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Geemu and media mix: Theoretical approaches to Japanese video games
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Introduction:
Geemu, *media mix*, and the state of Japanese video game studies

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It is safe and true to say that Japan's contribution to the development of the video game industry is undeniable. Nevertheless, despite the impact of games and franchises such as *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985-), *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix, 1987-) or *Pokémon* (Nintendo, 1995-), specifics issues related to Japanese video games (*terebi geemu* or simply *geemu* in Japanese) only achieved in raising the interest of a small group of fans.

Many factors explain this gap, but there is no doubt that the language barrier is the main difficulty preventing the realization of convincing research on the local market. However, another important aspect—and one that is somewhat linked to the previous issue—needs to be taken into account: the lack of knowledge of Japanese studies. In order to fully understand the characteristics of Japanese video games, previous knowledge about Japan, and not only about its culture, but also its history, economy and its modern and contemporary development is not only preferable, but essential. In short, we consider that the ideal theoretical position in the context of Japanese video game studies is located at the junction of game studies and East Asian studies.

Evidently, this shortcoming is also linked to the distinctive position of the video game industry, having developed essentially within a global context. Likewise, the fact that game

studies were expressed more strongly in Europe and in North America has led to a "Western-centric" understanding of video games, even of Japanese video games.[1]

In this sense, despite studying an industry—and contributing to a field of research—that is qualified as globalized and transnational, it seems difficult to underline the defining features of video games developed in Japan beyond categorizations that, after investigation, prove to be problematic. Consequently, many questions arise: are there differences between games coming from specific countries or precise sociocultural contexts? And if distinctions exist between Japanese, American or European games, what would these be and what would they mean?

Geemu*: Japanese video games in their local context*

To answer at least part of these issues, and in order to better understand Japanese video games as a whole, it is, as it has already been mentioned elsewhere (Picard 2013), essential to increase one's knowledge of the local aspect of Japanese video games.

Similarly to the work of Marc Steinberg for *anime* (Steinberg 2012), it is crucial to examine the economic and material conditions of the video game industry on the Japanese territory in order to portray a comprehensive picture of the evolution of video games on a local, global, and glocal level, as well as on any levels between these. In this sense, the emergence of the video game industry in Japan is a "development that is informed by a unique set of historical and material circumstances" (Steinberg, 2012, p. xiii) and which cannot be reduced to the unique model of globalization.

[1] On this point, a certain conception of Japan, built from its premodern and modern history, and conveyed outside of Japan (Sakai, 1989; Befu, 2001; Oguma 2002[1995]), has profoundly marked a common vision of what could be "Japanese" in Japanese video games. Some current examples of this phenomenon is the now broadly used acronym "JRPG" (which scope is explored by one of the authors of this issue) to characterize a certain form of role-playing games (initially coming from Japan exclusively, but not anymore, as proven by the numerous indie games inspired by this "model"), the frequent characterization of Japanese games as being weird or crazy or the perception that Japanese video games could be best defined by an analysis of its Japanese "essence", or its "Japaneseness" (a critic of this latter approach has already been discussed in Pelletier-Gagnon [2011] or Picard [2009]).

To borrow a statement already made elsewhere (Picard 2013), Japanese video game is at the crossroad of local innovations in its marketing strategy (within the larger context of a strong consumer culture), of industrial transformations at the national scale (considering that the video game industry is at the intersection of the media, electronic, computer, and toy industries), and of creative and technological development (hardware and software) which were, subsequently or synchronously, established at the global scale and under an increasingly more translational mode, shaping a singular media ecology.

Japanese video games, that we can qualify by the Japanese term *geemu*, which underlines its local specificity, is not bound to any "essence" (national, mediatic, etc.), but to a market, or rather to markets, which birthed a game-related culture, or rather cultures (and subcultures) which are themselves fluctuating and mobile under the influence of industrial structures (publishers/developers, console manufacturers, marketers, localizers, etc.) and of interpretative communities (specialized and popular press, player communities and fans of popular culture, scholars, etc.).

