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GAMES DESIGN AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS: AN APPROACH TO THE CULTURAL ROLE OF JAPANESE VIDEO GAMES THROUGH PROCEDURAL RHETORIC

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An Approach to the Cultural Role of Japanese Video Games through Procedural Rhetoric

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Resumen

En el ámbito de la disciplina de *Game Studies*, el videojuego japonés es uno de los principales objetos de investigación debido a su papel histórico en la conformación moderna del medio. A pesar de ello, los estudios centrados en dilucidar su relación con la creación de imágenes sobre el Japón moderno son escasos. Este artículo propone aproximarse a este fenómeno mediante las herramientas metodológicas desarrolladas por Ian Bogost y Gonzalo Frasca, agrupadas aquí bajo el término de "retórica de procedimientos". De esta forma, se espera comprobar su utilidad para dilucidar los elementos en común clave entre el videojuego japonés y las actuales dinámicas culturales.

Palabras clave

Estudios culturales, videojuego, diseño de juegos, Japón

Abstract

In the area of *Game Studies*, the study of Japanese videogames is a main object of research due to their historical role in the modern shaping of the medium. Yet despite that, the number of studies dedicated to discern its relationship with the construction of images of modern Japan is still reduced. Thus, this paper aims to realize an approach to this subject throughout the methodological tools provided by Ian Bogost and Gonzalo Frasca, which are grouped together under the general term of "procedural rhetoric". In doing so, we hope to check its usefulness for elucidating the key elements that establish the relationship between Japanese video games and modern cultural dynamics.

Keywords

Cultural studies, video games, game design, Japan

GAME DESIGN AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS: AN APPROACH TO THE CULTURAL ROLE OF JAPANESE VIDEO GAMES THROUGH PROCEDURAL RHETORIC[1]

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Introduction

The concept of narrative and its application within Game Studies has long been a contentious subject in the field of Game Studies. The fact that, as of today, stories and characters have become a major source for attracting potential buyers and generate costumer's loyalty, have fostered this debate. In many cases, the concept of a story in gaming is defined as an extradiegetic element that is used to contextualize the elements of the ludic system into a cohesive structure (Perron and Wolf, 2003). In the case of videogames, stories have been perceived as an optional aspect of the ludic experience that function as a reward or as an incentive for the player to keep playing (Holmes, 2012). Both observations shed some light on the reason as to why video games have been focused on enhancing the narrative aspect of their system. In recent years, gaming companies have fostered the creation of intensely detailed fictional worlds, and a significant portion of their marketing

strategies rest on the appeal that these worlds may have on their audience, even though sometimes this effort has been seen by critics and consumers alike as a damaging factor for their quality. Nevertheless, the introduction of complex stories in video games has been widely celebrated in video game journalism as an enhancement of the medium and a way of legitimizing it as an artistic endeavor (Edge, 2009; Russell, 2012).

Through these perspectives, it would seem that narrative can be considered either as an integral component of game design, or accidental, and thus a foreign object that may interfere with the creative process. Both observations are opposed to each other, yet this ambiguity has been noted by Espen as a defining characteristic of video games, who he says are both "object and process" (2001). When considering video games as objects –texts–, narrative can be analyzed in the same way that is analyzed in other media, such as film or TV. However, when seen as processes based on player input and ludic mechanics, narrative can be treated as secondary to its consumption, which would allow some games to do not rely on storytelling to engage the player. A notorious example of this type of game would be *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984), which relies on a heavily abstracted representation of its rules and doesn't convey any story whatsoever.

On the other hand, video games can also be used to create fictional worlds and enable players to engage with it by their own accord (Juul, 2005). By allowing that freedom, they enable them to create a meaning of their own and establish a sense of ownership, and if the game itself doesn't adhere to a cohesive story or narrative progression, a player could theoretically "fill" those blanks with a narrative of his or her own. In that regard, some game designers have claimed that narrative-driven games do not convey the same amount of agency that mechanic-driven

games, and as such, should be considered inferior to the latter (Juul, 2005).

