Video Games and Japaneseness:

An Analysis of Localization and Circulation of Japanese Video Games in North America

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Abstract

Since the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System in the 1980s, the video game industry has transformed itself to become very dependent of the transnational circulation and localization of its products. In this thesis, I take a look at this current trend of video game's transnationalization, analyze its processes and components as well as uncover its impact on both games and gamers. Through the analysis of video game localized both by the industry and by amateur translation groups, this thesis investigates how transnational circulation of Japanese video games from Japan to North America influences the definition of Japaneseness in this media as well as a binary and culturally determined interpretation of the video game global culture of circulation. This work focuses on the dynamics that drive different localization processes from both the industry and fan communities. It also sets to explore the conflicts that occur when certain translated titles do not blend in their new media environment or are rejected by certain fan communities. This thesis demonstrates that both those localization processes and reception conflicts shape the video game culture of circulation in a binary fashion, opposing notions of Japanese and Western video games. This thesis concludes by stating what is at stake in video game localization processes as well by explaning the risks entailed by relying to much on such as culturally determined interpretation of the media.

Résumé

Depuis la mise en marché de la Nintendo Entertainment System en 1980, l'industrie du jeu vidéo s'est transformée pour devenir très dépendante de la localisation et de la circulation transnationale de ses produits. Dans ce mémoire, je porte un regard sur cette tendance actuelle de transnationalisation en analysant les processus et les éléments qui les composent tout en mettant à jour ses impacts à la fois sur les jeux et les joueurs. À travers l'analyse de produits localisés à la fois par l'industrie et par des groupes de traduction amateurs, cette étude porte sur la façon dont la circulation de jeux vidéo japonais en Amérique du Nord influence la définition de la notion de Japonité dans ce média ainsi qu'un perspective binaire de la culture de circulation du jeu vidéo définie par rapport à la culture de la provenance d'un produit. Ce travail fait la lumière sur les différentes dynamiques régissant la localisation de jeux vidéo à la fois dans l'industrie et dans certaines communautées de fan. Il explore aussi les formes de conflicts engendrés par l'importation de certains titres lorsqu'ils ne s'intègrent pas facilement à leur nouvel environment médiatique ou lorsqu'ils sont rejeté par certain communautées de fans. Cette thèse démontre que ces processus de localisation et les conflits entourant la réception de jeux vidéo localisés façonne la culture de circulation du media de façon binaire, opposant les notions de jeux vidéo Japonais et Occidentaux. Ce mémoire se conclu par une présentation des enjeux qui sont au coeur des différents processus de localisation de jeux vidéo ainsi que par une présentation des risques encourus lorsque notre négociation avec le media se repose trop sur une telle interprétation déterminée par l'origine culturelle des produits.

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Introduction

About 50 years ago in an obscure computer lab of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Steve Russel and a team of dedicated programmers created what can be considered one of the first video games ever designed: *SpaceWar!* (1up). The program was basically a two-player game consisting of a duel between user-controlled starships battling on a star-filled space background. Players had to shoot down their opponent's starship while avoiding getting sucked by the gravity well of the star located in the middle of the screen and crashing into it. Although the game seems rather simplistic, the mechanics that emerged from it allowed for gameplay experiences that required both reflexes and strategies. For example, a common strategy involved using the sun's gravitational force (that could deflect bullets and starships) to surprise and defeat one's opponent.

Little did they know that this technological innovation would lead, just a few decades later, to the establishment of a major mass entertainment industry with its own dynamics and culture regulating the media of video game. No one could also predict that this form of entertainment, as the spearhead of today's increasingly globalized system of cultural products' circulation pattern, would challenge the economic importance of the well-established cinema and music industries. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of the video game industry is its reliance on transnational circulation of its products.

Examples such as French developer Ubisoft (*Rayman* series, *Assassin's Creed* series), Russian developer like 4A Games (*Metro 2033*), or even Polish developer CDProjekt (*The Witcher* series) demonstrate that the industry as a whole does not primarily target the local market as its main profit source, but rather focuses on the international export of its products from the beginning in order to insure profitability. However, when one considers the transnationality of the media of video games, the case of Japanese video game exports is the most representative of this phenomenon in terms of both invested capital and cultural impact on the international scene.

Indeed, as one of the countries with the highest production of video games, it is relevant to consider Japan as a key example of video game development, localization and international exports. This thesis will focus on the Japanese video games' international circulation patterns in order to examine larger patterns of the media's transnationality.

A popular narrative of video games' early history regularly featured in much of the literature on the media credits the Nintendo Entertainment System with having single-handedly enacted the revival of electronic gaming following its brutal crash in the early 1980s in North America (Consalvo 119). It is possible to explain the success of the Kyoto-based company in several ways, but it can be mainly attributed to the establishment of software quality regulations (to ensure that third-party publishers would deliver games with a minimum level of quality) and the innovation it provided in terms of both content and hardware. The console was mainly powered through an extensive set of software made in Japan that was exported overseas through the then newly-established corporation Nintendo of America. Thus, for the first time since the establishment of the medium, the majority of video games consumed in North America were designed in a foreign country. From *Super Mario Bros.* to *The Legend of Zelda*, most of the popular games featuring innovative characters, settings and gameplay mechanics that would remain at the heart of Nintendo's game publishing activities were created out of Japanese designers' imagination.

This revival of the video game industry and the international impact of the Nintendo Entertainment System also signal the beginning of a dependant relationship between the industry and the international market. From this moment on, publishers started to explore ways to make their products accessible to foreign audiences and localization slowly started to become a core component of video game production. Indeed, this situation is no longer exclusive to Nintendo as a large number of Japanese video game publishers and developers now have offices in both Japan and America in order to both localize games (as in the case of Nippon Ichi Software of America) and

produce them in collaboration with other studios. As much of the litterature on the subject state, localization in the video game industry is not a simple and straightforward process and it is not unusual for developers to go beyond the basic needs of language translation and removal of content estimated offensive or deviant by state regulations. Rather, products are often transformed in such ways that they are not easily recognizable from the original game, although this notion of "original" product is in itself a very controversial idea. It is this very process of localization and transnationalization that this thesis will explore and analyze through a set of questions related to the issues of culture and *regimes of value* within the media form of video game. How can one evaluate the impact of software localization on both the products and the consumers? How do such products integrate the already existing media ecology of a given locale? What risks does this circulation of cultural products around the globe entail for the audience's perception? Answering these questions will provide us with a critical analysis of what is at stake within the production of cultural artifacts on a global scale as well as a better understanding of the tension between gameplay elements and fictional elements in the medium of video games while not considering one over the other.

This study will also try to depart from the frequent division within video game studies between what are often addressed as the narratologist and ludologist perspectives, a problem that has plagued the field by preventing in-depth analysis of the complete experience of playing video games. Indeed, ludologists have often denounced the emphasis put on approaches based primarily on textual analysis that pervades academic writings about video games. Although it is not wise to exclusively approach this medium from this mindset, is it also not productive to dismiss the fictional and representational levels of video games:

> [...] you can play chess with some rocks in the mud, or with pieces that look like the Simpson family rather than kings and queens. It would still be the same game. The "royal" theme of the traditional pieces is all but irrelevant to our understanding of chess. (Aarseth, "Genre Trouble")

What Aarseth suggests is that it is not necessary to think about the representational and iconic levels of games as they they have no impact its actual system. However, this observation does not address how games are played nor their subjective impact on players as the pieces change through localization and transnationalization. In fact, as a direct response to Aarseth, it is possible to say the game is not the same at all.

Rune Klevjer offers an account of the relationship between fiction and gameplay that is much closer to the needs of this study. Claiming that "radical ludologists" overlook the textual components of games by aiming at analysing only their gameplay elements, Klevjer demonstrates that certain tools used by video games to tell stories (such as iconology, cut-scenes and other inter-textual representations) are not relics of ancient media forms, but are actually a necessary part of the experience (194). Video games are part of a collection of representative medias and should be seen as objects that are hybrid in nature, integrating both rules and fictional elements. This formal interpretation of the media will be helpful in our understanding of video games in a global context.

Having introduced this conflict between ludology and narratology within the field of video game studies, it is important to state that this study will asset an alternative framework. Following Klevjer's account of the issue, the stating point of this study will be the interaction and mutual influence between the representational and ergodic elements within video games.

This study will also build on other recent works concerning video games and the global circulation of culture. As the field of video game studies increases its body of knowledge, it is becoming more obvious that there is a strong need for research concerning the transcultural consumption and production of games. Given the preeminence of Japanese games on the international market, it is surprising that so few studies focus on the dynamics of Japanese games and the processes that render them accessible to foreign audiences. Parts of the issue have been addressed such as the reception of Japanese video games in the United States with regards to the

globalization of culture (Huang) and the actual process of localization by taking into consideration both the constraint of the medium and the tension between the fictional level and the mechanical level (Szurawitzki). Martin Picard has also raised the issue of transnationality in his work on the particular genre of Japanese horror games, in which he observes that genre is a melting pot of different influences from both Western and Japanese cultures, thus diminishing the appeal of framing certain games as retaining a pure Japanese essence (97). Very recently, Rebecca Carlson and Jonathan Corliss have addressed video game localization and transnational circulation in a way that is closer to my project in an article focusing on the formation of the perspective of international consumers seeing Japan through the mediation of localized video games and partly analysing the general discourse about bounded and incommensurable cultural difference in video game localization processes (62). While most of these studies emphasized the localization of video games and their transformation, it is still unclear how the process of cultural circulation that brings one to the other plays out. The relationship between the localized products and the already existing media ecology also remains understudied. More importantly, most of these studies overlook the fact that localization practices take many forms, enacted both in the industry and in the often overlooked fan communities. The aim of this research and the contribution it will attempt to bring to the field will concern the exploration of the relationship between consumers and products while considering the broader practices of localization and reappropriation by different communities. In doing so, it will become possible to identify what is at stake in both video game transnationalization and the global circulation of culture.

First, it will be necessary to focus on the different sites where the distribution and circulation of video games originate as well as on the different agents regulating the media in order to analyze the circulation of video games. In order to do so, Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma' concept of *interpretative community* introduced in their article “Cultures of Circulation: The Imagination of

Modernity" will be considered as a preliminary theoritical framework. Lee and LiPuma suggest that the concept of interpretative community stands for forms of social organizations and institutions acting as regulating agents that evaluate and set boundaries on various cultural forms that circulate through them (192). The result of these mediation institutions on cultural forms is described as being *cultures of circulation*. Considering the very performative nature of the cultures created out of the circulation of goods and cultural artifacts, Lee and LiPuma state that interpretative communities and cultures of circulation are very closely tied together.

What is at stake in this statement is the need for a shift from the study of cultural goods in regards to their interpretation and analysis to an overlooked aspect of cultural products, that of their actual circulation among other cultural forms in a given environment. Circulation is thus seen as not only the process of transit from one site to the other, but also as a phenomenon that generates a specific culture. It is with this idea in mind that I will explore the issue of circulation of video games through both official and unofficial forms of interpretative communities. The result of this investigation will facilitate the identification of the elements and forces that come into play when Japanese video games are being localized to another locale. Thus, a critical look at the transformations of cultural products would not be possible without considering the circulation of those products in both global and local scenes. It is only after such an analysis that it becomes important to look at the actual process of localization.

The second part of this work will focus on the transformation that certain video game titles undergo while being circulated in North America. This chapter will feature numerous case studies coming from both official studios and amateur development teams, spanning different time periods and platforms. Games will be addressed in regards to the different ways in which they can be localized. It will also be an exploration of the transformation found in video games framed around specific concepts. Indeed, following the article from Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition", I will depart

from the ideas of translation and localization that have already been the focus of many studies of Japanese video game localization. Instead, I will use Gaonkar and Povinelli's concepts of transfiguration and recognition. This new terminology is better suited to a more detailed description of what is really going on in the process of localization, which entails more than finding equivalent cultural icons to replace those which would not resonate within another locale (387). In the context of this thesis, transfiguration implies that there is not necessarily a predetermined set of cultural iconology to replace the one present in a given product. Instead, there are instances in which it is possible to witness the creation of new sets of value and thus new experiences that differ in varying levels from the "original" product, but that are still acknowledged to be the same.

The element of the tension between transfiguration and recognition will be of great interest to us. The appearance or "face" of a product sometimes undergoes a metamorphosis that might produce a radically different experience, but in the end the product must remain similar enough to its prior incarnation in order to be recognized as such[1]. Products introduced in this section will be dealt with using this general issue in mind as a starting point. Furthermore, returning to the concerns about the tension between fiction and rule outlined earlier, featured case studies will also take into consideration both elements of video games, as their interaction is crucial to the understanding the player's subjective experience of the game across multiple versions of a single product. The results of this chapter will introduce the notion of video games' translatable and untranslatable elements as being the core foundation of the processes of transfiguration and recognition outlined earlier. This notion will be of great importance for all remaining aspects of this work.

The third chapter will attempt to bring prior discussions together in order to illuminate the relationship between the concept of interpretative communities and the different processes of localization. Applying the different notions explored up to this point, we will investigate how

[1] By appearances I don't mean solely the fictional and iconic elements, but also the the experience of the player in regards to the rules of a game such as its speed, difficulty and other gameplay altering elements.

different audiences coexist in a single locale in regards to the acceptance of video games localized in certain ways. This will be investigated through several case studies which will provide insight into how these relationships can prove to be instances of conflicts and reject. We will investigate how audiences criticize the way specific titles are localized and how other audiences reject certain titles in regards to the gap they feature between the *regimes of value* used to interpret them and the locale's mainstream regimes of value.

This investigation will provide us with an important defining point of this thesis as we identify the impacts of the delimitation between video game's translatable and untranslatable elements. At this point, I will introduce the notion of Japaneseness in video games and define its articulation and construction as being closely linked to those elements. Indeed, the study of phenomenons such as fan criticism of localization practices and the rejection of particular titles from a locale's mainstream regime of value exacerbates certain aspects of audience interpretation of the media. It is then possible to link those aspects to a set of expectation that one has when negociating video games and that get organized in a culturally determined construction of video game culture. We will also examine how this phenomenon can influence the global video game culture of circulation in regards to an opposition between Japanese elements and Western elements in video games.