Thus, the local Japanese video game market should not be separated from the particular media ecosystem within which it evolves, and particularly within a larger content industry strongly characterized by specific commercial strategies, and one in particular, that is the marketing strategy best known in Japan under the name of *media mix* (*media mikkusu*).

Media mix *:* geemu *in a singular ecosystem*

A relevant approach to achieve a better understanding of the specificities of Japanese video games is to contextualize its diverse expressions within the *media mix* socioeconomic system in Japan. Taking into consideration the special ties between Japanese video games, *manga* and *anime*, the examination of the *media mix* as such, and consequently the place of Japanese video games within this environment, proves to be a fruitful path.

The *media mix*, as recently re-conceptualized by Marc Steinberg in *Anime's Media Mix* (2012), is an industry-related and popular term that evolved considerably. During the 1960s, it was used to describe advertising purposes for a variety of media. Since then, it is defined as

the practice of marketing interconnected works for different media (*manga*, *anime*, movies, etc.) and tie-in products, generally through the promotion of attractive characters (*kyara*) and an engaging fictional world (*sekai*).

After its introduction within this media environment during the 1980s, Japanese video games are, despite their increasingly imposing presence within this system that tends to constantly redefine its nature, under-analyzed in regards to the way in which its different modes of production and distribution affect players—not only in the act of playing games, but also their modes of consumption and cultural practices—and games' content.

The relevance of a consideration on the geemu media mix

In a text written exclusively for this issue, Marc Steinberg continues the discussion on the anime's media mix with "8-Bit Manga: Kadokawa's Madara, or, The Gameic Medix Mix" by explaining the importance of video games within the Kadokawa Media Mix model which emerged during the 1980s through, amongst other things, the *Madara* franchise, one of the first examples of what Steinberg calls a "gameic media mix", and that we are naming here *geemu media mix*. Understanding the different articulations of the *geemu media mix* allows to better identify the development, marketing and consumption practices of video games in Japan.

Consequently, this special issue aims at addressing a gap in the theories and analysis of the (trans)national and (trans)cultural aspects of video games in game studies, and then in interdisciplinary studies related to the Japanese media culture. While video games and popular culture are now a part of the academic landscape, too few publications and research projects are examining video games through a non Western-centric perspective, and even fewer take into account the specificities of video games in Japan. It is because we consider that the academic sphere is lacking theories about Japanese video game that we thought important to prepare a special issue on the topic—especially concerning its local context—and to gather critical thoughts submitted by scholars aptly interested in these issues.

As evidenced by the Kakokawa Media Mix Summer Program of 2014,[2] an increasing number of scholars and students acknowledge the relevance of approaches centered on the local manifestations of cultural industries in Japan. However, it needs to be recognized that Japanese video game research is growing and much more diversified than before; fortunately, the field seems to have emerged in recent years, both in Japan and elsewhere (as shown by the conference series "Replaying Japan" co-organized since 2012 by the University of Alberta and the Ritsumeikan Center for Game Studies [RCGS]).[3]

While game studies in Japan still remain little known outside of their territory, its development has been rapidly progressing for some years, and an examination of this advancement, however brief, is essential.

Game Studies and Japan

Coming from the Western side of video game studies, we obviously have a particular perspective about Japanese video games, which may be different than Japanese game researchers. But what is even more obvious is the lack of knowledge about video game research made in Japan. As already mentioned, this gap is related to many difficulties.

In their anthology *The Video Game Theory Reader*, published in 2003, Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron already underlined the difficulties of exchanges between Western and Japanese game studies, saying:

> While there is growing cross-fertilization of ideas and academic debate between scholars of Europe and the Americas, there is much less so between Western countries and Japan. Part of the reason is the availability of writings translated into English, as well as the emphasis on game design and production as opposed to academic study of video games (13).

[2] <http://kadokawa.iii.u-tokyo.ac.jp/summer2014/>
[3] <https://sites.google.com/a/ualberta.ca/replaying-japan-2015/>

This quote reveals two things: first, that language is always a big issue in establishing this "cross-fertilization of ideas"; and second, that for them there has not been any substantial form of academic game studies in Japan, at least at the time of writing in 2003 - which is true to some extent, but we'll return to that before long.