The narrative that is achieved in these games is not, therefore, endogenous to game design, but exogenous, since it must come from outside the object, that is, from the active input of the player. An exogenous narrative could also be enforced by extradiegetic elements that were associated with it outside of the game's simulation (Perron and Wolf, 2003; Jenkins 2006). For example, the instruction booklet of earlier games was usually employed to deliver some form of narrative context to the game experience. This practice has been continued upon by fan culture and the convergence of media, which in turn has led to the establishment of a complex mix of media and texts that are arranged vertically and horizontally (Steinberg, 2012). However, this process has also put into question the validity to consider games as purely mechanical processes, and in particular, it has led to a reflection on whether game design philosophies are motivated by more external factors than it might look like. A particular area of this questioning has been trying to deal whether some of these factors might be related to local and regional specificities, whether those might be ascribed to cultural differences or several other factors.

Video Games and Cultural Representation

One of the first scholars to write about the topic of cultural representation in video games was Espen Aarseth, who tried to analyze the relationship of hypertext –as it is presented in the Internet and digital software– with traditional forms of text. He defines video games as "factories of signs" that are built around a formal system of rules and mechanics that conform to a unified structure (Aarseth, 1997). In contrast with linear narratives, which tend to be based on representation, gaming narratives rely specifically on the development of simulated

environments. In order to instill investment and agency, video games use non-linear structures to invite players to explore different outcomes and consequences of their actions. He further argues that video games have the capacity of offering the player a sense of control and authority over the text that cannot be found on other media.

Another important factor to understand the relationship of video games with linear narratives is explored by Steve Swink in his book *Game Feel* (2009). According to his analysis, video games resort to a specific mode of engagement that he labels as "game feel" and describes as the tactile interaction that is established between the computer and the player and enables to communicate the effects of the former into the latter. While this term may be applied to a wide range of human activities, video games depend completely on it, since their nature, as closed and ambiguous systems, forces them to deliver a means of communication that has to be reinforced through haptic means –as well as representational means, though Swink considers them ancillary to the core experience.

While this term has not been universally accepted, it is one of the most useful to explain the appeal of video games and their ability to relate to their audience in meaningful ways. However, these terms also highlight the problem around narrative and mechanics. In fact, it is possible to argue that, since the mechanics are that important to define a game, then the rest of the elements should be seen as irrelevant or even inconsequential. This problem has prompted a contradictory academic debate between so-called narratologist and "ludologists"[2] that question whether narrative should even be considered a factor in order to understand video games. That

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[2] For a brief summary of this academic debate, see Frasca, 1999, 2003.

been said, there has been several answers to that dilemma over the years, one of them being the proceduralist model of Ian Bogost (2007). According to Bogost, video games convey meaning and deliver their messages throughout the procedure and order on which the assets of the game are presented, both mechanics and aesthetics. Following his analysis, games can be considered as procedural texts that could transmit various types of artistic expression through different arrangements of all of its elements. It also implies, therefore, that both the ludic and the narrative in video games must be seen as part of a unified whole, not as different entities.

Bogost's works also imply that, in video game design, certain types of meaning can only be made through specific arrangements of the gaming, which in several ways correlate with the taxonomy of game genres that Chris Crawford (1997) established in his original work. Besides, and much in the same way that game design understands the difference between endogenous and exogenous mechanics to establish the rules of games, I would argue that meaning in a video game can also be conveyed through exogenous means. In a game where storytelling elements are deliberately scarce, the player would have access to a much wider variety of choices, but the meaning would be composed through several factors that arise from both the player's activity and its contextualization into a wider cultural context. On the other side of the spectrum, games with a strong narrative component would be able to present a much more cohesive story, and although it would limit the amount of freedom that the player would be allowed to have, it could compensate itself thanks to an engaging fictional setting. These games would also be much more similar to traditional texts, as Aarseth (1997) described them, but would still nevertheless require a greater amount of agency from the player before being able to engage with it properly.