The final chapter of this thesis will address the influence of the establishment of links between video game elements and Japaneseness on the global video game culture of circulation. As the final site of analysis, we will explore the risks entailed by the previously explored concept of Japaneseness and binarism in the video game culture of circulation. We will see that what is actually at risk is the repurposing of these elements in theoretical frameworks drawing on Japanese nativist theories and anthropological structuralist concepts that elude the performative nature of the definition of Japaneseness in video games while putting too much emphasis on cultural

predispositions in order to explain their circulation and consumption patterns. Finally, we will explore this Japan-West binarism in regards to Arjun Appadurai's alternative theoretical framework of disjuncture and deterritorialization (“Disjuncture and Difference”). These concepts will prove useful to better emphasize the specificity of today's dynamics in regards to the global circulation of cultural products.

This final chapter will feature specific case studies of company discourses regarding the international marketing of their products. Nuancing the cultural binarism that defines part of the video game culture of circulation, the goal of this chapter will be to broaden our perspective on the global video game production in both the industry and in amateur development communities to realize that the performatively defined Japaneseness in video game is not a concept necessarily rooted in Japan, but one that it is frequently rearticulated on the international scene.

As a final introductory note, I would like to state that this research do not only suggests a way to understand the dynamics of video game transnational circulation patterns in a less superficial way, but it is also an attempt to contribute to the neglected Japanese side of video game studies. Considering that both the history and commercial success of the media is largely attributable to titles made in Japan, it is disappointing to see how those productions still escape most academic works, which favour a body of knowledge and a set of canons based on the North American history of the media. I hope that this work will contribute to expanding academia's understanding of not only Japanese games, but also of the Japanese amateur video game production and localization scene, as the ramification of its impacts on the global video game culture of circulation is undeniable.

Chapter 1

Consumption Spaces and Audience Defining Agents—An Analysis of the Concept of Interpretative Communities

In a period of a few decades, video games' technological capabilities evolved from the 8-bit powered machines of the 1980s to today's broadband internet-connected multifunctional high powered consoles. As the children who enjoyed console gaming grow up to become entertainment media consuming adults, video games are becoming increasingly accepted as a popular medium within mainstream culture. Gaming culture is no longer confined to children's playtime in the living room nor is it considered to be exclusive to role-playing game aficionados and computer science experts. Indeed, the video game market has greatly expanded partly because of an increased diversity of products, which are now targeting a wider audience. The democratization of video game consumption is visible in a variety of ways from the now in vogue *Guitar Hero* performances in urban night life venues, to the quick and absorptive play sessions of casual games on phones and other portable devices easily accessible to the daily bored commuters in public transport. With this multiplicity of genres and platforms, video games are securing their own place as a part of our daily life just like other mediums such as newspapers, cinema and television did when they emerged at their respective times. This phenomenon also includes the rise of other structures for the interpretation of video games to be created in accordance to the practices found within those stuctures. Here again, a situation comparable to what happend with the arrival of other medias at their respective times.

The formation of social structures and communities centered around specific media forms is a phenomenon that occurs alongside their circulation. In fact, media forms are highly dependant on these structures to facilitate their circulation and exchange as these constitute agents that both enable consumption and establish frames of negotiation. As introduced earlier, Lee and LaPuma

offer an interesting framework that can help us think critically about this phenomenon. Indeed, the idea of interpretative communities succeeds in partially framing the dynamics between the objects and their structures as a "set of practices that set the codes, customs, contracts–and thereby also institutions and boundaries–for understanding and using certain forms of circulation" (Sander 5). Nowadays, a multitude of video games' interpretative communities can be easily related to this idea: conventions and social gatherings (such as the E3, GDC or PAX), multiple yearly awards ceremonies, tournament organizations, review magazines both printed and online, fan-made websites and blogs, etc. All of these structures work in their own way to shape and define the interpretation that leads to the practice of consuming, exchanging and playing video games. This general phenomenon where people and cultural objects interact is composed of many practices embedded in all of these communities, and is what Lee and LaPuma call the *cultures of circulation*.

In order to analyze video games' culture of circulation, it is essential to emphasize a particular kind of interpretative community: video game retail and distribution environments. While it is important to keep in mind the entire picture of a locale's culture of circulation, attention must be given to perticular sites where interpretation is performed by the very act of exchanges by means of money transactions, reflecting the value of specific icons or genres. These sites are where most of the initial contact between cultural products and audiences occur, and it is thus interesting to observe which factors come into play when a customer picks up a particular game over another. However, it is apparent that the terminology of interpretative community does not apply fully to those sites, as most shops and venues obviously do not embody the bottom-up dynamics that Lee and LaPuma imply in their original definition. Indeed, most of the interpretative elements outlined above do not seem to reflect the collective user-empowerment connotations of the term. To compensate for this issue, it is important to turn to the distinction between what I will call *interpretative structures* and *interpretative communities*. This distinction allows the establishment of a difference between sites, both physical and virtual, where interpretation is performed and

promoted in a top-down fashion–interpretative structures–and sites where interpretation is more of a participatory bottom-up process–interpretative communities.

Focusing on the world of interpretative structures, the first part of this chapter will not only address video game retail environments as sites of interpretation, but also official video game publications and websites as core elements of North American video games' culture of circulation. In the secondary part of this chapter, our focus will shift to elements that constitute interpretative communities such as fan websites, community forums and other similar sites. The goal of the separate analysis of these sites will be to identify how different notions of the *regimes of value* are embodied within these sites of interpretation through both regulative and performative practices. As introduced by Arjun Appadurai, the concept of regimes of value stands for the cultural framework that regulates the exchange of cultural objects (*The Social Life of Things* 15) . What is evaluated in this framework is not only the presence of certain elements in a given cultural product, but also the organization of those elements. Thus, products are bestowed with different values depending on which regimes of value they are evaluated and exchanged in. The use of this concept is twofold for us. First, it allows for an interpretation that can accomodate situations in which exchange is performed between locales that differ greatly in terms of cultural environment and perceptions, thus impacting the trade value of specific cultural representations. Second, it is possible to push this concept further and state that multiple regimes of value can coexist in a single locale. Indeed, I will argue that the discussed collection of interpretative structures and interpretative communities constitutive of video game's culture of circulation in North America cannot be considered as a unitary interpretative monument having a single normative impact, as they often part ways and offer different takes on the medium.

Industry and Retail Environments—The Concept of Interpretative Structures

The first main group of sites that will be approached in this chapter is that of the interpretative structures. This term will be used to designate the sites where the interpretation of the medium of video game is conducted in what we can consider a top-down process. This group will be introduced with several case studies that will demonstrate they intermediary role between the consumers and the medium, leading to an interplay of power realtionships as well as analyze how they are part of particular regimes of value that promote a certain interpretation of this culture of circulation.

The first interpretative structure that we have to consider might not bear an obvious importance at first glance. However, as sites housing and regulating most of the circulation regarding this form of digital entertainment, video game shops and specialized retail environments are of critical importance when discussing patterns of object exchange with the mass audience. Although it is becoming clear that we are at a critical moment in the history of retail services as the balance of sales' figures between physical venues and new online marketplaces is shifting more and more towards the latter, physical retailers still prevail with the majority of consumers' habits. This may partly be caused by the characteristics inherent to the retail environment and the particular experiences they provide for customers. Indeed, among the masses of different shops, from the small, independent store to the large, franchised store, a common trait amongst these venues is the factor of display and attraction.

These stores compete with many other kinds of venues for the attention of the typical mall-wanderer and thus, with only few seconds of attention being payed by a single potential customer to each product, the products on sale must be easily identifiable and negotiable for the common crowd. Thus, in order to facilitate customers' recognition and evaluation of particular titles, some video game publishers make their products approachable by using already well-known fictional icons and

archetypes found in other medias or by using icons that are part of the general knowledge of a given locale. This phenomenon is often associated with the term “transmedia storytelling” in video game studies, referring to the marketing strategy that focuses on providing a long, coherent narrative spanning several different media forms (Jenkins). In the context of Japanese studies, this calls to mind the term “media mix”, which refers to the publishing strategy used by media businesses in the 1980s that consisted of creating single narratives across an array of different medias in order to diversify their consumption (Steinberg). Although this strategy provides a fast and efficient way to involve players within the fiction of a game by keeping the time required by a complex narrative exposition to a minimum, our analysis asks for another understanding of this concept[2].

Video games' front covers usually depict the game's fictional world and give the consumer hints as to what the narrative will be about. The cover's primary objective is to attract customer’s attention and publishers hope that this first image has enough resoning power to intrigue the viewer. In order to do so, this first encounter must convey a lot of meaning in a very short time. The first way in which this phenomenon operates is through iconic recognition. For example, the front cover of the game *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* depicts elements belonging to the semantic field of the *Star Wars* franchise such as stormtroopers, lightsabers and recognizable force powers such as blue lightning bolts coming out of a character's finger tips. Since this franchise is one of the most recognized in the history of American popular cinema, it is reasonable to assume that most of the people that encounter this title will acknowledge that it belonging to a certain system of meaning, thus quickening the process of recognition and making the process of attraction more likely to occur, increasing the chances of commercial success. Although this element of recognition is not specific to video games, the second layer of visual recognition has more to do with the actual ludic content of the game per se.

Within the same quick gaze at the front cover of a game, another important layer of

[2] As cut-scenes heavy games tend not to be succesful with the general audience, developers try not to rely on extensive exposition.

information is suggested to the consumer. These pieces of information allow him or her to start to investigate and imagine the game's content, that is to say the gaming skills involved as well as the tools for navigating the world in regards to game genre. The cover art of our previous *Star Wars* example shows a scene in which the character in the centre of the picture—the lightsaber wielding protagonist—disposes of multiple enemy soldiers in a dramatic fashion. Seeing this, one can infer that the product will be a flashy action game in which the player controls a powerful lightsaber wielding character and that the actions required by the player will consist of slashing his or her way through hordes of soldiers. Following this assumption, players familiar with the media of video game will be able to associate the new product with other *beat 'em up* games of the same formula: the *God of War* series, the *Uncharted* series, the *Gears of War* series, etc. This phenomenon of recognition within the field of video games has been explored by Perron and Arsenault in their work inspired by Ulric Neisser's book *Cognition and Reality* as the heuristic circle of gameplay (109). However, while their approach focuses on the play experience of gamers from the start of the game to the finish line, in my understanding, the heuristic circle begins much earlier: the environment of the retail shop itself as an video games' culture of circulation shaping interpretative structure. Indeed, as the customers “probe” the video games' cover, they extract key information that is then compared to what they already know based on general knowledge and the games they have already played. This incomplete result—that still needs to be verified by experiencing the game itself—is then used in order to evaluate the product's place in the regimes of value that are themselves based on other media products. This phenomenon encompasses both fictional elements and the set of mechanics involved in a game. Thus, it is not surprising that video game covers undergo serious scrutiny by publishers and necessitate a certain expertise in order to ensure that they feature the particular codes necessary for quick recognition—sometimes regardless of their actual content.

Video game cover art act as an important part of video games' culture of circulation within the interpretative structure of retail establishments. This is an example of the top-down nature of

video games' culture of circulation based on marketing and display. There is a tendency to emphasize the attraction factor of games based on other medium and already well-established genres to counter the risky process of introducing original narratives (that are not extending other medias' narrative or a video game franchise) and niche genre games or titles introducing new genres altogether. This incentive to reproduce established formulas based on fictional icons and genre creates a sense of performativity in this regime of value, wherein a specific organization (or regime of value) of a video game's elements is promoted by the industry because it is estimated to be what is popular based on previous sale figures. Regimes of values can be seen as self replicating.

The same top-down dynamic can also be observed through other aspects of the retail environment such as advertisement. Indeed, these commercial spaces also provide opportunities for publishers to introduce new products to the customers in a wide variety of fashions. Releasing promotional material to stores—such as posters, empty promotional boxes mimicking the projected appearance of the product or large standing displays—allows the products to be displayed and evaluated much longer before the actual video game is released. This early introduction into the media environment of video games does much to maximize the customer's exposure to a new title and the likeliness that recognition will occur by association with other products. In this sense, publicity and advertisement is an all-encompassing notion that involves both forthcoming products and displayed titles whose main advertising method is their physical display. The type element organization displayed on these advertizing methods thus relies on the locale's regimes of value.

A consideration of the recent rise of online retail sites such as *amazon.com* or *playasia.com*, reveals that this aspect is not limited to physical spaces but can be observed in virtual spaces as well. Here it becomes evident how the dynamics of promotion, circulation and consumption of video games are played out. While browsing such sites and looking at a particular product's description page, customers are presented with a list of products related to what is being viewed and prompted to take a look at them. Occasionally, these virtual shopping venues also tag customers,

offering them products and titles associated with the same genre or fictional universe. While one can see here a marketing strategy aimed at encouraging the purchase of multiple products and maximizing profits, it is also a clear example of how video games' culture of circulation driven by interpretative structures proves to be relatively close top-down process.

In addition, another element is at work in retail stores' attraction- and recognition-focused environment. The practice of playing video games, like any other art form, is also influenced by canonical titles that helped define and shape the practices of contemporary video games. Just as retail environments that specializes in movies, music or novels create physical spaces dedicated to the promotion of their products on the level of memory, legitimating current-day practices, certain video game stores also serve the same purpose by providing icons that ultimately result in the shaping of the culture of circulation. Here, the example of the GameBuzz chain main store, a Montreal-based independent retail group, will demonstrate this phenomenon. Unlike major retail store chains like GameStop that clearly have more mercantile goals in the display of their various products, entering a GameBuzz store provides the customer with an experience that in some aspects retains characteristics of museum or archive-like environments.

Figure 1.1: Glass case displaying memorabilias of video game history

Upon entering the store, customers will most certainly first notice the various glass cases that house a few selected memorabilia and gaming artifacts ranging from a few decades to a few months old all in pristine condition. From old gaming consoles like the original Nintendo Entertainment System to 1980s hit titles and art works depicting well-known characters or icons,

the display of these products not only serves specific marketing purposes (even though they are indeed for sale), but also celebrates video games' history and culture by exhibiting important key titles that true gamers must know and have played to legitimize their "status". Obviously, this process implies a selection among the culture's canon of games in order to create a narrative that includes certain titles as influential achievements and leaves other titles out as more or less irrelevant artifacts that are excluded from the "official narrative" of a locale's video game culture of circulation. Such displays can be seen as normative, used to suggest and impose standards of evaluation of current titles and genres. For example, whereas the game *Super Mario Brothers* of the Nintendo Entertainment System is explicitly displayed and celebrated in many ways (original cartridges, plushes, sculpural art, etc.), we do not find any of the major titles from the visual novel genre (*Higurashi no naku koro ni* or *Kannon* for example). Inclusions as well as omissions both shape how video games are negotiated by interpretative structures. Here again we can see the extend to which the interpretative structures-driven video game culture of circulation enacts top-down dynamics that shape audience's perception of the media.