In the next paragraph of the same introductory text, they nevertheless acknowledge the possibilities of exchanges and the growth of game studies on an international level:

> In any event, the increasing number of books, periodicals, and conferences on video games suggests that an international network of video game researchers is forming, and that video game theory as an academic field is coming into existence. As it does, the question remains as to when (and perhaps if) agree-upon theoretical foundations and a common vocabulary will arise among the international research community (13).

They were right on this aspect since video game theory as an academic field has indeed continued to grow, as well as the establishment of an international network. In this regard, probably the first big step in these cross-cultural exchanges between the West and Japan came with the DiGRA 2007 conference held in Tokyo.

At around the same time new associations and societies of game studies started to be formed in Japan, such as DiGRA Japan,[4] created in 2006, and whom launched their Journal in 2007,[5] the same year of the DiGRA conference in Tokyo. We can also mentioned The International Game Developers' Association Japan Chapter (IGDA Japan) ,[6] founded in 2002, but more focused on the creative side; or The Game Amusement Society,[7] which was also founded in 2002 at the Osaka Electro-Communication University, which is rather focused on applied and natural sciences and which started to publish their Journal in 2006;[8] or larger associations

[4] <http://digrajapan.org/>
[5] <http://digrajapan.org/?page_id=336>
[6] <http://www.igda.jp/>
[7] <http://www.gameamusementsociety.org/>
[8] http://www.gameamusementsociety.org/staticpages/index.php?page=journal_E>

open to video game research, such as the Japan Association of Simulation and Gaming (JASAG) ,[9] which also has its own Journal[10] and conference.[11]

Regarding the importance of cross-cultural links, probably the most important group of Japanese researchers in game studies was established in 2011, with the inauguration of the Ritsumeikan Center for Game Studies.[12] Their primary goals were to build a network of researchers working on video games (from any fields) in Japan, and abroad, as well as to create a bridge between academia and the industry, a relationship often favored in Japanese game research.

However, these few mentions, among others, do not imply neither that video game research in Japan was inexistent before 2000. In fact, the development of research about video games in Japan followed pretty closely the one in the West, as the first written studies began to appear in the beginning of the 1980s, and which were mostly empirical studies tied to psychological approaches (see below). Then, the Family Computer (or Famicom / Famicon / Famikon) boom in the mid-1980s brought a further interest in video games, as much as in mass media than in academia. As video game studies in Japan have grown and diversified immensely since then, a deeper examination of the main approaches is then necessary.

A Quick Look at Japanese Game Studies

In 2007, Japanese game researcher Akito Inoue painted a clear picture of the state of video game research in Japan as part of an article on the concept of game recognition frame published in the Journal of Digra Japan (Inoue 2007). As an opening remark, Inoue states that, when academic works on video games began in Japan, there was no consensus between researchers as to what approach to take or what theoretical framework to adopt to study this new media (Inoue, 2007, p.46). While Japan is widely acknowledged as a major global player in the game industry, Japanese researchers then had a weaker set of theoretical tools for the

[9] <http://jasag.org/en/>
[10] <http://jasag.org/en/category/journal/>
[11] <http://jasag.org/isaga2015/>
[12] <http://www.rcgs.jp/>

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study of games compared to Western scholars. Inoue setted Salen and Zimmerman's major work *Rules of Play* (2003) as an example of such theoretical framework to adopt.

Despite these shortcomings, a tradition of game studies did exist in Japan since the 1980s. Inoue himself categorized this literature in three distinct categories: the discourses on the bad influence of video games, the studies questioning video games as a media of socialization, and the works around video game design and market research. This classification deeply reflect Japanese scholars' initial apprehension towards games. The emphasis put on the study of the video game industry also suggests that the study of the media in Japan has always been greatly motivated by economic incentives.