Every game could be classified as possessing an exogenous or endogenous meaning, and this separation could also help to establish a taxonomy of video game genres. While most role playing games, graphic adventures and visual novels can be considered implicitly meaningful –since they rely primarily on visuals and text to convey meaning to the player–, explicit games would be more common amongst platform games, shooter games and strategy games –those that rely much more on challenges and coordinated responses to communicate with the player–. A game that uses an implicit narrative would show its semiotic components either through metaphorical representation or proceduralized signifiers (Bogost, 2007). Several recent games have experimented with this approach, like *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) and *Dear Esther* (Chinese Room, 2012). In these types of games, player input is left to a minimum, while meaning is provided through a careful sequential process of presentation and contextualization of the elements found within the simulation. On the other hand, games with explicit narratives lend itself to the player's own interpretation of its gameplay, which in turn leads to a bigger dependence on context. Even though the game itself may possess several narrative components or even resort on storytelling techniques –like the use of cinematic language–, the core experience of the game still lingers on compulsory mechanics and an engaging system of rewards and failures.

The type of discourse shows that implicit narratives permit for a greater space of action to the player, and can be evaluated similarly to the discursive process found in other formats of gaming, such as sports and board games. However, it is important to note that, even when the player is allowed to dictate its own experience, this will be limited necessarily by the elements that are presented in the simulation. This means that, even though there may be an illusion of control of the narrative itself, this will be always limited by what the designer

intended to introduce in the game beforehand. As such, the textual authority is still left on the hands of the designer, and with it, his ability to instill authority on the intentions and ideological underpinnings of the object. The ability of video games to become ideological artifacts has been studied in detail by Ian Bogost (2007) and Gonzalo Frasca (2001, 2007), and while their focus may lie on games that are set as deliberate propaganda or advertising, it is also be extremely useful to understand how certain games can be analyzed as cultural objects.

According to Bogost, video games are able to convey meaning through a process that he calls "procedural rhetoric". In his definition, procedural rhetoric includes both traditional methods of storytelling –those that are supported by visuals and text– and those that are specific to video games, including the rules of the specific simulation and the haptic interaction that accompanies them. Similarly, Gonzalo Frasca coins the term "simiotics" (1999) to refer to the same idea of considering the actions of the player in the game world as intended rhetorical devices on the part of the designer. While both authors argue for different denominations, they roughly make reference to the same concept of considering video games as cultural artifacts whose textuality depends on rules that are unique to them. In order to properly identify them, researchers need to look not just for traditional forms of text in video games, but also for new forms that need to be defined beforehand. Usually, these new forms are identified as the "mechanics" or the "gameplay", since those are the elements that distinguish video games more from other media than anything else. However, their uniqueness must not detract us for the importance of the rest of the content, and the way that those elements interact with one another to present the game world and its internal rules to the player.

The Role of Japan in the Video Game Industry

One of the examples provided by Bogost in his analysis of procedural games is the game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar, 2004), and how the mechanics and events that happen in the simulation of that fictional setting may be interpreted as a form of cultural critique of certain aspect of American pop culture. To him, every kind of video game can provide some insight into an aspect of the culture it's supposed to be set in. The notion of the game as a parody is reinforced through several elements, including the story –which is based on conventional narrative tropes–, visual themes and rules that reinforce certain types of behavior and condition both the player's actions as well as the responses that he gets from the rest of the characters. In the case of *San Andreas*, the purpose of the simulation seems to aim for a satirical representation of early nineties Detroit's gang culture. Bogost also suggests applying this form of content analysis to every form of interactive media, which means that it could provide for a solid theoretical framework upon which analyzing whether certain video games ascribe themselves to certain cultural discourses.

It is important to note that, while the word discourse have several meanings throughout the years, here it is refered as the main subject of study that is treated in several academic disciplines, including Sociology, Discourse Analysis and Anthropology. Ever since the seminal work of Edward Said (1995), the concept of Discourse has been particularly useful to address the issue of how culture is perceived and constructed by the main participants of a society. In the particular case of video games, a procedural analysis would be able to explain what are the main factors that distinguish Japanese video games as different or distinct from Western video games. While games as a whole have been influenced by multiple factors over the years and don't necessarily limit themselves to a single region

or culture, the culture and habits that surround this form of entertainment today have explicitly distinguished Japanese video games and signaled them as unique or alternative from "mainstream" video games, even though the criteria used to make that distinction can be contradictory. Mia Consalvo (2006) has argued that business practices and specialized marketing strategies are major agents in the shaping of these differences, but she also notes that these practices are based on already existing power dynamics between those regions. It is, therefore, imperative to consider how these dynamics may have been established in the first place, how they have contributed to the modern perception of the medium, and which type of meaning does it convey in relationship to the role of Japan as a creative force in it.