Both physical and virtual retail environments—regarding publicity, product display and archive-like features—act as a regulative top-down interpretative structure by replicating a certain patterns of exchange. After examining these spaces, it is clear that the driving force of exchange and circulation is highly influenced by the power of attraction of games which displayed elements are organized so as to fit in the locale's regimes of value as opposed to their innate individual characteristics and narratives. In a sense, this environment is itself a driving force that leads to patterns of exchange and consumption based on regimes of value that not only span the culture of video games, but that find their meanings in specific organization of elements featured in the greater media environment of a locale.

Parallel to physical retail environments, another form of interpretative structure that

occupies a key position in the process of video games evaluation enacts some interesting top-down dynamics that can further expand our understanding of video games' culture of circulation. Indeed, the other form of first contact that can bring a specific game to the attention of customers is mediated by a variety of publications both online and printed. However, among the masses of publications, I want to emphasize the official channels of information about video game culture—those that are the most accessible, the most advertised, that exercise the most influence and that share the most ties with other similar official channels of information in other entertainment forms, such as movies. We can find examples of such publications quite easily: *IGN.COM* and *Gamespot* on the internet, *Edge Magazine* and *PC Gamer* in the realm of printed publications. In Japan, equivalent publications would correspond to *Famitsu* and *Dengeki*, which have both online and printed editions.

Parts of these publications embody the same purposes that we observed in the retail space environments—game previews acting as advertisement, articles focusing on retro-gaming and console history or top 10 lists about numerous subjects—but the most interesting aspect of game journalism with respect to our focus on circulation and evaluation, is the practice of video game reviewing. It is indeed a fundamental practice of video game journalism as readers browse magazines and websites mainly to find good coverage of new releases in order to determine which titles to purchase and which titles to avoid in the never-ending search for good entertainment value for both their time and money. This is especially important for video games, as they tend to be a relatively expensive commodity in comparison to other entertainment products. Video game reviews are generally formulated by a single journalist and are subjected to the publication's editorial perspective as well as to the influence of the studios that funds the publication via advertisement. It is also obvious that part of the sale figures of most of video game titles rely on these reviews; a fact that is not lost on publishers.

What I want to note in this practice though, is how the process of evaluating by granting

seemingly very precise scores on products creates systems of meaning in relation to genre by establishing references for both the consumers and the reviewers themselves. It is important to keep in mind that these interpretative publications are highly fractionated and diverse. Indeed, like in the worlds of novel or movie criticism, it is not possible to define the review process as a unitary practice as each product does not reach a general consensus shared by all journalists, but rather each magazine, blog or website establishes its own regime of value regarding certain genres, canons and expectations in regards to video games. While printed publications and well-established websites show the tendency to easily praise the industry-leading, high-profile games targeted to the general audience, smaller publications answer to a different dynamic with more diverse purposes in their editorial ratings. Referring once again to our previous example of *The Force Unleashed*, the PlayStation 3 version of the title's entry on Metacritic—a website that compiles review score and establishes average rankings of entertainment products—shows a very diverse rating of the game according to diverse publications. *Game Informer,* a high profile paper publication, scores the game at 88 out of 100, focusing on the pleasure of enacting *Star Wars* aficionados' fantasy in the virtual world while *Gamespot* grants it 75 out of 100, criticizing the uneven gameplay. In comparison to these quite favourable reviews, reviewers at the *1up* website award the game a score of 50 out of 100, mainly criticizing design choices and the ultimately generic nature of the game when compared to the whole library of the genre (Metacritic). How can one explain the 38 percent gap between *Game Informer*'s review and *1up*'s review?

This investigation foregrounds how different publications reflect different interpretations of the medium of video game based on different ideas on what they should offer as types of gameplay experiences and how those experiences should be designed in regards to expected innovation and conventions. Reviews should never be seen as empirical analysis, rather each critic embodies different standards that are used to evaluate different products resulting in interpretations that generate an audience whose regime of value will be modelled after the publishers' interpretation.

Also, given the fact that these sites provide both reviews and publicity for video games, their independence is sometimes questionable as in the case of *jeuxvideo.com*, a major French video game reviews website partly owned by *Ubisoft* (De Broche des Combes), or in the case of the Jeff Gerstmann controversy where the Gamespot Editorial Director was rumored to have been fired after writing a low-score review of Eidos' *Kane and Lynch* game in 2007 (Orland). It is thus false to think of video games' culture of circulation as a unitary phenomenon sharing a common idea of how games should be amongst all gamers of a single locale defined by national boundaries. Instead, these boundaries merely act as a container of the multiplicity of interpretations of the same cultural objects.

After observing these different interpretative structures, it becomes clear that the main characteristic regulating the circulation of video games in such spaces is the display and attraction value of games as well as the influence from official publications and opinion making agents. This results in a culture of circulation that relies on superficial evaluation of games as well as top-down normativizing journalists' opinions.

As demonstrated earlier, while interpretative structures do allow for multiple interpretations, the top-down model they embody does not offer much space for more discursive, exotic or deviant interpretations of cultural forms. However, there is only so much we can observe using this closed model. While there are also other interesting forms of interpretative structures left unexplored—issues such as the impact of hardware manufacturer regulations on game design and its repercussions on the way games are negotiated as family-friendly products—it is time to move our analysis onto the other contruct that provides media interpretation. This other model that completes our review of video games' culture of circulation is closer to the concept originally proposed by Lee and LiPuma where interpretation is a more user-empowering process.

Consumers-Driven Culture—The Concept of Interpretative Communities

The other element of video games' culture of circulation has to do with sites where the practice, evaluation and circulation of video games are not as strongly mediated by top-down agents. Rather, in this model, products are negotiated outside the boundaries of official outlets and create their own standards. Indeed, the model of *interpretative communities* regroups instances in which regimes of value emerge from fan groups and break the divide between consumption and production. Although different from the interpretative structures in many aspects, the main distinction between them is the bottom-up power relationship that seems to drive the interpretative communities' interpretation of the media. The goal of this investigation of video games' interpretative communities is to identify the spaces where emergent bottom-up interpretation occurs and how their impact can be observed in patterns of circulation and recognition. Sites observed are by no mean exhaustive and will focus on bringing light on particular communities that introduce, give meaning and create patterns of circulation related to specific interest and titles. Given the fact that there are hundreds of such communities gathered around specific genres such as retro-gaming, text adventure games and independently-developed games communities just to name a few, this study will focus on on-line communities whose primary interests reside in Japanese games—especially *dôjin sofuto*, JRPG (Japanese Role-Playing Game) and visual novels.

Since video game studies is still a very young academic field and much of the work it compiles is mostly related to the study of the formal qualities of the medium, it is not surprising that little research has been conducted on internet gaming communities as distinct sites of interpretation. The lack of scholarly work in that field leads us to consider another starting point that will certainly offer interesting insights in regards to our primary focus on video games by means of comparison. This starting point is the examination of the academic literature about the development of *anime*

fansub and *manga scanlation* communities.

The prolific world of *anime fansubbing* and *manga scanlation* comprises a network of hundreds of different translation groups of various sizes that together produce subtitles from dozens of Japanese animation shows in multiple languages and translations of multiple manga chapters daily. From the 1980s onward, this practice arose from the desire of fans in different countries to enjoy Japanese cultural products without the heavy editing and poor-quality dubbing that previously plagued international releases of Japanese audio-visual products—usually to market the product to a broad public to insure maximization of profits (Ruh). Another reason for the popularity of this practice is that publishers are rarely inclined to officially import products belonging to more controversial genres such as *yaoi* and *hentai* that would attract significant criticism, thus leaving to translation communities the handling of such products' unofficial circulation (Rice). With the advent of the internet, the number of anime series and manga translated by these groups exploded as the use of video editing software became simpler and more accessible, and the circulation of the subtitled and translated products could be achieved using peer-to-peer file exchange software.

Fan subbing groups cannot be considered as a single entity producing equivalent translations. Indeed, the multiplicity of fan subbing and scanlating groups suggests as many different approaches and interpretations of the media. While certain groups focus on producing translations very close to the Japanese original dialogues and trusting their audience to possess the knowledge of basic Japanese expressions like honorary suffixes and basic vocabulary, some groups instead freely include additional elements such as cultural adaptations of jokes or interpretations of dialogue lines, thus producing translations that diverge from the audio tracks (Rush, Coundry). It is clear that this process not only provides translations in order to facilitate the public's understanding of the shows, but it is also a process which creates meaning, and forms communities based on the ways products are negotiated, potentially producing as many sites of interpretation based on specific standards as there are translation groups producing new content.

Additionally, the internet allows fans to communicate in more efficient ways and in greater number using community forums, chat channels and mailing lists systems (Napier). Fan communities—organized around genres, artists or series—enact discussions and formulate criticism towards their favorite shows, and this contributes to the construction of singular ways of approaching the medium through unique sets of references.

The first aspect introducing this study of the dynamics of interpretative communities organized around Japanese video games is the capture of not only cultural elements situated outside the borders of a given locale's regimes of value, but also about the capture of cultural elements' organization patterns that are foreign to it. In many ways, these communities share the same characteristics and enact similar dynamics than their anime-and manga-focused counterparts. In Japan, these products—along with video games—are part of the greater media mix marketing model, compelling creators to enact their narratives using several different media forms[3]. It is not surprising then that this model tends to be emulated within the process of video game circulation in North American fan communities.

When browsing popular fan blogs or news websites, one notices that video games are seamlessly integrated into the coverage of the anime and manga media environment as yet another site where related narratives are consumed. Fan websites like *Japanator* enact this media convergence in a critical way, integrating not only manga, anime and video games, but also music, *idoru* coverage and fan practices such as *cosplay*. There are many instances in which the coverage of specific games can be attributed to the sharing of narratives, fictional worlds and characters from the game with a popular anime series—a dynamic that remind us of what is at stake in the relationship between video games and customers within the paradigm of the interpretative

[3] Publishing cycles can take a variety of forms and go through different paths. As Azuma Hiroki has demonstrated, media mix cycles do not only begin within traditional medias such as anime, movie or TV shows, but can also originate in icons not priorly associated with a narrative such as a mascot or a specific character (73). Although video games are often considered to penetrate this cycle only as quick follow ups to a commercial hit, they are also a point of origin to larger narratives spanning different medias.

structures. However, the significant presence of various products discussed and debated on the website that are not attached to any particular transmedia brand suggest that we have to look elsewhere to find the ties linking these media together. I suggest that the bridge that allows for this cross-media interpretation and coverage can be found at the aesthetic level, more specifically in the conventions of cultural products attached to *anime* style medias that are at the forefront of the cool Japan trend of Japanese media exports and shape the foreing consumers' perception of Japanese culture. Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that there is a clear tendency towards cross-industry labour movement with creative workers transferring between the anime and video industry in Japan, and a consolidation of video game companies with other industries to diversify their products (Aoyama, Consalvo). The fusion of the video game company Namco and the *anime* and toy-producing company Bandai in 2005 illustrates this close relationship as well as the possibility of creative labour force exchange. What is important to note here is that games created from these companies tend to feature a common set of media conventions and style—*anime* in this case—shared across multiple media, facilitating their negotiation by inexperienced gamers in Japan. For North American fans, this style bears a mark that indicates its potential integration within the community's standards of interpretation in regards to the style's relationship with other objects flagged as *cool Japan* products.

Interpretative communities focused on Japanese video games are thus based on the establishment of regimes of value inspired by a different set of cultural elements that are foreign to the locale's media environment and can potentially contradict the latter. By responding to different criteria for the consumption of cultural media, interpretative communities enact different patterns of consumption that constitute a part of the global culture of circulation of the medium. However, their attachment to alternative sets of cultural elements and cultural elements' organization patterns is only a part of the dynamics that they embody. It cannot provide us with a complete picture of the phenomenon. The most significant part of their contribution to the culture of circulation is the

bottom-up formation of interpretation. Indeed, the word “community” suggests a power relation of the establishment of regimes of value that is formed at the grassroots level.

The second important point to consider when investigating the dynamics of interpretative communities is the emergent patterns of the objects' interpretations. Contrary to what we observed in the dynamics of game criticism and game journalism in official publications wherein evaluation and commentary are performed in a top-down fashion and have the effect of forcing critics' interpretation onto a large audience, in interpretative communities this process operates in a communal fashion, that is to say with the opposing interpretations of fans brought forward through discussions. As previously discussed regarding *anime*, the democratization of the internet allowed for the creation of virtual spaces in which Japanese video game enthusiasts could meet, exchange and expand their understanding of specific games' virtual worlds. It is also used as a tool to exchange tips from players to players in order to accomplish certain in-game tasks or to achieve maximum completion of the game. As Japanese-marked video game genres such as JRPG (Japanese role playing game) and visual novels (considered marginal in other locales and thus relatively unsupported by official structures) circulate through a new locale, new, alternative interpretative communities led by aficionados form around them in order to create new forms of interpretation. Their presence constitutes a means of creating tools for the inexperienced gamer to negotiate these texts and evaluate them according to certain sets of standards, shaping the way they are circulated in the process. In these virtual environments, this specific pattern of interpretation is mainly enacted through discussions within a community's forum. Case studies of two different types of Japanese video game web fan communities will help us understand how emergent interpretation is enacted and the concrete impacts of this process on video games' culture of circulation.

One of the first means gamers use to get in contact with others who share the same passion about a genre or a specific video game series is through dedicated websites and forums. Known for

its extensive fictional worlds and narratives spanning dozens of individual titles each of which feature an independent world and story built from the ground up, Square Enix's *Final Fantasy* series is one of the most discussed series by JRPG enthousiasts. Therefore, it stands as a pertinent case study through which we can observe the formation of the culture of circulation of games since the start of the series in the 1980s, when Japanese games first began to circulate outside their country of origin.