During the early years of game studies in Japan, the question of whether playing games had physical or psychological effects on players, and particularly on children (An'Ei, 1981; Sakamoto, 1992), captured much of the attention of academics and scientists who studied the media. When arcades and, subsequently, the Famicom started to captivate young people's imagination and monopolize their free time in the 1980s, their parents started to worry about the impact of those new technologies on their mind and their adaptation to society (Kimura, 2003, p.115). These worries were largely reflected and amplified by the mass media. The reach of this *bideogêmu akueikyouron* (the discourse on the bad influence of video games) was such that it coloured academics' interest on video games for a relatively long time (Sakamoto 1993, p.79). Much research seeking to clarify the degree of influence of those video games were conducted, putting them at the center of a broader research trend focusing on the impact of media (including manga and television) on the socialization of children (Fukaya & Fukaya, 1989). Some researchers also conducted research to clarify what was then starting to be called the "Famicon syndrome" with experimental and theoretical psychology frameworks (Sakamoto 1992; 1993).

As part of this movement, other researchers like Rei Shiratori were led to inspect the regulations around the content of games from this perspective by, for example, conducting comparative research on game rating systems from different countries (2003). However, the apex of this trend was without a doubt the ideas presented in the book *Bideo geemu nou no kyoufu* (Fear of the Game Brain) by Akio Mori (2002). The book presented the results of

electroencephalography experiments indicating how videogames could physically damage children's brain. While this type of research can yield interesting insights, Akio Mori's book had been widely criticized over the years in the field of game studies in Japan. It nevertheless enjoyed a relative level of success with the general public (Phillips, 2002). Thus, scientifics and critics alike often felt the need to address Mori's claims as part of their work during the early 2000s.

Other examples of this type of research also focused on examining how players interacts with games as well as shedding light on the social context of gaming. A precursor of this approach was Nakazawa Shin'ichi's close reading of *Xevious* as a text which narrative is determined by both the author's program and the players through the creative way in which they interact with the game (1984; translated for this special issue). In video games, Nakazawa identified the same characteristics that defines mythological texts, namely the power to arouse readers' narrative curiosity and motivate them to extend the text through sustained engagement.

Similar interests in the study of player engagement with the media and the dynamics of the relation between games and players is at the base of other interesting works. Masaki Sawano demonstrated how player reception of video games is set on a metaphoric plane, explaining that murdering characters on screen does not hold the same affective value as in reality (1993). Psychologist Rika Kayama, in her book *Bideo geemu to iyasu* (Video Games and Healing), acknowledged the positive impact of video games amongst some children, demonstrating how they can provide them a way to nurture positive self-esteem and learn the perseverance to overcome life's challenges (1996). Nakazawa himself continued this trend of research and, in 1997, published an essay on the complex reception of the *Pokémon* franchize by children using psychoanalysis theory.

More recently, Hiroyasu Kato published an extensive study of game centers (Japanese game arcades) demonstrating the dynamics of youth socialization mediated by video game culture within those venues and how the latter can embody a third space separate from school life and family (2011). Additionally, researchers at the Ritsumeikan Center for Game Studies (RCGS) published a book entitled *Famicon to sono jidai* (At the Time of the Famicon) featuring a large segment dedicated to the social reception of the console at the time of the

Famicon boom (Uemura & Koichi & Nakamura, 2013). The study of video games in Japan are constituted of many more diversified approaches such as Yahiro Shigeki's extensive multi-faceted look at video game interpretation (2005) or Akito Inoue's analysis of gamification (2011), but it is possible to say that the player/game relationship research trend constitute a central stream within this tradition.

A third branch of the literature that we wish to highlight, and one that grew in importance since the beginnings of the 2000s, is research on game design and market research. The growth of the body of literature focused on the industry-related side of game studies is telling of the state of contemporary research environment of this field in Japan. Video game market research is very present in Japan (Nakayama, 2012; 2013; 2015) and so is industry business analytics (Saito & Shigihara, 2013; Digitaru geemu kyoukasho seisakuinka, 2014) and game design theory (Watanabe & Nakamura, 2014). Akira Baba, founding president of DIGRA Japan and professor at the Graduate School of Information Studies of the University of Tokyo, focuses in his Baba Lab[13] on such relationships between academia and the industry (Rockwell, 2011). Work on serious gaming is also gaining a lot of attention thanks to certain researchers like Baba, as well as Toru Fujimoto, educational game design professor at the University of Tokyo and Japanese translator of Jane McGonigal's book *Reality is Broken* (2011). Classic game creator figures such as Masanobu Endo (*Xevious*) and Toru Iwatani (*Pac-Man*) are still present in the contemporary literature through varying level of involvement in books on game design (Iwatani, 2005; Kabushikigaisha mobairu & geemu sutajio, 2012; Endo and Iwatani are also on the executive board of DiGRA Japan). There is also a remarkable amount of publications about the history of video games and how to enter the industry made for the general public.

