed without need for ideological alignment" (Wagner 2013, 257). Florence's rediscovery of her artistic passion which, eventually leads to a career change shows how the game narrative fashions a seemingly universal love story as unique. Most notably, it is a story in which cultural

difference remains visible on its own terms. And, yet the game is made bespoke by player contributions and therefore is rooted in player experience. This speaks to the idea that "cosmopolitanism, and the religious views that draw upon it, require us to let go of the assumption that full and complete 'programming' of the real world is even possible" (Wagner 2013, 258). Rather, the player undertakes a constitutive role in *completing* the game world. Thus, this bespoke aspect, enabled through the game mechanics, weaves the player into the cosmopolitan cultural milieu of the game narrative. In doing so, they help fashion the virtual game space as a global one, in which difference remains irreducible, but not central, to the story.

The game's designers embed manipulatable artifacts within the narrative process which both reflect the cultural eclecticism of Florence and Krish (e.g., eating sushi, packing/unpacking the Gaṇeśa) while showcasing their relatability as a *normal* couple experiencing the erratic emotions of love (e.g., minigames of arguments). The impact of these design choices implemented through game mechanics and the kinetic movement of narrative objects is the rendering of a cosmopolitan game space that both produces cultural difference as commonplace while centering Florence and Krish's story as novel, and yet, familiar and accessible.

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Conclusion

> "Although all modes of digital engagement perform some degree of order-making, it can be argued that videogames offer more certainty than other wired experiences because they make possible an end state, a certain finish, and they are fuller in their construction of mediated other-worlds, that is, in their performance of world-building. In this way, then, video games are more like religion than other modes of digital interaction like social media…" (Wagner 2013, 250).

Wagner's point that video games can offer resolution much like a religious world is interesting when considering how the potential interiority of player in *Florence* is produced. The game requires the player to assume the shared cultural space of Florence and Krish to complete the game. Completing the game in this sense means not just reaching the end of the narrative, but rather, making the game whole. This kind of completing-as-wholeness requires the player to invest emotionally in Florence and Krish's story by expanding the world of the game to include the player's play behaviors, and perhaps, even their own personal histories. In this sense, the game space fosters an interactive cultural world in which the player's behaviors and interiority can contribute to and participate in that cultural world. We argue that the design of interactive play helps create a new kind of contemporary love story, one that, though acute and particular, holds reflections of religion and social identity in contemporary cosmopolitan life, not just for Ken Wong and his team, but for the players participating in the game's story.

The quotidian aspects of the story of Florence and Krish's romance, located within a deculturated game space, participate in a narrative of cultural *normalizing*. In this way, the game narrative works to elevate these moments through the growing and then breaking of the romance. As noted earlier, this reflects, perhaps, a bourgeois elite perspective of multicultural Melbourne extrapolated to represent all globalized urban spaces. Another reading is that the game paints a love story featuring characters traditionally treated as *other* within a western context, as normal and accessible. Whether or not this is true, the game is offering an accessibility to that life, through the participation of play with artifacts – through mechanics of the game and enmeshed in the narrative. This access to the multicultural quotidian *is* a transcendent experience. Indeed, many players report crying at the end of the game (Wong 2019), including one of the authors of this essay. In this sense, the game can offer a cathartic

experience that is accessible through the quotidian parts of the narrative that are told through non-white characters, including a female player-character who is the primary protagonist. Thus, the player embarks on a narrative journey that is both ordinary and transcendent simultaneously, experiencing a *slice of life* drama that is moving, meaningful and most notably relatable in its normality, while also being exciting.

Unlike games without vertical play moments woven into a narrative, *Florence* relies on the dialectic between the vertical, interior world of the player and the horizontal narrative. The resolution is both parallel with and external to the conclusion of the pre-scripted narrative of the game; the game offers players a chance to unpack the affective and cognitive dynamics of their personal experiences within an enclosed, externalized space. Religious and cultural objects function as markers of a *bricolage* modern cosmopolitan identity (Wuthnow 2007) that the game narrative presents as quotidian, ordinary, and normative. When applying Roy's (2010) theory of deculturation to *Florence*, the game space can be seen as a cultural multiverse that carries something for each player. Players can fashion a unique identitarian portal into the narrative world of the game, seeing Florence and Krish's relationship through their individually cultivated cultural lens. The player can do this in part through game mechanics; the somatic and tactile experience of clicking and swiping become elements of the player's experience of the narrative. Each decision to move the screen forward represents another interactive moment between player, player-character, non-player-character, and the story. Within a culturally flattened game space, narrative objects like Florence's painting supplies and Krish's Gaṇeśa function as touchstones for players to suture their individual experience and histories into the story. Further, the act of moving these objects and playing with puzzles during vertical play moments that are interspersed amid the horizontal narrative weave the player behaviors into the narrative fabric. In this way, the game hails players to refract

the relatable experience of love and loss through a personal lens. The mix of identities is the marker of genuine love, mitigating the particulars of religion. The modern love story is digital, built and communicated through game mechanics and game objects. It is a story through which two people from seemingly different worlds find love, loss, and learning.

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[i] We use the term *game space* to connote the virtual space in which the video game is taking place. Building on the concept of "third space," (Hoover and Echchaibi 2018, 96) we suggest the game space operates through the "location of practice" within a virtual sphere (i.e. the game) that exists in a "negotiated dynamic with the physical" and can enable various types of meaning-making through user/player interaction.