Fan sites are primarily used as community hubs that regroup extensive information on the games themselves. The fan site *Unofficial Final Fantasy Site* demonstrates this aspect of interpretative communities, as it contains information on all titles of the series (game plots, characters, side quest, etc.) as well as information on subjects around the games themselves (interviews, news, etc.). It is also a space where members extend the narrative possibilities of the fictional universes by publishing fan art and fan fictions. At the border of the world of fan sites, communities have also recently made use of the new wiki encyclopedia website format in order to gather and organize information. The *Final Fantasy*-themed wiki, for example, is—like any wiki—exempt from a central organization that makes editorial choices on the content of the pages. As advertised on the site, anyone can edit information in the approximately 13,000 articles that the community has created so far covering all previous and upcoming titles of the series. As an emergent site of interpretation, however, parts of the functionality of the wiki format depart from the purposes of information display in the encyclopedic style, as titles of the series are the most highly regarded by contributors result in receiving the most extensive coverage and consultation rates. The wiki also features an extended universe driven by the community. Called the *Dragon's Neck Colosseum,* this virtual space features fictional battles between two *Final Fantasy* characters of different fictional worlds—the results being decided by the visitors' votes, some of whom vote according to their affective preference and others who carefully examine the odds and compare them in regards to the game's lore and characters' actual abilities within the series. Such practices go

beyond the mere gathering of information and just like some fans produce art and novellas, some produce texts that extend the primary narrative, reflecting the worth of Final Fantasy's fictional world for the fans.

However, exchanges, discussions and debates between users—the core activity leading to the advent of fan communities—is mainly tied to the virtual forums and chat channels. These virtual spaces provide yet another tool for fans to communicate, exchange ideas and collectively deepen their understanding of the games' fictional worlds by comparing players' experiences and interpretations of the games' events and even providing narrative details that developers did not account for. Threads from the active forum of *The Final Fantasy* fan website illustrate this situation by providing us with insightful examples of the different ways communities approach discussions and the establish of alternative interpretations through conflicts and concessions.

Certain discussion threads and exchanges between members compare players' experiences and interpretations of the game's text, which works to create a more complex and nuanced understanding of the game's narrative and the dynamics of the virtual worlds. For example, one of the discussion topics of the forum deals with the nature of *Final Fantasy XIII*'s lead character, Lightning. With the goal of writing a fan fiction about her, the original poster of the thread asked the community for their opinion of the character's personality and motives. Although the first replies were not very nuanced ("She's a cold bitch because she had a hard life growing up"), as other members progressively joined the discussion, the overall image of the character became increasingly complex as members' interpretations opposed and built on top of each other (The Final Fantasy, "Lightning"). In the end, the resulting forum thread became a repertoire of information—a *body of knowledge*—that could then be used by other members.

The second example deals with the phenomenon of reinterpretation of narratives by members who don't hesitate to go beyond the game as a text and create alternative story arcs or challenge participants with unexpected reinterpretations of the game's events. This phenomenon can

be observed in the practice of fan-produced *manga*—or *dôjinshi*—as well as common media used by anime and manga fans to extend the life of their favourite characters beyond the official narrative by devising "what if" types of stories. The communities' virtual spaces also provide a site where such creative processes can be enacted by members. Several threads of *The Final Fantasy* community's forum can be identified as such. For example, a recent discussion emphasized the fans' concern regarding the extensive mythology of *Final Fantasy XIII* and details left unexplained by the in-game encyclopedia, leaving them to devise new rules to the game's internal logic to satisfactorily explain certain events (The Final Fantasy, "What's the story?"). Another example comes from the website *squallsdead.com*, a fan website dedicated to the promotion of a radically different interpretation of *Final Fantasy VIII*'s narrative in which the main character, Squall Leonhart, actually died early in the story, leaving the player to navigate a dream or a vision for the rest of the game (Choudhury). Although not widely accepted by fans and often debated, this example proves that the creation of alternative narratives and original story lines is enabled by the extensive knowledge possessed by dedicated fans as community members. It also demonstrates that interpretations are also in constant evolution and not firmly established by authors or game studios.

The last point in this investigation of communities' forums is relevant to our understanding of interpretative communities as standards- and canon-establishing agents. Fan-produced content, debates and information gathered collectively create a sense of history of specific genres and series that is oriented around community-created canons and the establishment of standards that may or may not meet popular praise by the agents of interpretative structures. I suggest that those canon-establishing patterns are related to the amount of dedicated work by fans towards a title expressing its endorsement by members—its overall worth as text within the community. For example, the number of threads related to the 1997 Square Enix game *Final Fantasy VII*—considered a classic by JRPG standards—in the forum discussed earlier is far greater than any other title on the site, indicating how relevant the text is within the series and the genre. Furthermore, this selection

pattern can also be very critical of the game developers themselves. Indeed, it seems that fans' consciousness of *Final Fantasy* as a very old and genre-defining series clashes with what they sometimes perceive as marketing-focused game development that does not take into consideration and respect the series' "history" and legacy. A forum contributor, expressing his concern about the quality of the recent *Final Fantasy XIII*, addresses the problem directly: "[...] I'm thinking Square Enix is forgetting the real meaning and importance of the title" (The Final Fantasy, "Zero Punctuation Review of XIII"). As an agent that generates interpretation, the interpretative communities are often overtly critical towards developers when they feel that their concerns with the place of a new product within a genre's lineage and tradition is not considered and properly addressed. This phenomenon illustrates the degree of the media's reappropriation in regards to traditions and standards regulated by fans, eluding the authors of the "original" texts and putting the fans at an equal position of interpretation. The reappropriation that occurs with the establishment of canonical titles and with the narrative expansion through the creation of new content is the result of the process of information gathering by the community and the deep knowledge it provides to the members. It is thus possible to state that the underlying element under fans' focus on the establishement of a body of knowledge and its use to determine the worth of a video game's text within the interpretative community-led regimes of value is the reappropriation of the texts themselves and their repurposing into an alternative knowledge economy.

Both of those major elements found within the virtual interpretative communities—the capture of objects marginal to the locale's regimes of value and emerging patterns of interpretation—constitute the second aspect that shape video games' culture of circulation. This analysis has provided us with the keys to understand the driving forces that make that makes interpretative communities and interpretative structures such different spaces of negotiation for the media of video game. Bearing those elements in mind, I suggest that the fundamental characteristic that can

summarize the whole set of dynamics that constitute interpretative communities is the profound knowledge of the texts themselves. Indeed, as opposed to the paradigm of interpretative structures wherein the circulation of video games is more dependant of display value and quick recognition targeting a wide audience, the parallel dynamics of circulation powered by interpretative communities put more value on the knowledge of the product in itself and its relationship with user created systems of value, reappropriating the products and repurposing them into an alternative knowledge economy. This can lead to the establishment of independent channels of not only information gathering and interpretation promotion, but also as we will see later on in the case of digital products' localization, to the circulation of the products themselves via underground virtual transmission systems and fan-created tools aiding their comprehension.

Having introduced these basic terms and ideas regarding the circulation of cultural artifacts as well as having established the coexistence of multiple and possibly opposing regimes of value within the same locale, we will now start to take a closer look at the artifacts themselves. The particular moment when publishers make video games cross national borders will be investigated along with the impacts related to this change of locale.

Chapter 2

Tales of Cross-national Journeys—Processes of Japanese Video Games' Localization in North America

As stated earlier, the internationalization of the video game industry in general led to an emphasis on the global circulation of games made possible by including lozalization as a normal step in video game development. Nowadays, with the sales in foreign markets being such an essential part of a title's profit margin, the process of localization has become well-integrated into most video game studios. In fact, the establishment of localization teams within development studios has become an important aspect of the business. It has become a mandatory step in video game development to consult professional localization teams or use the studios' in-house resources specialized in the transformation of products for specific markets. Developers are now conscious of the fact that the quality of a title's localization and the degree to which it connects with a foreign audience has a direct impact on the sales figures. Heather Maxwell Chandler's book *Game Localization Handbook*—an extensive guide addressed to publishers and developers explaining in detail how to create localization-friendly games—is a testimony of this state of affairs within the industry.

Echoing this recent acknowledgement of the importance of game localization, journalists and researchers alike have started to show interest in the matter of cultural adaptation as well as demonstrate the differences between gaming practices in the West and Japan, the globalization of video games consumption and localization as a process that erases all cultural markings from a product to the point of mistaking it with a local product (Huang 86). Localization has also been discussed by Szurawisky in regard to several different aspects such as the language issues inherent to the translation process as well as the relationship between fictional elements and gameplay mechanics' influences on localization while investigating the perticular case of the horror video

game-series *Siren*. The main conclusion of this particular study introduced insights as for the tension between rules and fiction in the translation process, associating the former to functionalist translation and the latter to a production of meaning (Szurawisky 70). While these studies clarify the dynamics of narrative translating in a data-processing environment in which specific types of challenges appear[4], they ultimately do not provide much insight into the global circulation of video games nor do they take into account the different methods and agents related to the localization process. Indeed, as we will see, video game localization does not consist of a unique set of practices akin to a normative magic recipe by games developers and localization agencies. It is also important to point out that the objective of localization is not strictly to strip the targetted product of its cultural markings to fit its new locale. If one is to evaluate the forces influencing video games' global circulation, it is important to look at the process of localization more broadly as well as to take a wider look at the media in general. Indeed, it is not only essential to distinguish between different practices in the industry itself, but it is also crucial to go beyond the official transnational circulation channels and observe how the circulation and localization of certain titles are directly dealt with by dedicated individuals and groups as an alternate trend of video game circulation.

Another aspect of this study will entail shifting from the already explored concerns regarding localization towards a new focus in which video games will be approached as cultural objects and commodities that undergo various processes of transfiguration that impact different strata of the media. The concept of transfiguration and recognition allows a more nuanced analysis as well as a necessary, fresh perspective on the process of adaptation of cultural objects and cultural artefacts in the wider context of an economy based on exchange. This concept will allow us to view video games as multiple cultural texts whose content defy the traditional notions of translation. This notions imply the replacement of a given system of meaning to another, but basically transmitting the same message. In contrast, transfiguration suggests that cultural products are

[4]Issues related to memory consuming language coding practices and conflicts between the amount of words used in a literal translation and the programmed size of dialogue boxes.

broken down into pieces of cultural elements and then put back together in a re-imagined way so as to fit the new locale's system of value that they are meant to penetrate (Gaonkar and Povinelli 394). In other words, the surface level "figures" of video games—be they in a game's fictional or gameplay elements—are modified so as to blend in the targeted locale while still retaining the essence and text of the original title. In this process, which is closer to the creation of meaning than a simple linguistic adaptation, critical elements are identified to be transformed, suppressed or differently presented so as to adapt the text and create a different cultural product that can still be recognized as the original. While the actual tension between transfiguration and recognition will be investigated in much more details in the third chapter, our first look at Japanese video game localization processes will benefit from an early introduction to this concept.

The goal of this second chapter is to offer an overview of the different ways Japanese video games are localized through an array of case studies. This analysis will provide a general survey of the video games after they have undergone processes of localization and transfiguration. These examples will be broken down into several categories inspired by Chandler's original division of video game localization processes based on the amount of work required to make it sufficiently accessible to foreign markets: the no localization level, the "box and docs" localization level, the partial localization level and the full localization level (Chandler 12). Extending this categorization beyond the needs of the industry and towards a wider and more inclusive comprehension of the concept, our case studies will be separated in two main categories. The first one will comprise the multiple ways games are localized by developers and localization specialized companies, where some products undergo heavy transfiguration at either the level of marketing, the level of fiction or at the level of gameplay and others products that do not require drastic makeovers. The second category will introduce the overlooked aspect of emergent processes of game localization and will demonstrate how unlicensed and unofficially circulated video games are still adapted by fans and dedicated individuals for specific North American audiences. Putting those practices side by side

will demonstrate that the global circulation of video games and their localization is not a single, all-encompassing practice, but rather a myriad of alternative processes of circulation driven by very different dynamics, an important perspective from which we have to investigate in order to understand what is at stake in the relationship between localized products and the audience consuming them.

Transfiguring Video Games—Case Studies of Products Localized Within the Industry

With the predicted shrinking of the internal video game market in Japan brought about by problematic phenomenons such as the ageing of the Japanese population and the ever-growing development cost of high-profile projects on last generation consoles, it has become clear that in order to retain the dominance of Japan-based video game companies, it is necessary to focus on overseas exportation and appeal to international audiences. For a long time during the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, foreign market sales plans were considered optional as the domestic sales made a sufficient amount of profit. International audiences were also overlooked because of a suspicion that Japanese video game products were incompatible with the Western audience as a whole. A remnant of this situation is the domination of localized console games as opposed to localized PC games amongst the Japanese exportation of digital entertainment products. Indeed, Japanese publishers are reluctant to export most of the PC games produced in Japan due to the unique nature of the games themselves (most of which consist of visual novels and dating simulators), and a lack of comparable products in other markets.

The products that are being officially localized, however, are scrupulously transfigured with the objective of removing most of their cultural markings in an attempt to eliminate the risks that come with the transcultural marketing of cultural products. Indeed the majority of games aimed for

success overseas are adapted in multiple ways, undergoing modifications at both levels of presentation and gameplay. Of course, every product being somewhat unique, there are no real localization guidelines *per se*. It is important to keep in mind though that since studios and publishers now usually include localization teams, it has become a natural reflex to mandate in-house specialized resources to work on virtually every title produced, even those whose content do not necessarily require transfiguration. This state of affairs raises crucial questions in regards to our study: what actually constitute cultural markings in a video game? What criteria are used to evaluate what is translatable and what is not? Through the case studies provided, we will identify the major ways developers and localization teams choose to transfigure games in order to fit their perspections of the North American markets. Analyzing thid collection of practices will give us insight into the main options available to publishers to modify their products as well as the assumptions made by localization teams as to where the boundary is between what constitutes the game's original, untranslatable core experience and the translatable elements that can be freely modified for foreign audiences.