The voice of the industry is very highly regarded in Japan, collaboration with game designers or publishers is often a way for academia to justify and conduct research. Some recent events in Japan game studies such as the creation of the RCGS at Ritsumeikan University, a project meant to act as a platform for collaboration between academia and the industry, the Replaying Japan conference series, which feature keynotes from the industry every year, and

[13] <http://chi.iii.u-tokyo.ac.jp/>

the Press Start conference held in Vancouver in February of 2015[14] are all examples of this situation.

Close collaboration is certainly an effective way to enable research about a media whose industry learnt over time not to disclose its internal practices. For example, it is through collaboration with Nintendo and former Nintendo employee Masayuki Uemura, creator of the Famicom and the Super Famicom and now Chair of the research center, that the RCGS team was able to publish *Famicon to sono jidai*. However, it is true that, as Inoue states (2007, p. 48), academics should retain some level of independence in order to avoid that game research acquires the connotation that it should predominantly be research profiting to the industry. While convergence may provide researchers with a better understanding of the creative process within the industry, the interests of the latter does not always reflect all the facets from which games and gaming culture can be analysed and critiqued.

But breaking the dichotomy between academic literature and industry-linked research, it is essential to acknowledge the Japanese gamers' communities and their invaluable research contributions. By visiting certains stands at the Comic Market, by shopping in Akihabara or even just by making a quick internet search, researchers can easily stumble upon a treasure trove of information on Japanese games in the form of encyclopedias, reviews, and other in-depth articles written by dedicated gamers and published either in magazines, web pages or self-funded fanzines over the years. All of these resources which vastly outnumber the work from both academics and the industry, are very valuable to the contemporary game studies researcher as they sometimes provide the first documents that direct the latter to a specific research project. Some of those gamers also act as curators by preserving material that would otherwise be completely lost or unobtainable.

The current situation is that a variety of research provided by Japanese game studies scholars exists today, a quick glance at the yearly DiGRA Japan and Replaying Japan conference is enough to acknowledge it. But following the example of the collaborative project Replaying

[14] <http://pressstartubc.com/>; a report of the event is available here: <http://www.kinephanos.ca/2015/japans-mobile-game-moment-summary-of-the-press-start-game-conference/>.

Japan, the contributions of Japanese scholars could not be significative outside of a relation with the Western side of the field of research. Thus, this issue wishes to participate in this collaboration by, amongst other things, providing contributions from researchers coming mainly from the important trilateral axis of the Japanese game industry (Japan, Europe, North America), contribution which the editors hope will add new perspectives about Japanese games in connection with game studies.

A diversity of theoretical approaches

First, this special issue features an important contribution by guest author Marc Steinberg. Linking theories of the media mix and video games, Steinberg chronicles the creation of the *Madara* franchise, the first media mix experiment entirely created around the language of video games. After defining the place of *Madara* within Kadokawa's game magazine division and in the publisher's greater media mix strategy within game magazine division, Steinberg demonstrates how putting video games at the center of the mix influences the dynamics of media convergence. He calls this phenomenon the *gameic media mix*.

As the theme of this issue suggest, video games in Japan are connected in many ways to the broader Japanese media ecosystem and creative industry. It is crucial to investigate and understand those connections when interpreting games. In "Kawaii Japan: Defining JRPGs through the Cultural Media Mix", Douglas Schules sets out to situates those connections, indicating how certain games are linked to the Japanese soft power and how the concept of "kawaii" is gamified therein. His article is about the game *Tales of Xillia* and its accompanying DLCs (downloadable content). Through this compound, he sheds light on the way a certain discourse on japaneseness is articulated in video games and their industries.