A main reason to start this research lies on the fact that, unlike other massive forms of entertainment, video games have been hugely influenced by Japanese video games during its formative years. While the first games originated in the United States (Kent, 2001), this specificity became rapidly irrelevant as soon as the industry expanded to other regions, more specifically Japan and the UK (Donovan, 2010). Through this process, a vibrant gaming culture was soon formed in Japan (Picard, 2013), and eventually, Japanese video games became major economic players after the recess of the American industry in 1983. As a result, video games today have been shaped by products made in America and Japan –and Europe, to a lesser degree.

On the other hand, this transnational process also led to the establishment of some cultural specificities. For example, it has been assumed by the gaming press and consumers alike that Western audiences prefer shooting games, while Japanese buyers tend to prefer role playing games. Sometimes, these differences have been explained as cases of unreconcilable

cultural differences (1UP, 2007, 2011; The Escapist, 2010; Rock Paper Shotgun, 2010), while sometimes they are viewed as temporary fads (Japan Times, 2013). However, all of the observations are already entrenched in the perception that the Japanese and the Western market are essentially different, and this difference has been exemplified in cases such as the treatment of Microsoft towards the Eastern market (Sloan, 2011) and the concern of Japanese companies to appeal to Western tastes (Kohler, 2004). Both cases not only show a pre-established conception around what games appeal to different regions, but also an unequal relationship between firms that enables the appearance of these differences.

One element that keeps coming up to explain this situation is historical context. While multiple companies have been successful in the medium, some key sectors were monopolized by Japanese companies for a long time, especially hardware development (Kohler, 2004). This era of video games, which comprises the time period between the late eighties and the late nineties, was dominated by firms like Nintendo, which was the first to successfully penetrate the American market, and other major publishers like Sega and Sony (Sheff, 1999). This paradigm became to be contested with the rise of PC gaming and Microsoft. The codename for this conglomerate's first video game console, the Xbox, was labeled "Project Midway" in a clear attempt to relate their economic activity to a specific, Japanophobic cultural imaginary (Sloan, 2011). In many ways, this language originates in the Japanese panic that sprung in the Reagan era as a reaction against the successes of the Japanese economy at the time, which also affected early Japanese gaming companies (Sheff, 1999), and is reflection on the perception of Japan not just as an important player in this industry, but as the major and most influential one.

Both Nintendo and several Japanese companies –including Sega, Sony and developers like Capcom, Namco and Konami– managed to adapt themselves to the preferences and tastes of the American audience. In order to achieve that, they created several products that were directly inspired in Western archetypes or were already ingrained into the Western cultural landscape. The philosophy upon which these games were made, according to authors like Kohler (2004) was based on pushing forward narrative elements and representation, which was a reachable goal thanks to the technology available at the time. For example, the *The Legend of Zelda* and *Super Mario* franchise (Nintendo, 1985, 1986) is heavily based on traditional medieval tales, even though they are mixed with elements of traditional Japanese culture –such as the presence of the Koopas, which are extracted from Japanese folklore.

While Kohler further argues that these products were pioneers in using this approach to game design, this claim does not seem to correlate with the overall history of the industry (Donovan, 2010). However, it can't be denied that these games were exceptionally successful in foreign markets (Sheff, 1999). While part of this success is attributed to massive marketing campaigns, it is important to note that Japanese firms also opted to use their local market as a testing area for potential products, while exports to Europe and USA were much more carefully orchestrated to avoid market flooding and encourage product scarcity. The conscious separation between these markets was further amplified to almost every practice of the overall industry. For example, distribution and the ability to publish one's own video games was much more feasible in Japan than in the rest of the world, where it was actively discouraged through both legal and technical means (O'Donnell, 2011).