The first level which often undergoes change in the process of transfiguration, is the game's front cover as a marketing tool aimed at grabbing the customer’s attention. This aspect has previously been partly addressed by Suzana Pajares Tosca in her article *Reading Resident EvilCode Veronica X*, but this partial analysis did not go as far as to state the developers' intentions behind the practice (Tosca 207). As we saw earlier in our exploration of the interpretative structures through Arsenault and Perron's concept of the heuristic circle of gameplay, this is a very sensitive aspect of video game circulation as in most cases it is a customer's first introduction to a product. Thus, it is a common practice for localization teams to reorganize the art cover of a game by using quickly-recognizable concepts and icons reminiscent of other products within the locale. This situation is very apparent in the case of the 2001 Sony Entertainment title ICO.

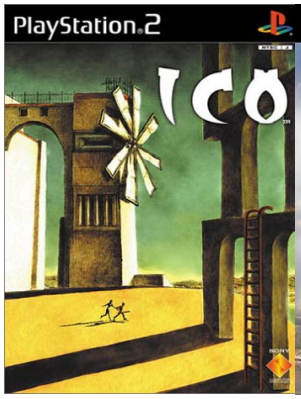

Fig. 2.1: Ico's Japanese cover art

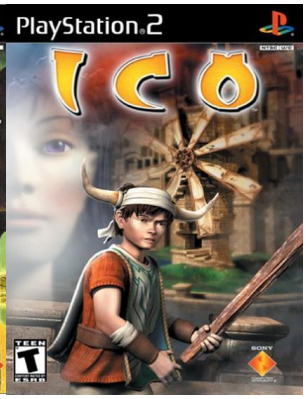

Fig. 2.2: Ico's North American cover art

The front cover of the Japanese version of the game depict an oppressively empty landscape reminiscent of Italian surrealist artist Giorgio de Chirico's painting *The Nostalgia of the Infinite.* In this landscape, two characters holding hands are seemingly escaping the strange looking buildings. The artistic sensibility and inter-textual references of the cover art suggest a somewhat uncanny gaming experience. The small size of the protagonists in the empty landscape also indicates some degree of helplessness that attempts to accurately represent the unusual gaming experience of the game. The message conveyed by this image is one of vulnerability and collaboration as the two depicted characters. While adapting the game for the North American audience, the localization team decided to completely change the front cover to a more traditional and proven formula: in the foreground, sword in hand and ready to strike, the main protagonist aggressively faces what is believed to be an enemy while surrounded by the ghostly figure of a woman. The cover art also features a flashier game title than its Japanese counterpart. This overall design is structured to give the impression that the experience of the game has more to do with the classic formula of princess-rescuing stories, in which the player embodies the empowering role of an active and potent character fighting on the behalf of the vulnerable female character. As a first point of entry into the text of the game, both covers clearly depict different narratives and incite different interpretations of the game although the content remains essentially the same. This transfiguration was deemed necessary by the localization team in order to insure that the public would easily recognize the game

as a worthy archetype with an easily negotiable pace within a wider cultural environment, facilitating its assimilation into the locale's regimes of value. Although this is an extreme example of cover transfiguration, most localization processes use this strategy to some degree in order to grab the attention of customers. Another example demonstrates a more subtle way to enact the same dynamic while at the same time clearly exposing what elements constitute the Japanese developers' perception of North Americans' regimes of value. Let us consider the front cover for the game 星のカービィ 参! ドロッチェ団 (*Hoshi no Kābi Sanjō! Dorroche Dan*) and its North American localized version: *Kirby: Squeak Squad*. While the appearance of both versions is basically the same and both depict the main character running away from a monster while carrying a chest, some details on the picture have been altered.

Fig. 2.3: Side to side comparison of the Japanese and American covers of Kirby Squeak Squad

On the localized product, the game's logo is more action-oriented; the mouse seems bigger and closer to the foreground and the main character Kirby now crosses over the game's box image space and—most noticeably—is depicted with angry eyebrows. The later seems to be a physical trait present in almost all of the titles of the Americanized Kirby series. This modification makes the character look much more aggressive and active rather than cute and childish as in his original Japanese incarnation. Needless to say, the fictional universes and the gameplay elements of both games are the same. This process of transfiguration estimated necessary at the level of display and initial impression changes how a player would interpret the game as action-packed and boy-oriented.

These examples demonstrate how the process of transfiguration modifies the product's "figure" in order to suggest a play experience that is similar to those of products seen as popular in the targeted locale. What is clear is that while the game remains the same in both locales, it is its presentation that influences the primary orientation of an audience towards the game, and this can potentially carry over to the actual play experience and shape the way customers interpret the game —providing that the product stays open enough to allow both interpretations. The next category of case studies deals with transfiguration on a deeper level, that of the experiences the players have within the game's fictional world.

A different but more expensive and time consuming way to localize video games to fit the Japanese developers' conception of the American market is the practice of what we will call fictional transfiguration. This term stands for all types of major or minor transformations located at the level of visual representation including characters' appearances, the fictional worlds, as well as the general aesthetic. In the 1980s and the early 1990s, when video games only featured low-resolution, two-dimensional sprite characters and background settings, enacting a complete fictional overwrite was still profitable in regards to financial considerations and a game's release schedule. A good example of this phenomenon in the early practice of video game localization is the transfiguration of the *Famicon* port of the arcade game 熱血硬派くにおくん (*Nekketsu Kōha Kunio-kun*) into its American Nintendo Entertainment counterpart *Renegade*.

Fig 2.4: First stage of Nekketsu Kōha Kunio-kun

Fig 2.5: First stage of Renegade

At first glance, the difference between the settings of the two *beat'em up*s' first stage is clearly noticeable: while the Japanese version takes place in a typical Japanese outdoor train station, in the western version, the brawls take place in a subway station, something more reminiscent of the American cityscape's image conveyed by other medias. The modifications of the characters also put the player in more familiar territory by replacing the street gangs dressed in Japanese high school uniforms (tentatively representing *bōsōzoku* or even *yakuza* gang members as enemies) with street gang members more reminiscent of icons of American popular culture inspired by movies like *The Warriors* amongst other things (StrategyWiki).

In comparison, the more recent Nintendo DS game 押忍！闘え！応援団 (O*su! Tatakae! Ōendan)* demonstrates that the complete formula of fictional transfiguration is still applied, but it seems like it is only applied to small sized products based on relatively open concepts. The 2006 iNiS rhythm game originally features a dancing and cheering male squad (*Ōendan*) on a mission to inspire people in anxious situations usually related to everyday-life tasks like serving tea in a sushi shop or studying hard to pass entrance exams. *Elite Beat Agents*, the North American adaptation, retains all the core gameplay mechanics of the original video game, but completely changes the fictional universe to feature new situations.

Fig 2.6: Cheering the tea making boy in Osu! Tatakae! Ōendan

Fig 2.7: Helping the movie director in Elite Beat Agent

In this version, the soundtrack features American popular hits and the everyday narratives

that accompany them have been reinvented so as to fit a North American audience. For example, it features situations where the player has to help a taxi driver finding his way across New York under the pressure of demanding customers or helping a film director to shoot his scenes just right for example. Characters from the cheering squad are now mysterious agents in black suits working for a secret organization (somehow reminiscent of the *man in black*, this figure born out of American conspiracy theories) instead of Japanese men dressed in high schoolers. This situation shows how the key elements essential for cross-cultural recognition of the product in this case are not the songs, the characters or the situation themselves, but the the rhythm game's gameplay elements based on music.

On most occasions however, such fictional changes are enacted in more subtle ways, reflecting the ever-growing development costs of polygon-based 3D graphics and high definition gaming, resulting in the loss of much of the flexibility in the cultural adaptation process. For example, in the Japanese horror video game 零～zero～(*Rei Zero*), localized under the title of *Fatal Frame* in North America, the appearance of the protagonist named Miku is slightly altered following the developers' expectations that North American players would identify more with a Westernized character. Indeed, while the haunted Japanese mansion that is the setting of the game remains untouched, Miku's facial features and clothing change from being like a Japanese school girl to a more mature Caucasian looking young woman (Wikia). What this decision implies is that the developers estimated that the North American players would identify better with a protagonist with familiar looks and consequently be more able to negotiate with the exotic setting. Here, the slight transfiguration of the game's fictional level does not change the overall experience of the game (it is still a Japanese ghost-hunting game), but it imposes a new point of entry to the fictional world for the audience. This way, it allows a different reading and interpretation of the game as a cultural text and will ultimately offer a different experience than the Japanese product. Here again what this implies is that the essential elements for the product's recognition are located at the level

of gameplay, overthrowing fiction as the the most important element in the definition of the product. However, we will find that such an interpretation of the practice of transfiguration quickly can be refuted.

Transfiguration and cultural adaptation can also be enacted by simply cutting content from the original version of the game. This practice is driven by the suspicion that parts of the game (either fictional or gameplay-related elements) would not echo well with the new audience the game tries to reach. The case of the localization process of Sega 2009 video game 龍が如く3 (*Ryū ga Gotoku* 3*)* illustrates this phenomenon quite clearly. Entitled *Yakuza 3* in its North American version, the video game had not automatically been a candidate for localization, given the extensive Japanese dialogue that would need to be translated and recorded in English, and the narrative based on dramatic *yakuza* gang crime stories, a subject matter feared to be too exotic or niche to really be profitable in the North American market. However, after the decision was made to finally export it to American markets, it was decided that the game's content would not be adapted as in the case of *Fatal Frame*, but that only some of the irrelevant content for North American audiences would be cut out in order to diminish the amount of money and time required to carry the project towards commercial success. The cuts mainly consisted of gameplay elements such as hostess bar based dating simulation mini-game, the mah-jong parlour and mini-game and the Japanese history trivia quiz. This method of transfiguration is justified as an efficient way to cut down costs for content that "wouldn't make sense [...] or wouldn't resonate as much (with the North American gamers) [...]" (IGN). While this practice is theoretically a good way to facilitate negotiation with the transfigured product as well as being cost efficient, we will see in chapter 3 that certain problems and conflicts may arise when this interpretation of the translatable elements of the game do not correspond with the media interpretation of particular customer groups.

There are also instances in which localization teams decide that in order to adapt a particular title for the Western market, the focus should not only be on the fictional level of the product, but

also on the level of game mechanics themselves. This is, however, a fairly new practice that tends to be only enacted by professional localization studios who are who don't have any restrictions concerning the modification of the products with the goal of mimicking what they perceive to be the distinctive aspects of dominant gaming trends in North America and Europe. For example, let us consider the localization process of the Nintendo DS game ヘラクレス の 栄光 (*Heracles no Eikō*) by 8-4, a game localization studio based in Tokyo and run by native English-speaking staff. Among the large number of language issues and translation work necessary, 8-4's staff deemed a modification to the combat system of Paon's 2010 JRPG necessary, judging the pace of the battles too slow in comparison with North-American RPGs. Thus, the localized version of the game—entitled *Glory of Heracles*—features the same combat system in terms of iconology and basic mechanics, but it has been modified to be three times as fast as its Japanese version.The practice of modifying the games' mechanics in order to fix gameplay bugs or general imbalance (like modifying games' difficulty or adding more tutorial elements) and arbitrarily modifying the game's rules with the stated intent of "culturally" adapting a product to a specific audience is a rather novel take on localization. However, it is an approach that might become increasingly used as a localization technique in order to find simpler ways to make foreign games more negotiable and avoid the costly modification of visual assets. However, acknowledging the two last cases of gameplay transfiguration, new questions emerge in our investigation: can fiction surpass gameplay as a repository of untranslatable elements? If gameplay elements can be freely taken out or modified as translatable elements, does this mean that the power of recognition of some titles primarily lies within the fictional level? This is an issue to which we shall return to later on.

The last category of video game localization process is essential if we aim at acquiring a complete picture of industry's concerns for the transnational success of their products. However, it stands in opposition to the examples of transfiguration unveiled throughout in this chapter. Indeed, their unique element is not located in the various shapes of the metamorphosis they are forced to

undergo, but rather it lies precisely in the fact that they defy such transformation processes. In other words, they do not undergo any major processes of localization. As we will see, several of the industry's leading products originating from Japan apply to a very different cost-effective and time-saving approach of video game design that is concerned with making the products easy to export from the start. Capcom's 2009 flag title *Biohazard 5* is a product belonging to such a category. Taking place in a fictionalized, zombie-invested Africa, players are invited to embody the overly muscled American protagonist Chris Redfield—assisted by South African female sidekick Sheva Alomar. The protagonist is assigned a mission to uncover the secrets around yet another Umbrella Corporation-related plot to take over the world by contaminating mankind with a man-made virus that transforms victims into grotesque, mindless monsters. As a starting point, we can see that the plot and fictional elements that constitute the game are not centred around the game's country of origin, Japan. The game also features a main character of Western nationality who struggles in a setting that is exotic for both Japanese and American audiences, thus limiting the changes necessary to an adaptation of the game for overseas markets. However, the other layer of interesting elements in this example over other products intended for the international consumption such as *Metal Gear Solid 4*, *Final Fantasy XIII* or even *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*, lies in the fact that, unlike those games that also required a complete translation and voice adaptation, *Resident Evil 5* (the American version of *Biohazard 5*) did not require such transfiguration. However, there is an other interesting layer to this game; whereas other products aimed at international markets required complete translation and voice adaptation, *Biohazard 5* already features English voiceovers as the only audio track of the game, leaving Japanese customers to read the subtitles provided in order to understand the content of the plot and gameplay objectives. Unsurprisingly, the main menu is also in English and subtitled in Japanese[5].

[5] While part of this specific phenomenon can be attributed to console manufacturers need for a unified lexicon throughout all video games licensed on their machines and key terms sometimes have to change based on the locale even if the target language for adaptation is the same as the original one (expressions such as ¨data load¨ or ¨game load¨). This is an issue partly explored by Andreas Szurawitzki. (Szurawitski)

The remarkable thing about this phenomenon is that although the game is created by a Japanese company, the game does not feature any recognizable Japanese features at neither the level gameplay nor the fictional elements, thus minimizing the need for localization (the only noticeable changes are a slight modification of the art cover and some regional button configuration patterns). We are led to think that it is part of an international business strategy that pushes for the elimination of the cultural markings at the very core of the game-creation process in order to facilitate the transition of the product to many other different regimes of value, a phenomenon that takes place during the short time between releases in different geographical regions. In an age in which the transnational circulation of video games is necessary to cover development costs and the risks associated with innovations in a very conservative market, these design choices can constitute a seemingly successful alternative. This new model, however, raises a few questions in our study of global circulation of cultural entertainment products. It indicates that the influence or inspiration taken from the cultural environment where a video game is designed and created might not be as strong as we are led to believe or as we commonly assume based on the cultural markings of other entertainment media such as music or cinema. Also, it demonstrates that what ultimately weights more in the balance between easy profits with popular formulas and “cultural” discoveries through games for developers is usually the former. Later, we will come back to this issue while discussing cultural markings in video games and games' relationship to their country of origin in the last chapter of this study.