Moving away from politics towards aesthetics, Andrew Campana invites us to look at media mix from the perspective of the porosity between media. In *Anime's Media Mix,* Steinberg isolates and analyses the place of stickers within the media mix created around *Tetsuwan Atomu* as a central element in the circulation of the image of the character. Focusing on the "materiality" of medias as presented within Steinberg's theoretical framework, Campana provides on a close reading of Nintendo's *Paper Mario* video games series and demonstrates

how those games proposes users to interact with the materiality of different medium such as paper and the aforementioned stickers. “Fold, Flip, Stick: Paper Mario, 2.5-Dimensionality and the Media Mix” challenges the traditional conception of medias as segregated categories and highlights the potential of interactions between them.

One of the challenges in studying Japanese game culture is, as mentioned above, the ubiquitous language barrier. Considering the global scale of the game industry, many titles are the subject of translations, which facilitate the task of the researcher, but which also introduces many questions such as the degree of legitimacy of localized products to their original versions. Localization is a complex creative process that touches many games that researchers study. Stephen Mandiberg acknowledges this situation and tackles the subject by providing an informative insight into the world of video game localization through the case study of the translation of *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*. He argues that the moments of bewilderment caused by cultural differences which a player sometimes experience when playing a games of foreign origin (a phenomenon called “*iwakan*”) should not be understood as failures of localization, but rather as moments that make possible a form a cultural learning about the Other. In “Playing (with) the Trace: Localized Culture in Phoenix Wright”, Mandiberg demonstrates how video games allow players to cross cultural borders.

While the term “video game” itself suggest an emphasis on the visual aspect of the media, sound and music have always been an important part of video game design since the very beginnings of the industry. In Japan, music composers have been enjoying some level of fame since the 1980s. For example, the composers Nobuo Uematsu and Koichi Sugiyama who respectively created the most of the music for *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* series used the limited capabilities of the Family Computer’s sound chip to deliver melodies that still inspire gamers today. Their success eventually made them household names of gaming culture. Nevertheless, little information on the Japanese video game music scene is known outside Japan; recent books on Japanese music, such as *Made in Japan: Studies in Popular Music* (2014) edited by Toru Mitsui, do not tackle the subject. In this issue of *Kinephanos*, Youkei Yamakami and Mathieu Barbosa introduces us to this important aspect of game culture by investigating the culture and the development of cultures around the « *geemu ongaku* » during the 1980s and 1990s. From the emergence of a game music fandom in the

arcades to the celebration of universally acclaimed soundtracks in live music shows, Yamakami and Barbosa demonstrate how specialized magazines and the popular press was central to the construction of the image of video games music and the formation of its audience.

Extending the reach of covered subjects in this issue, guest authors Geoffrey Rockwell and Keiji Amano underline the diversity of Japanese video games by investigating pachinko, an important fringe of Japanese game culture that links video games and other play-based forms of entertainment in Japan. Located at the boundary of gaming and gambling, Rockwell and Amano demonstrate how studying the extremely popular phenomenon of pachinko from the perspective of game studies brings forth many interesting problems pertaining to the place of play in Japan as well as to other cultural issues.

As mentioned in the introduction above, Shin'ichi Nakazawa's close reading of *Xevious* introduced a new academic perspective deeply rooted in the tradition of the humanities to critics of video games in the 1980s. It was certainly a first in 1984. This pioneer text entitled "The Game Freaks Who Play with Bugs – In Praise of the Video Game Xevious" is presented in English for the first time as a part of this special *Kinephanos* issue. The translators Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon and Tsugimi Okabe introduce the text by sketching the academic profile of Nakazawa as well as by contextualizing *Xevious* within Japanese game culture. This translation is also annotated in order to bring more precisions regarding the context of the article's publication to the contemporary reader.

Finally, the last text of this collection takes the issue full circle back to this issue's guest author Marc Steinberg and his book *Anime Media Mix*. Indeed, the closing contribution comes from Frederic Clement in the form an in-depth review of Steinberg's book by contextualizing it within the literature related to Japanese media studies.

We sincerely hope that the contributions for this issue will become important additions not only for the field of video game and media studies, but also for that of Japanese studies as well as many others.

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