Through these businesses practices, it would seem evident that Nintendo designed a transnational approach that divided their

respective markets very early on, an approach that was quickly imitated by their competitors (Sheff, 1999; Aoyama and Izushi, 2002), including Microsoft. The process of the Japanese entertainment industry to accommodate to foreign audiences has been studied in detail by Koichi Iwabuchi (2002), who described it as the conscious decision on the part of Japanese firms to generate "odor-less" products that would fit into several markets without any indication of its origin. He also observes that, by doing this, some Japanese companies have integrated the Orientalist description of their own cultural landscape into their activity. In the particular case of video games, this practice is probably the main reason as to why the current gaming press and consumers distinguish between their tastes and those of Japan.

While this perception of the Japanese market has been entrenched in the public discourse, it is more prevalent now, with the economic recession, that the Japanese industry is facing in the Western market (BBC, 2010). The shrinkage of the Japanese gaming economy has been considered an important shift in the history of the medium and it is usually interpreted as the end of the Japanese dominance (The Guardian, 2014). Recent events like Nintendo's low financial profits (Gamasutra, 2014) are also seen as signs of this decline. While this process is still developing at the moment, the influence of Japanese firms is still felt significantly in the overall industry (Newzoo, 2013), which may indicate that Japanese video games are nowadays viewed as a cornerstone of this art form. However, it may also reveal the fact that Japanese video games have been attributed with a certain number of traits over the years that have ultimately enclosed them into fixed categories of description. How these descriptions have been created and consolidated must be taken as a priority in order to understand how the concept of the Japanese video game has been established today.

Japanese Video Games as "Acultural" Products

To proceed adequately into the process of understanding and description of Japanese traits in video games, an application of the criteria used by Bogost and Frasca (2001, 2007) is the most optimal choice. By also applying the distinction between games that deliver meaning explicitly or implicitly, it is possible to understand how their overall design philosophy is able to convey different aspects that are assumed by the audience as distinctly Japanese. A proper approach to video games should also use the distinctions already established within the industry between game genres. While some of these categories have become obsolete or are put into question by several experts (Fencott, 2012), they can be useful to understand how phenomenology plays a vital role in procedural gameplay. Likewise, its division is useful to understand how different ludic structures are able to support different types of stories and semiotic signs.

During the years of Japanese dominance, some of the most well-known game genres were developed and codified by several Japanese developers. Examples of this include platform games, which were amongst the most popular and varied, and action/adventure games, which alongside the former, became the staples of video game consoles at the time (Kohler, 2004). In these games, the narrative is presented implicitly, since the context is only offered throughout the elements of the simulation and only resort to other methods in rare of specific locations. For example, while textual words that described the situation of the game were often used at the beginning or the end of certain events in the gameplay, they were always separated between bigger chunks of gameplay that took the weight of the ludic experience.

This format of game design does not favor the use of traditional narratives and formal storytelling techniques, as they are used in other media. Instead, the setting and objectives of the players are being told through game mechanics. For example, in all iterations of *Super Mario Brothers* (Nintendo, 1986), the player learns about the fictional world that the character inhabit through their actions. The fact that Mario is able to jump so high, obtain magical powers by touching mushrooms and flowers, and has to be aware of turtles along the way, are all elements of the game that the player knows by playing it. Shortly after that, the player learns that his objective is to traverse through different worlds –stages– and castles to defeat an evil creature –who can be easily distinguished from the rest thanks to the fact that he's specially strong and dangerous– and rescue a princess that is located in one of these castles. Only the latter bit of information is learned through text, since the rest can be inferred by the way that the game places all these elements sequentially.

Later cases of this formula would approach this method of gaming to create numerous types of setting and delivering several forms of narrative. For example, the franchise *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sega, 1991) which was designed from the start as a competitor to Mario, uses almost the same philosophy, but emphasizes movement and exploration through the use of bigger maps and the presence of different power-ups than those Mario uses: while Mario tends to become stronger and more deadly after acquiring items, Sonic becomes faster and more resistant to enemy damage, which allows the player to traverse the worlds much faster. On the other hand, the focus of games like *Kirby's Dream Land* (HAL Laboratory, 1992) and *Mega Man* (Capcom, 1986) is on acquiring enemy abilities and use those against them. These differences help game designers to differentiate their properties and explore different aspects of the same type of gameplay, which always consists on traversing