Finally, this investigation of the industry's video game localization processes through selected case studies demonstrates an essential part of the dynamics of cultural products' transnationalization. It indicates that products are actually transfigured on both levels of fiction and gameplay according to the developers' interpretation of the border between the translatable and the untranslatable, the latter constituting the essential elements of the game that resist transformation

and trigger recognition of the product in another locale. Localization teams in charge of the process of transfiguration target the translatable elements and either remove them or transform them so as to allow different readings of the game's experience. In our case, this results in a move towards more empowering narratives, transformations of the settings and characters of the fictional worlds so as to facilitate their negotiation and the removal of unfamiliar gameplay dynamics. However, this specific distinction between the translatable elements and the untranslatable elements remains in the power of the studios.

Furthermore, it is possible to associate this collection of transfiguration techniques and products' modifications to a single encompassing tendency. Having analyzed several case studies, it is possible to say that video game transfiguration by the industry could be seen as product repurposing. As localization teams transfigure a game for foreign markets, they actually change the object so as it can be viewed from another perspective and experienced differently. Games are then repurposed to carry a different organization of elements through another regime of value.

At this point, we notice that our analysis is far from being complete and needs to move forward. The investigation will now consider alternative processes of video game localization as they are necessary for a wider comprehension of the phenomenon.

Explaining Video Games—Case Studies of Emergent Alternative Localization Processes

In parallel to the official localization businesses and practices bringing Japanese products to North American audiences, there are other sets of emergent practices related to both the circulation and localization of Japanese video games. Indeed, it is important to notice that alongside the official profit-driven localization efforts by the industry, there are a plethora of individuals and communities working to localize Japanese video games that are not considered to be good products for exportation mainly because of their low profitability estimates. Partly freed from money or time

constraints and primarily relying on fans' enthusiasm and fans' abilities to gather competent and dedicated people from the communities we explored earlier, their work is driven by different recognition dynamics both concerning which titles should be localized and how this process should be executed.

The second part of this chapter will thus emphasize the unexplored aspect of underground video game localization processes by examining case studies of fan-driven localization projects. Revealing this unaccounted for aspect of video game circulation will provide us with an interesting alternative picture of the forces pushing for the transnationalization of certain cultural products as well as help us identify the compromises that implies this cross national journey.

For the early aficionados of Japanese video games in the 1980s and 1990s, the only way one was able to play the titles that were not distributed to other markets than Japan was to obtain a copy through specialized import retailers and—equipped with a thick dictionary and a good deal of patience—go through the time-consuming process of translating one's way through the game as one played it (Mackey). With the democratization of the internet, the emergence of online communities and the circulation of ROM-hacking tools, it became possible for fans to put their efforts together and undertake to modify console games' files so as to translate its textual assets for an English speaking audience. The practice of ROM hacking, as lead by the inspiring 8-bit games localization projects in the latter half of the 1990s comprising titles like *Final Fantasy II* and *Final Fantasy V*, managed not only to make the tools necessary for Japanese video games localization more accessible, but also to expand their circulation, as the game files were available through virtual spaces used as community hubs and could be played on virtually any computer configuration. As a good example of this situation, the website romhacking.com is used by the community to present the current projects translators are working on as well as to promote the very specific practice of ROM-hacking by historicizing its milestones, like the emergence of innovative techniques or the

birth of a successful amateur localization team. This phenomenon helps establish a sense of legitimacy and “noblesse” for the often criticised practice. Indeed, people behind these projects seem to avoid mentioning the clearly illegal status of such activities, violating the game developers' copyrights by altering the game's code and distributing it freely. Quite similarly to the cases of fan-subtitled *anime* or *scantrad manga,* there is always the possibility of retaliation by studios asking the translation circles to no longer modify or circulate their product, a demand to which fans have to comply. However, there seems to be an unofficial consensus between both parties as developers often turn a blind eye to these activities when there is no official release of the title in the region—a rational choice considering that a fan base is potentially growing in a market yet to capitalize on, at no real cost for the studios.

The characteristics that define ROM hacking as a localization practice can be observed in the specific case study of the fan-localized version of the 2006 GameBoy Advance game *Mother 3*. When it became clear that the last game directed by Itoi Shigesato would not be exported to other markets like the previous instalment of the series, several fans decided to tackle the translation of the long awaited sequel themselves and organized a localization team comprising of hackers and translators (Reidman). Two years later, the first English translation patch for the ROM version of *Mother 3* was published on the localization team's official website (http://mother3.fobby.net/) along with a plethora of fan-produced guides, art, interviews, goods, etc. The fan community still continues to produce *Mother 3* translations patches in approximately 10 other languages. As for the localization itself, it is important to point out that no elements other than the replacement of the Japanese script with the English translation have been altered during the process. Clyde Mandelin, the main translator on the project, even wrote a “translation note” document explaining the liberties he took in adapting the original script while also dealing with the technical difficulties that regularly arise in the translation of digital products. It should also be noted that the game's translation patch is not yet a completed project as the translators continue to update their work using the feedback

received by gamers and *Mother* series fans (Parkin, “You Say Tomato”).

As a first example of alternative localization processes in our study of video game localization, the *Mother 3* fan-localization project and the ROM-hacking scene in general offer interesting information about what drives consumers to produce free, localized versions of foreign video games. However, it turns out that it is not possible to talk of “transfiguration” here; it seems that sensible efforts are put into not only to conserve all of the game's original assets for the sake of coherence, but also to explain rather than alter the assets' original context. An example of these concerns can be found in the title of the game and the way it is depicted on game's main menu screen. While the localization team considered changing the title in accordance to the previous instalment of the series which was localized as *Earthbound* in North America, a decision was reached not to rename the game *Earthbound 2* because of the huge amount of work it would require to change the moving menu screen (even with all the artwork suggestions provided by fans) and also because of the product's coherence for both the translators and for the fans who had been referring to the game by the original name (Tomato). Another interesting reason outlined by Clyde Mandelin links the title to the game's essence and untranslatable elements: “One can also argue that the title of ‘MOTHER’ is actually a major theme that runs through the story. If you've played the game, you can probably understand this” (Tomato).

These elements demonstrate a core dynamic of fan translation that contrasts with that of the industry: the focus on a video game's original text and the creation of a body of knowledge around it leaves little place and incentive for the acknowledgement of the presence of translatable elements. Although not every ROM-hacking project is as well covered as the *Mother 3* projects, it is reasonable to expect that most of the fan translation projects deal with the idea that the source material is a text to be explained, not transfigured to facilitate its negotiation. As we will see, this interpretation of the practice is often found at the core of emergent localization processes.

The second set of fan localization practices deals with the translation of video game genres whose circulation to North America finds no support from publishers, who seem to even consciously restrain the accessibility of those genres outside Japan. However, there is a fan base and a good number of dedicated individuals whose goal is just the contrary: to make these cultural products available to a larger international audience. The games targeted by such a localization practice comprise most of the Japanese PC releases and fall for the most part into a few selected genres: visual novels, adventure games and dating simulators.

It can be argued that video games in this category are not exported through offical channels for a variety of reasons. First, in comparison to the Japanese console game scene which rely on gaming mechanics common thoughout the video game industry, the Japanese PC gaming scene might seem less accessible to the average North American player. For example, the gameplay mechanics of most visual novels or adventure games are very limited, sometimes resembling more an actual novel with accompanying graphical representation of the characters and settings than an action-packed video game. The player's involvement in comparison to other genres can also appear to be quite limited as often the player's only input consists of pressing a key to change the dialogue line or at most, sometimes choosing narrative options to alter the course of the story. They are also heavily based on archetypes and conventions of the Japanese *anime* visual culture. Given the absence of comparable games and genres in North American gaming habits, exporting is considered to be a rather risky business. The other reason that could justify the reluctance of any international release of some of these video games is the pornographic content that a majority of them feature. Indeed, this is an important issue as it is not possible to display games rated as AO (adults only) in most retail environments, thus severely handicapping the mass-marketing of such products. However, this does not mean that visual novels or dating simulators are not circulated at all outside Japan.

Very much like the ROM-hacking scene, there are communities of fans dedicated to the

localization of these particular video game genres. The process of PC game translating is mostly the same as ROM-based games insofar as it requires teams that comprise of both hackers and translators, although they use different tools more fitted for PC game architecture. The teams have to extract all the text and language-related graphical assets, translate them and then organize the new English content into a patch file simple to use that players can download on the group's website. Most of the translation circles encourage players to buy original physical or digital versions of the games and direct them towards Japanese distribution websites such as *getchu.jp* or *dlsite.com*, even offering "store walkthroughs" for customers who cannot easily navigate in Japanese (Relentlessness). Another recent phenomenon pushing towards the legalization of grey areas concerning copyright infringement is the emergence of alternative English websites distributing Japanese video game in digital format mainly consisting of small translation companies that communicate with the original makers of the game in order to arrange partnerships for overseas online distribution of their games. Such localization studios also make partnerships with former translation circles whose work can finally be properly distributed through official channels. The case of the digital distribution website mangagamers.com and its partnership with the former amateur translation group No Name Loosers to produce translation for the Japanese developer Minori, or the partnership between The Witch Hunt producing translation patches for the *Umineko no Naku Koro ni* series from 07th Expansion illustrate this phenomenon quite vividly. However, even though there are a certain amount of efforts put toward the completely legal circulation of video games, it is inevitable that most games end up being available through peer-to-peer download channels.

By taking the specific example of the fan-translated *Sengoku Rance*, an hybrid title between a dating simulator and a RPG, we can see how this process is equally different from the industry's practices in term of the methods of game localization. The fan localization of the Alice Soft 2006 title was produced by the collective *Yandere Translations*, a group providing translation patches for

visual novels and *eroge*. As in the case of *Mother 3*, the fan localization of *Sengoku Rance* did not affect the game much beyond the transition from Japanese to English. In fact, it is possible to find a good amount of untranslated text embedded into the art assets of the conquest game set in the Sengoku period (1467-1573). Untranslated elements are present in assets like the game's introduction video and the various background images found during the visual novel parts of the game. This suggests a very functionalist orientation to the translation project and a focus on the core textual assets to properly understand the game and the mechanics. Although we can explain this focus on translating the essential part of the game as part of the technical limitations that translation circles can encounter in a project, we nevertheless have to acknowledge the orientation and impact of that choice: even though players may not understand the literal meaning of these textual assets, they still stand as icons that belong to the untranslatable elements of the fictional world, set in historical Japan. In other words, even if they may not have been meaningful in the eyes of Japanese developers, these elements become embedded with a textual worth at the moment of fan circulation. This interpretation of the game's untranslatable elements proves just how different emergent localization processes are from the industry's transfiguration processes.

The final set of emergent localization processes deals with the fan production of guides, FAQs and cutscenes subtitling as alternative means to provide North American players with an understanding of unlocalized Japanese video games. While such methods of producing external documents to help players navigate their way through untranslated games has been used since the 8-bit console era, recent technologies and accessibility to community hubs are allowing new tools and ideas to emerge. A good example of this phenomenon is the production of guides centred around the game 龍が如く 見参! (*Ryū ga Gotoku Kenzan!*), a samurai game set in Edo Japan, and a spin-off title of the popular *Ryū ga Gotoku* series never released outside Japan. As an exclusive PS3 product, it is very simple for players to import the game and play it on any PS3 system since Sony's console

is not region locked. However, since the game features a big amount of text, it is improbable that non-Japanese speakers would find much enjoyment in aimlessly wandering the streets of Gion without some plot exposition or a way to understand the game's fighting system.

With the goal of helping their fellow gamers fully enjoy what they consider an excellent game and seeing that SEGA would not commit to develop a localized version, several groups of gamers and translators started to produce various documents designed to bypass the language barrier. A first example is the game FAQ (frequently asked questions) created by Patrick Coffman and published on GameFAQ.com (Coffman). The document is designed to help English gamers to navigate through the game while still having a good idea of what the story is about. It features a chapter-by-chapter explanation of the plot, including the steps required to complete quests and side tasks as well as explanations of items found in the game and their use. Furthermore, it features descriptions of the game's cultural context and social dynamics of the particular setting of Gion at the beginning of the *Edo* period as a way to make up for the lack of Japanese historical knowledge a regular North American player would lack. A second example of these accessibility measures is enacted by the *Kamei~Hame~Ha* translation circle and the work they have done to extract, translate, subtitle and publish all the cut scenes featured in the game on *youtube* (Captain Epic). As the main tool conveying plot exposition in a video game, the understanding of the game's 150 or so cut scenes proves crucial to the comprehension of the game and its enjoyment. Although guides providing translation of the game's dialogue exist, it is much more enjoyable for gamers to experience these plot-explaining devices as would one watch a fansubbed *anime*. Although this example is clearly not a case of transfiguration, as there is not real modification of the product, it is possible to state that similar to the other practices we encountered, the production of external documents to guide a player through a foreign language game stands as yet another example of the establishment of the game's text as a body of knowledge that is to be understood in its original form rather than being transformed.

This method of fan translation, along with the ones we investigated, proves not only that there are alternative ways to circulate and localize Japanese video games enacted by dedicated individuals and fan communities, but also that the patterns of those emergent localization processes differ greatly from the industry's favoured localization practices. Indeed, as we saw earlier, the core practice and orientation of game localization for studios and localization companies are based on the concept of repurposing through transfiguration of both fictional elements and gameplay elements according to their interpretation of what constitute the games' untranslatable or essential elements. It is no longer possible to use the term *transfiguration* when it comes to fan translation practices. Indeed, when fans take the localization process of games into their own hands, they usually enforce the idea of adapting it while retaining most if not all of the original product's gameplay and fictional assets. This implies a preference towards an explanation of the original content to North American players over its modification to fit its new audience. These phenomenons lead to the establishment of a knowledge economy allowing and regulating the existence of a body of knowledge enacted by video game fans in the virtual spaces created by interpretative communities. Games are not modified, but rather documented, studied, debated and explained. While part of this phenomenon is due to the limited resources of translation circles, this orientation towards unmodified localization can be a conscious choice reflecting the fans' own interpretation of the medium. These localization processes and their driving dynamics could thus not be more different from each other.