[ii] The first published text of the symposium held in 1953 appeared in *Film Culture* in 1963 under the title "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium." The symposium was a discussion between Maya Deren and 16 other filmmakers where she elucidates her theory of verticality. We use Deren's theory of verticality as discussed in this forum which was organized and later published by Amos Vogel (1970) throughout the essay.

[iii] Florence's surname (Yeoh) can be found in the publisher description (Annapurna Interactive 2018) and is discussed in Wong's 2019 Game Design Conference talk (Wong 2019). Krish's surname (Hemrajani) appears in Chapter 6 "Inspiration" of the game. It is pictured in a photograph of his family and in a scene in which he imagines himself as a concert cellist when he and Florence are in a record store.

[iv] We use *bricolage* to describe a multicultural game space and how players can customize their experience of Florence and Krish's love story by manipulating narrative artifacts. There is more discussion of this term in the article's section "Theory and Methods" as well as in endnote ix.

[v] We use the terms *global* and *globalized* to mean a transcultural space that technological, economic, and media connectivity produce and sustain (Ampuja 2012). In this context, *globalization* refers to the processes and conditions which enable people from various cultural, racial, national, economic, and linguistic positionalities to interact, through a mixing of cultural foods, products, and identities and developing relationships (Schirato and Webb 2003, 31). As we note in the section "Theory and Methods," we consider Plate's (2011) formation of the game space or the virtual space where the video

game is taking place as a "space in making." In this sense, we posit that the player co-constitutes the global and relatable aspects of Florence and Krish's story. Thus, the player's kinetic involvement is a globalized, virtual cosmopolitan. We also employ Roy's (2010) concept of deculturation within globalization of religious practices to consider how cultural elements become unmoored and transferable making possible *bricolage* identity (Wuthnow 2007) within the context of a cosmopolitan game space.

vi We use the term *normative* to refer to the design team's choices of casting an Asian Australian woman as the primary player character and a South Asian Australian man as the primarily non-player character. Our claim rests in part on how this game differs from most video games which center white men (Williams, et al. 2009). While we acknowledge that the thorough, meticulous research of Williams, et al. is somewhat dated, as Van Leusden's (2019) recent piece in *Diggit Magazine* notes, the issues of diverse representation in video game PCs and NPCs as well as how they are represented (e.g., sexualization of female characters, stereotyping characters of color, etc.) remains pervasive.

vii We use the term *universal* to refer to the way the frame narrative of the game posits a broadly relatable story; but does so by centering Asian characters and cultural markers. In doing so, the design team creates a globalized game space which invites players to refract the game through their personal cultural lens.

viii We use the term *game space* rather than *game world* to spotlight the interactive and co-constitutive nature of game play in fashioning the Florence and Krish's love story as broadly relatable. The player's participation in this constitutive process through minigames, activities, and kinetic movement of objects is vital to understand how the game operates as broadly relatable.

ix The term "*bricolage*" Robert Wuthnow (2007, 14) employs is rooted in Claude Levi-Strauss' concept of the "*bricoleur*" (tinkerer). Wuthnow (2007, 14) notes for Levi-Strauss "the *bricoleur* in preindustrial societies is a handy person, a do-it-yourself craftsperson who uses the tools of his or her trade and the materials that happen to be at hand to fix things and keep them in good repair. The tools and materials that prove useful today may be different from the ones that were useful yesterday. The tasks of each day nevertheless reflect the past and the lessons one has learned. The objects the bricoleur produces are a *bricolage* – a construction improvised from multiple sources." We use *bricolage* to describe how *Florence* invites players to participate in an eclectic process of identitarian customization through gameplay.

x Building on Kaja Silverman's (1983) concept of *suture* in film, we use this concept to show how the game mechanics invite the player to shape the game narrative through the minigames and activities such taking pictures, completing puzzles, and moving objects.

xi We acknowledge the numerous documented accusations of verbal abuse by Wong that have been made by *Mountains* team members. We provide Wong's words about the game as they speak to the intentions of the team in its creation.

xii We thank our first reviewer for this language around the concept of *broadening relatability*. This phrase describes how we understand Ken Wong's concept of particularizing a *universal* in creating Florence and Krish's characters within the game.

xiii Wong (2019) notes that the vignette games of Jenny Jiao Hsia (*Morning Makeup Madness* 2016) and Nina Freeman (*How Do You Do It* 2014) were particularly influential in the making of *Florence* (2018). He explains that these games are often invested in fostering empathetic connections between the players and characters. Such evocations align well with Deren's vertical poetics (Vogel 1970).

xiv Music is an impactful and powerful part of storytelling in the game. While this paper lacks the space to also consider and analyze music in depth, in brief: the music, like the objects, suggests both a flattened and yet elevated cosmopolitan space. Using a post-classical score in the tradition of cinema orchesteral scores, though with a small ensemble of instruments, the music mirrors and elevates the emotive themes as the story progresses and provides open play space during the mini-games. For

example, the tones are uplifting as Florence and Krish's relationship blossoms, they move to somber as the relationship falters, and finally, they reprise as befitting the story. The music in the minigames likewise reflects the tone of the narrative moment, allowing for a vertical exploration of the music as well as the mechanics. Sound effects also play an important, if subtle role. Objects moved on the shelf for example have sounds of memories associated with them – the crowd at a cricket match with the cricket bat, the sound of a tanpura drone when the Gaṇeśa is moved.

[xv] In this way the game is reminiscent of an inverse of form of literature found in the Talmud, which uses narratives to illustrate underlying principles in legal debates and hypotheticals. However, in this case, it is the games that expand on underlying emotional moments in the narrative.

[xvi] See endnote ii for more information.