through one end of the map to the next. At the same time, the aesthetics and sound effects of those games are helpful assets to establish the overall tone of the story. Most of the times, these aesthetic elements employ "cute" or otherwise attractive designs (Chen, 2013) that draw a huge inspiration from recognizable authors of both *manga* and *anime* in Japan. In fact, Kohler (2004) has suggested that the ludic structure of some of these games, like the arcade *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981) was intended to look similar to Japanese comic strips, specially the format known as *Yonkoma*, or *manga* that only uses four cells to deliver a joke. However, other type of platform games, like *Contra* (Konami, 1987) *Bad Dudes* (Data East, 1988) and *Bionic Commando* (Capcom, 1988) use elements that seem substracted from the general ethos of the American action movies of those times, or try to reproduce the looks and visuals from already popular American properties, like Disney and Warner Brothers.

The philosophy design behind platform games like *Mario* and *Sonic* were also the basis upon which new genres were explored or refined. For example, brawler games like *Streets of Rage* (Sega, 1991) or *Final Fight* (Capcom, 1991) used the same level layout and the same narrative techniques to generate world-building through rewards and motivations. However, instead of focusing on platforming and avoiding obstacles, these games encourage fighting opponents using different combos and objects to defeat them in a setting that resembled those of action movies at the time. In this particular genre, the game mechanics and pacing change substantially, but the design priorities are essentially the same, since story and characterization still rely on aesthetics and ludic motivations.

Another genre that derives heavily from this philosophy are action/adventure games, like *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) and *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986). Unlike traditional action games –like plattformers and brawlers–, the fictional worlds that are being presented here are not being explored by traversing a number of obstacles, but by allowing the player to move at his own pace in a specific setting. Since in these games it is impossible to inform the players of his goals through a preset course, the appeal of the game must rest on rewards based on exploration and throughout narrative input by which the player is able to know his role in the world. Recently, designers and experts have named this type of design as "environmental storytelling," a technique that relies on objects and triggers to convey information, and while this term is usually used to refer only to recent games, it can be equally applied to earlier cases like the ones mentioned above. Thus, if we were to place these games according to their semiotic qualities, they would lie somewhere between pure implicit games –like *Mario* and *Sonic*– and purely explicit ones, like role playing games.

At the opposite side of this design ethos spectrum, role playing games became quickly known for their dense and complex stories and their lack of compulsory mechanics. Since it was assumed that video games were not able to deliver complex themes by player action alone, many of these products opted for heavily abstracted rules that tended to reduce every form of player input into numerical values, much in the same vein as tabletop role playing games (Barton, 2007). A compromise between the ludic system and the story that is woven into it becomes the key factor to understand the structure of these particular types of text, which allows literary content to be placed in front of ludic. It is, thus, a type of game design that subscribes to an explicit narrative and only relies tangentially on traditional ludic motivation to be engaging.

Of all the genres presented above, the most successful and popular of them were those that resorted to implicit narratives in order to present the setting of the simulation. Games like *Super Mario* and *Legend of Zelda* were quickly treated as landmarks of interactive entertainment and an inspiration for designers across the industry (Fencott, 2012). At the same time, newer design choices and genres emerged from the ideas that originated in those games. Sport games, fighting games and shooting games were heavily influenced by the mechanics that had been used in those, and in all cases, they delivered characterization and themes implicitly. This design philosophy was also favored because it facilitated a lax approach on storytelling and, indirectly, the possibility to market these games as "odor-less" to foreign audiences (Iwabuchi, 2002). While the games had a clear point of origin –Japanese game developers–, their design heavily facilitated its consumption and distribution to Western audiences, since any trace of "culture" in the text is kept to a minimum or becomes so abstract as to becoming secondary. As such, these games weren't perceived as part of Japanese culture, even when Japanese cultural images were being used as inspiration to populate them (Kohler, 2004). For example, while the *Super Mario* franchise tends to draw inspiration from traditional folklore tales –specially *Yokai* and other Japanese mythological creatures– when designing the obstacles of the simulation, this relationship gets heavily diluted thanks to the importance given to the gameplay rather than the digital world itself. In many ways, this approach was similar to what earlier American games did with arcade games, since they relied a lot on abstract representations to convey their rules. However, unlike those games, Japanese products did represent elaborated scenario, with clearly defined characters and stories written therein. So, in order to guarantee the success of these games in the Western market and avoid any sort of cultural interference, these

characters were presented either as cultural hybrids that evoked both Western and Eastern cultural images (Consalvo, 2006) or were obfuscated by game mechanics that were put in front of them. In both cases, they were presented to the Western market as "acultural" products and, thanks to that, were easily digested by American and European consumers.