The dynamics of object explanation and knowledge economy explored in the world of fan-localized Japanese video games can also be linked to a form of repurposing. Indeed, as games are translated and adapted for the North American audience, they are reappropriated by those communities and repurposed to be added to the interpretative communities' body of knowledge beyond their original meanings. Elements that may have not been essential or particularly meaningful in a particular game according to its developer, such as detailed visual assets,

unexplored narrative threads or even language assets, can then be reclaimed by users. They are then infused with value and integrated into a community's regime of value, which regulates constitutive elements in particular titles and genres. Games thus become more than objects or digital entertainment commodities as they escape rigid interpretative regulations by interpretative structures and sometimes even their own makers.

Now that we have a better idea of the localization processes in the world of Japanese video games and digital entertainment, it is time to go back to our previous notions of interpretative structures and interpretative communities; the next chapter will investigate how the dynamics of transfiguration and localization are negotiated by different audiences and how different interpretations of the translatable and the untranslatable cohabit in a single locale.

Chapter 3

Transfigured Products or Disfigured Objects?—Conflict Between Localized Games and Audience's Expectations

Up to this point in our study, we have investigated the concepts of interpretative communities and interpretative structures as well as defined their different expectations and interpretations of the video game media. We observed that they echo the concerns of different structures and communities driven by the different dynamics embodied in a plethora of forms from magazines to retail environments and from fan websites to fan fiction. We then took a closer look at examples of Japanese video games localized for the North American market and identified different sets of patterns in their adaptation to this new locale. We identified the differences between the industry's emphasis on transfiguration in its practices of localization, and fan's localization practices, where an alternative body of language is used to interpret the products. Both of these repurposing processes establish a frontier that determines how flexible the process of recognition is expected to be according to the target audience.

Keeping this preliminary state of affair in mind, it is now time to look more closely at how both of these communities and structures, each generating audiences, coexist within the same locale and identify the impacts of this cohabitation on video game's circulation. In order to do this, we will have to investigate the reception of these products by both the interpretative communities and interpretative structures and see, as a result, how they either successfully blend into the culture of circulation or meet rejection and criticism when faced with conflicting interpretations.

Indeed, our study requires us to acknowledge not only the success of their integration but also instances in which the integration and the localization process of specific titles are met with opposition and create conflicts. However, unexpectedly, these tensions are not only located within fan communities' disapproval of the industry's choices concerning the transfiguration and

reorganization of elements in Japanese video games. Indeed, there are also instances in which localized products are also met with opposition by the regulative agents of the interpretative structures when a certain title's transfiguration process does not successfully overwrite enough foreign elements so as to minimize elements generating friction upon their entry into another culture of circulation. Both these forms of the products' rejection are a reaction to the process of localization and repurposing that is either deemed to be too invasive and ultimately prevents recognition by fans, or seen as being insufficient, resulting in a product that diverges too much from the locale's culture of circulation.

It is from this perspective, focusing specifically on conflicts and tensions, that we will investigate some examples of Japanese video games' introduction to the North American locale. The aim of this chapter will be to investigate both forms of conflicts triggered by such an introduction. In doing so, we will be able to identify the dynamics that trigger the processes of recognition of a localized foreign product and bring more nuance to our preliminary results concerning the frontier separating translatable and untranslatable elements of cultural products as well as how this distinction is repurposed in terms of cultural markings. This new understanding will then allow us to have a clearer idea of both audience's expectations for Japanese video games as well as how power relationships are negotiated between fans, consumers and publishing companies. Furthermore, discussing these questions will pave the way for the remaining issues that will be investigated in the last chapter of this study: the issue of a performative creation of Japaneseness as well as the identification of a binary perspective on the video game culture of circulation.

Disfigured Objects—Conflicts Between Fans and the Industry Over the Process of Transfiguration

As the first site of conflict to be examined, it is important to address the rather large issue of fan discontentment with the way that Japanese video games are sometimes transfigured as a step estimated necessary for exportation to other markets. As observed earlier, when the process of video game localization is undertaken by industry agents and driven by objectives of profitability (usually performed through dynamics of display and attraction), we can observe a tendency in the products' transfiguration process towards a reorganization and modification of the game's translatable elements to better suit the industry's image of the new target demographic. However, it is this process that generates friction and discontent with the interpretation of such modified products. What is at stake here is the location of the fine line that separates the elements that can be modified and those that are required to remain the same in order to retain recognition. Gaonkar and Povinelli formulate the same question directed at a much more familiar transnational object: what elements define McDonald's' Big Mac beyond transfiguration? Is it its shape, its ingredients, its name or even the fact that it is different in each major locale? The issue in the analysis of conflicts and dissatisfaction regarding the Japanese video game localization comes down to discovering the threshold point where products are modified beyond recognition, thus identifying its core elements. However, part of the answer to this question, as we will see, is impossible to narrow down to a single interpretation of the border between the translatable elements and untranslatable elements of cultural products, as it is a very mobile concept. The following examples of conflict between the transfiguration of certain titles and their reception by fans and gamers will help us shed light upon our investigation. As we explore these questions however, it will become rapidly obvious that what is at stake is not only the nature of video games, but also the underlying power relationships between the publishers and the audiences.

The first example of conflict involving video game localization and fans's expectations requires us to go back to our previous case study of *Yakuza 3* from chapter 2, where it was presented as an example of content removal in the transfiguration process. SEGA's decision to adapt the game for Western territories was mainly because they acknowledge the potential profitability based on the large support the title had from fans as shown by the amount of e-mail requests and petitions concerning its release outside Japan (Artifice Inc., “Please SEGA”). Due to financial and time constraints, the publishers decided to remove several aspects of the game related both to fictional elements (quizzes) and gameplay mechanics (dating simulator and Mahjong mini games), justifying this choice by pointing out that these elements would not be enjoyed by North American gamers who don't possess the necessary the knowledge of Japanese popular culture necessary to face these challenges, or are not accustomed to certain “Japanese” game mechanics not present in the games of the Western mainstream market (Totilo). However, the absence of this content, as well as the undisclosed removal of various other assets by the publisher, was far from lost on the fan communities who were, after all, the game's main target demographic.

Following the release of the game, the fans realized that the product they anxiously requested was missing more defining elements (according to their interpretation) than SEGA's representatives had suggested. Consequently, the fans extensively expressed their discontent in various gaming communities through a variety of means. An analysis of this negative reaction to SEGA's poor decisions regarding the localization of *Yakuza 3*, the whole issue can be reduced to two things for fans. First, it demonstrates the fans' desire to bring the video game localization practice a step closer to other media such as novels, by explaining and integrating “cultural” differences represented both in a game's mechanics and fictional aspects rather than just erasing them. The second aspect that becomes clear within those criticism is the realization of a certain sense of powerlessness by fans within a game industry that disregards the consumers' opinions

within the whole process of localization. The idea that consumers are entitled to have access to commodities from other markets is confronted by the reality of a business driven by profits.

Among the significant criticism that the internet fan communities express, articles from Kotaku video game blog editorial board member, Japanese game journalist and author Brian Ashcraft provide a comprehensive account of this conflict and can be considered as a useful source to understand what is at stake in this issue for both fans and the media of video game. Ashcraft denounces the diverging approaches to the title shown bye SEGA and the fans. Indeed, the latter seems to consider the product's core experience as going over the “human drama” story advertized by SEGA. It seems that what is mainly driving fans to complain about the cuts in the game is their interpretation of the object as a tool providing cultural contact comparable to a travel experience, though in virtual form: “For Westerners, this appeal is compounded: the game is not only a tour of the Japanese underworld, but a tour of Japan as well” (Ashcraft). For Ashcraft, this cultural “tour” seems to be twofold. Its first appeal lies in its exploration of the yakuza world through the yakuza crime genre, which spans multiple media in Japanese popular culture. In this case, it is done through the portraying of venues (such as Kabukicho and hostess clubs) and activities (such as mahjong) typically associated with the yakuzas according to the genre's conventions. The second aspect, more directly addressed by members of fan communities in forum conversation, deals with the “Japanese gaming culture”, or genre literacy, as represented by specific gameplay mechanics such as the dating simulator mini-games, a literacy not usually endorsed by the North American gaming culture of circulation. For Ashcraft, this editing practice removes the “direct” experience with the foreign object from the hands of the players, thus denying many instances in which the player, out of curiosity, would be compelled to seek outside knowledge in order to make sense of this foreign object. The industry prefers the safer approach of editing out aspects that do not blend in easily with the expectations of the regular player.

This conflict also exacerbates another aspect of this method of product circulation: the

unequal power relationship between SEGA and its customers. To what extent is it possible for fans not only to express criticism, but also to act against the company localizing the foreign product and ask for reparation concerning the purchase of the unsatisfying object? Would boycotting the game have a negative impact on the localization of the series' future titles? A commenter of another Kotaku article related to *Yakuza 3*, slim394, acknowledges this issue: “I truly hope that is the case, because if the game does NOT do well this time, it will almost be assured that we will not see *Yakuza 4* (*sic*). (...) If you want to see *Yakuza 4* (*sic*) at some point without learning Japanese (*sic*), [purchasing the game] is the only rational course to take” (Totilo). Aside from comments on articles and forums, fans expressed their discontent and desire for improvement through internet petitions, that is, the very same tool that was used to incite SEGA to bring the game to North America in the first place (Artifice Inc., “Yakuza 3 Content Petition”). However, as one might expect, all of these requests for an enhancement of the game fell on deaf ears.

It seems that in this unequal power relationship, fans face the choice of either supporting localization efforts, or rejecting the localized product by preferring alternative methods for products' circulation, while being simultaneously well-aware of the potential consequences their actions could have on the localization of other similar products in North America. The tension here is between marketing consideration based on sales, low cost localization, and the segregation and the removal of Japanese games' characteristics and fan's reappropriation of the media based on the presence of these very elements. However, what we can extract from this conflict is how the differences in the interpretation of the distance between the translatable and untranslatable is repurposed by both SEGA and the fan communities. Indeed, the reasons invoked by SEGA to remove certain elements from the games and the reasons invoked by fans to keep them as mandatory elements of the title are both addressed as the game's *Japaneseness* as a collection of specific fictional assets and gameplay mecanics. Thus, in this case, Japaneseness is considered within the fans' knowledge economy to be part of the title's experience. This is genre literacy, leaving only language to be translatable.

However, for SEGA, Japaneseness is considered to be a set of elements bearing cultural markings, assets estimated to be foreign to the targeted audience and thus removable. As it will be demonstrated later, this performative interpretation of Japaneseness is an issue that underlies all case studies in this chapter concerning conflicts in interpretation patterns, an issue that is even more emphasised in games featuring imagined worlds and character archetypes such as in the next example.

Our next case study of localized video games focuses on *NieR*, an action RPG released in 2010 by Square Enix. Originally developed by the defunct Tokyo-based studio Cavia, *NieR* has been published in two different versions in Japan: one called *NieR: Gestalt* on the Xbox 360 system and the other titled *NieR: Replicant* on the PlayStation 3 console. The two products share the same gameplay mechanics and narrative: several centuries in the future after Earth has been devastated by an unknown cataclysm, Nier embarks on a quest to save his only remaining relative— a 10 year-old girl—from an incurable illness that slowly drains her life away. The game consists of exploring the different areas and villages of the fictional world in order to seek a cure for this illness while preventing the yellow ethereal monsters called Shades from decimating the few human settlements remaining in this dystopian universe. The only major difference between the two products is one of great relevancy to our study: while the main character from the game entitled *NieR: Gestalt* is a big muscular man marked as the father of the little girl, the main protagonist from *NieR: Replicant* is an androgynous looking adolescent who is identified as her big brother. The object of conflict we want to bring to light here lies in this very aspect of the game and the fact that the only version of the product that was exported to the North American market is *NieR: Gestalt*, the one featuring the older, fatherly character, to the great discontent of many gamers.

Facing the news from Square Enix that the only version of *NieR* that North American audiences would be able to play in English would be *NieR: Gestalt*, a decision based mainly on the

fact that general Western audiences would prefer playing as a character with a less ambiguous masculinity, fans expressed dissatisfaction towards Square Enix's localization choices in various community forums. For example, as fan contributor Savious points out in the community forum of RPGFan.com, this decision doesn't reflect the fans' expectations of the game as a Japanese product and might ultimately result in a loss of fan support in the West: "[...] the old man version is a big turn-off and the box art is supreme fugly. *Replicant* (*sic*) would have been an instant buy" (Savious). Iesious, a commenter on the website 1up.com, expresses an idea representative of another form of complaint by addressing the powerlessness of fans towards publishers and their interpretation of the North American market as a whole: "now that I know we'll only be getting Gestalt in NA, I'm not going to buy it period. How dare they force the choice on us" (Bailey, "Nier Gestalt"). Further along these lines, another commenter expresses concern about the great divide between fans' interpretation of video games and their actual treatment by profit-driven publishers:"I (*sic*) wish it was more seen as a work of some artful value, than pushing marketing decisions ahead. for me it's something that will definitely make (*sic*) me not buy the game".

Although not a case as well covered as the case study related to the localization of *Yakuza 3*, the arguments and complaints expressed in the case of Square Enix's title are in line with our previous investigation. All of these comments help us have a better understanding of the actual nature of the conflict between fans and publishers over the localization of Japanese video games. Some fans see these localization decisions as imposed choices on their reading of the game which prevent its proper reappropriation, since elements that are indistinguishable from the game— that we can identify as being the game's Japaneseness—are modified. For fans, the conflict comes down to the localization of a version that is not the original but a modified version made only for North American audiences. Here again Japaneseness is identified in the differences between the untranslatable elements from the original to the transfigured copy.