Those games that couldn't fit into this category of game design –those that focused on explicit storytelling and favored narrative over mechanics– became, on the other hand, rapidly associated with ludic modalities and preferences that were identified as distinctly Japanese, and because of that, their distribution became much more limited (Kohler, 2004). Game genres like JRPGs (Japanese Role Playing Games), shooting games and visual novels became the staples upon which considerations of "Japaneseness" were introduced in order to address their most defining traits.

Conclusion

In spite of the extended practice to avoid inserting "Japaneseness" into their products, Japanese games have been eventually identified and separated in the public discourse, both visually and mechanically, from Western video games (1Up, 2011). In most cases, this "Japaneseness" becomes relevant when the aesthetics and elements of the simulation deliberately invoke images related to Japanese culture or the Japanese media mix. Games that use overtly "cute" characters (Chen, 2013), or get inspired by *anime* or *manga* art style (Condry, 2009) are usually identified at first glance. Likewise, certain game mechanics and design preferences and choices have also been identified as Japanese (1Up, 2007). This includes those genres that were identified earlier by the market due to their explicit content and those that were initially considered "acultural", like shooting games and brawlers. However, the

continued development of these genres in specified regions, as well as its opposition towards newer genres has contributed to its enclosure within a fixed cultural framework. Lastly, Several games become tied to already existing properties or attempt to ludically simulate certain aspects of Japanese culture. All these examples can be categorized to create a cohesive repository of images in the gaming industry that relate to Japanese culture in visual motifs and simulated environments.

Thus, it can be argued that the presence of certain aesthetics and mechanics in a video game could be used by game scholars and hobbyists to identify it as part of a certain culture. In order to find those elements, a use of the methodological tools theorized by Frasca (1999) and Bogost (2007) proves optimal to identify not only traditional motifs and images, but also those that emerge exclusively in an interactive medium. Moreover, the progressive process of identifying certain games with "Japaneseness" could also be interpreted as part of a greater discursive structure that aims to integrate certain signifiers and symbols that are part of interactive entertainment into the modern perception of Japan. This also means that, in doing so, these images also influence in the power dynamics that are established between Japan and the West through this discourse.

Since the early days of Japanese economic dominance, this power dynamic became an important factor for the business decisions of Japanese firms and their creative process, since Japanese video games had to be conceived from the beginning to cater to a Western audience and its cultural landscape. Thanks to a design ethos that favored games with vague narratives and focused on mechanical mastery, these commodities were able to circulate freely in the worldwide and granted Japanese firms an influential position in the gaming industry. However, ever since the re-emergence of the

American and European market and the eventual decline of the Japanese market, this position has gradually waned over the years and gradually returning to a position where Western firms hold both economic and creative leadership in the industry. The isolation of Japanese video games into a closed framework of a specific set of mechanics, aesthetics and recognizable franchises in recent years has reinforced this process and subjected Japanese video games into its Western description.

In spite of this, the worldwide industry is still held by transnational corporations of both American and Japanese origin, and the overall business practice is highly hybridized because of that (Consalvo, 2006). At the same time, some of the most well-known and best regarded games are still being made by Japanese game developers and have a huge impact in the West. This fact shows that Japanese companies still hold a much powerful position than several emergent or marginalized industries. However, it also shows that Japanese video games resort to creative choices that favors "odor-less" products over the rest (Iwabuchi, 2002), and in doing so, they contribute to perpetuate the existing power structures within the industry. It remains to be seen whether these practices will continue in the future, and if that so, how the perception of Japan as a main actor in the game's industry will raise or lower in relationship to these dynamics. It is, nonetheless, clear that the analysis of the cultural role of Japanese video games can be a useful way to discern the images and symbols that surround our perception of modern Japan.

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