As a closing comment on the tensions brought forward by the localization of *NieR*, it is important to note that contrary to the case of Yakuza 3, where the transfigured fictional elements were clearly associated with the Japanese cultural environment, all of the fictional assets in *NieR* are based on an imagined world with no real features that would invoke and connect to a prior understanding of a part of the Japanese culture. In this case, Japaneseness is thus more clearly defined as differences seemingly unrelated to Japan as a culture, as is the case of gameplay mechanics in *Yakuza 3*. By associating elements such as androgynous characters to Japan and muscular characters to the West, we notice how Japaneseness in video game is defined performatively. Japaneseness as translatable or untranslatable elements is sometimes identified in relation to perceived differences in a locale's regimes of value that depend on social trends or historical context. This phenomenon—especially the special case of *NieR*—will require further investigation later in the final stage of this study, where it will be demonstrated that performatively constructed definitions of Japaneseness can be repurposed to explain the video culture of circulation on a global stage.

Without bringing forth any other specific examples, it is easy to identify many other elements that can generate conflict between fans and publishing companies over localized Japanese products. Among them, the modification of the game's cover art deserves to be underlined and investigated as it invites us to go back to the previously explored characteristic of industry video game localization.

The issue of the visual aspect of video games as objects intended to be looked at and advertizing tools is often a point of tension when it is time to localize a title for another locale. As we previously observed in our discussion of cover art designs in the transfiguration process, the re-imagination of the message conveyed though video games' art cover as a main marketing tool is one of the most common and obvious changes the product can undergo. However, it is also the aspect

that most often engenders conflict and dissatisfaction among fans towards the localized product. The intentional transformations enacted by marketing departments to the outside appearance of the product imply that the industry acknowledges the importance of external appearance mainly as an attention-grabber which must be exploited to its full potential in order to attract customers to the product. These modifications also imply a separation between translatable and untranslatable elements, thus creating another space in which Japaneseness is performatively articulated in regards to attention-grabbing tools. However, this practice is often met with opposition and discontent by fans, a reaction driven by the difference between the emphasis put on the primary purpose of this element and the importance of the perceived original product. Indeed, when news of the publication of the official North American cover art design of *Ico* and *Yakuza 3* reached the internet via blogs and fan communities, the initial reaction was generally negative. The new North American look of the object was accused of conveying the wrong message and the art itself was deemed to be uninspired and ultimately a derivative effort. The sense of Japaneseness was felt to have been stripped away. This criticism indicates that video games are seen by fans to be more of an aesthetic and culturally relevant object and are thus more open to considering an outside appearance that stands apart from the standards and acknowledges the product for what it is. For fans, the facade of the object seems to embody a legitimate part of the overall game text and experience as it compensates for the usually very abstract nature of games; it is thus deemed very important. Just as the antique arcade cabinets from the 1970s now stand as culturally relevant artifacts preserved in museums narrating the now almost defunct experience of arcade-going in North America, video game covers are regarded by fans as imaginary gateways to the game experience (Guins). Video game covers can thus be integrated in the performatively-created notion of Japaneseness. However, such an interpretation is rarely considered by industry in the localization process and gamers are left to rely on other means to make up for what they perceive as a lack of respect for the original material.

Relatedly, it is interesting to see how some fans deal with this situation. As an alternative to signing petitions or sending letters to the companies involved in the localization in order to express their discontent and push the developers to revise their localization processes, some fan communities take advantage of the fact that video game cover art is rather easy to swap and replace. Indeed, some web communities such as the website *vgboxart.com* provide fellow gamers with alternative covert art to print out to replace a game's unsatisfying official cover art. The interesting aspect of this practice lies in the fact that, in the case of Japanese games, the main objective of members of this community is not to store and distribute original cover art from the Japanese version, but to encourage fans to show new visions of what the video game cover could be in accordance with its narrative and gameplay, often combining elements of the Japanese, North American and other official cover art versions. This can be seen as an example of an alternative solution devised by fans to go beyond the problem of transfiguration of video games through a form of reappropriation that integrates both Japaneseness—as the formulation of an original text—and a direct negotiation between the object and an alternative reading of its text.

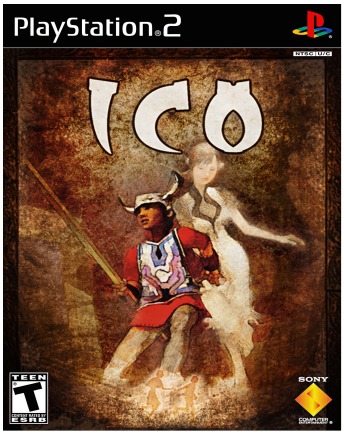

Fig.3.1: Alternative cover art of the game Ico depicting influences of both its Japanese and North American versions published on vgboxart.com by contributor Ladykiller.

The conflicts investigated here are all related to the origin of fan dissatisfaction about the

heavy modification process that games as cultural texts undergo as they are transculturally circulated by the industry. This dissatisfaction is caused by the contrast between interpretative communities' interpretation based on an alternative knowledge economy and the transfiguration process enacted by the industry. We observed that some transfigured video games are rejected because they are perceived as betraying the original Japanese product's text as well as just plainly misinterpreting it. It can be argued that this is also perceived as a threat to the admittedly less influential fans' knowledge economy-based interpretation of video games, as it becomes clear to them that their voices are not easily heard by the industry and cannot really compete with financial interest at stake in the global circulation of entertainment products. Uncovering this tension also made clear that the difference in interpretation of the translatable and untranslatable elements is often articulated in terms of Japaneseness for both interpretative structures and interpretative communities.

Although these elements form the basis of most of the obvious conflicting situations and tensions concerning video game localization, we must take into account the other side of the picture of conflict in the transcultural circulation of Japanese video games. This perspective will provide us with a deeper understanding of the dynamics that defines Japaneseness through the gap of interpretation between translatable and untranslatable elements.

When the Veil is Too Thin—Rejection of Localized Video Games by the Interpretative Structures

In the second part of this analysis of conflicts concerning the circulation and localization of Japanese video games in North America, we will investigate instances of conflict brought about by agents of various interpretative structures. Indeed, while most of the transfigured products are generally met favorably by these agents, we must not overlook instances in which localized games

do not meet success in the new locale, sometimes resulting in their rejection in the form of harsh criticism or an absence of product's exposure in official publications. As we will find out through several case studies, the reasons invoked for this rejection can lie in the retention of both the products' fictional assets and gameplay elements belonging to a different regime of value than the one that these interpretative agents regulate—the retention of elements judged untranslatable to interpretative communities. Furthermore, we will investigate how the Japanese industry and the Japanese state react to demonstrations of products' rejection, like media outbreak framing certain games as foreign and deviant. Ultimately, in the case of fan dissatisfaction with overly transfigured products, we will observe how this phenomenon also helps to create a performative definition of Japaneseness in video games.

The very first expression of this rejection is to be found in official publications that act as regulating agents in the circulation of video games. Video game criticism and video game journalism featured in printed publications and websites are ultimately seens as influential in the success or failure of a specific title in regards to sale figures in the critical first weeks following its release. In this industry, where products are relatively expensive and have to stand apart from the other dozen or so titles published every week, good review score is essential as it provides the customers an efficient way to identify which games to avoid and which to look forward to. This form of regulation of the media through the evaluation of individual products is essential for us to investigate in order to determine which games and which genres are supported by the interpretative structure agents and which games are rejected by them under what criteria.

An example of this phenomenon can be identified in the case of the media coverage of the 2001 game *Hyperdimension Neptunia*, the North American version of the Idea Factory game 超次元ゲイム ネプテューヌ(*Chōjigen Geimu Neputyūnu)*. The JRPG's premise is a rather unique one: it tells the story of the struggles of a group of young female characters each representing an

anthropomorphized version of the major video game consoles on the market (the Nintendo Wii, Microsoft's Xbox 360, Sony's PS3 and the mysterious SEGA Neptune that, in reality, never got released) and various video game development studios (Idea Factory, Compile Hearts, etc.) who are on a quest to save their fictional world, Gameindustri, from various enemies seeking its demise. This parody of the video game industry obviously draws heavily on the cross-media anime conventions on a variety of levels such as the clearly *moe* aesthetic of the characters and the comical *ecchi* situations in which they frequently find themselves during narrative moments of the game, inspired by the visual novel genre.

During the localization process, the game underwent only minor transfigurations such as a translation of the text, a re-recording of dialogues and a redesign of the limited-edition cover art (from a *kawaii* design to a more aggressive one) as noticeable changes. In fact, when asked in an interview about the differences and censorship of the game's content for the North American version, the producer of the game stated that despite its circulation from the Japanese locale, which is more open to *ecchi* comical situations, to the North American locale, which is generally unfamiliar with these conventions, the game's content remained "all intact" (Ishaan). While the game itself is clearly targeted at a very niche market constituted of JRPG aficionados and anime fans who are expected to have a certain knowledge of the elements belonging to a particular regime of value, the producer, aware of the incentive to potentially sell the game to other types of gamers, still felt the need to reorganize the game's cover art so as to make it more easily negotiable. However, as we will see, such a minimalist transfiguration process intended to please its target market by offering them a product as close as possible to the original title also has the potential side-effect of alienating the interpretative structures' agents whose evaluation is critical for the broader success of the product.

Following the release of *Hyperdimension Neptunia*, many game critics offered negative reviews of the game, evaluating it as a poorly-designed mainstream entertainment product.

However, a few of them merit attention in our study for the extremely low score they give to the game, a practice that is itself very uncommon in video game criticism and is symptomatic of a rejection of the title for reasons that go beyond simple entertainment consideration. Although most reviews do not usually grant scores lower than 6 out of 10, given the underlying nature of these publications and their focus on similar aspects to evaluate like quality of graphics, story, gameplay and the title's playing time up to completion, it is possible to read video game reviews that go outside that boundary and evaluate games on other basis. Major web publications such as Gamespot rated the game very poorly, calling out the poor quality of its gameplay mechanics and design choices and granting the product an unusually low score of 3 out of 10 (Bailey, “Hyperdimension”). At the beginning of the article, the game reviewer Kat Bailey identifies a critical point that will become the main aspect upon which of his criticism and other publication's will be based: the identification of the visual style of the game's main characters as blatant examples of hypersexualization in digital entertainment. Another reviewer from the website Eurogamer—although not based in North America—provides us with an interpretation of the game that more openly addresses the issue of genre while carefully linking the game's failure to its essence as a Japanese video game. Indeed, the 2 out of 10 review written by Simon Parkin—a reviewer who, despite being ususally favorable to a large array of Western and Japanese game, gave *Hyperdimension Neptunia* a score of 2 out of 10—points out at most of the negative points described earlier, but also directly links the game's hypersexualized characters and its overall sexism to Japanese gaming habits and Japanese culture in general: “Some will claim the game is playing on established anime conventions. True. It's playing on conventions of plain old ugly Japanese sexism [...]” (Parkin, “Hyperdimension”). In the closing comments of the article summarizing his evaluation of the game, the author goes on to further link those elements to a form of Japaneseness and emphasizes its irrelevancy for North American gamers:

> Even the most ardent JRPG fan will baulk at the roughshod simplicity of the game's

> systems, restricting the game's audience to Japanophile anime fans who can overlook the experience's shortcomings as a videogame and approach it as a cultural curio. That is, a sexist, senseless and ultimately stupid cultural curio. (Parkin, “Hyperdimension”)

Both of these critiques of the game *Hyperdimension Neptunia* indicate how localized games that do not undergo a sufficient process of transfiguration can potentially be interpreted very negatively by structural agents whose goal is to provide a sense of the entertainment value of the object in relation to the locale's mainstream regimes of value. In this case, this phenomenon results in the negative interpretation by reviewers of the game's intentional use of *moe* archetypes targeted to an audience whose regime of value can interpret it positively. Reviewers, whose task is to interpret the content and the worth of a product for their readers, fail to see the object's place as a product part of a whole *moe*-based knowledge economy enacted by transcultural groups of fans from both Japan and North America. Rather, the product is seen as a meaningless depiction of over-sexualized characters linked to one of the problematic aspects that prevented video games from becoming legitimate mainstream media in the 1990s. Indeed, the depiction of openly-sexualized and—to a certain extent—romantic content and situations in video games was the subject of various debates related to female objectification in the 1990s and 2000s and was severely criticised by major media, strongly impacting the subsequent production of video games in North America to the present day. Thus it is understandable that game journalists misunderstand and criticize foreign video games circulated in North America as sexist, lacking substance, superfluous and ultimately counterproductive with the conception of today's video games as a legitimate media. This contradiction with the locale's regimes of value regarding video game and medias in general is what drives this rejection. Reviewers as agents enacting the interpretative structures do not usually take into consideration alternative regimes of values when interpreting titles. Untransfigured elements are thus negatively interpreted and sometimes performatively attributed to our earlier concept of Japaneseness in video games, here again created out of the differences between the interpretation of the text's translatable

and untranslatable elements.

From this example we can also extrapolate on the impacts that such an establishment of Japaneseness and its denunciation can have. Looking at Parkin's review and considering how he links his interpretation of the game as a curious object from Japanese culture instead of a genre or regime of value, it is clear that such writings can have other, broader effects. Indeed, founding such an interpretation on culture rather than genre or other concepts implies a mediation of Japanese culture through video games. I suggest that this concept takes shape in a broader cultural binary perspective of video games' culture of circulation underlying a large number of localized products. Other examples of rejected localized Japanese games that have been rejected will aid our understanding of this concept.

The analysis of the coverage of other localized Japanese titles that didn't successfully blend into their new locale further demonstrates the performative nature of Japaneseness in video games. The case of *Atelier Rorona: The Alchemist of Arland* is another example where not only fictional elements, but also genre conventions and gameplay mechanics are considered to trespass the limits of North American video game regimes of value as determined by structural agents. The North American localized version of ロロナのアトリエ　～アーランドの錬金術師（*Rorona no Atorie ~Aarando no Renkinjutsushi*）is a JRPG title part of a series that stands apart from others in the genre by making the player embody a female teenage alchemist whose story is based on gathering materials and ingredients to be used in various alchemy recipes. The game's goal thus consists of discovering alchemy recipes, as opposed to the more empowering classical formula of saving the world through battling enemies. The game also features many elements from the visual novel genre in the way its narrative is presented as well as the extra incentive to witness every alternative ending, thus unlocking the pictures of the moe characters in the game’s image gallery.

The North American version of the game did not undergo any noticeable changes beyond

raising the age of the main character from 15 to 17 years old. This change takes into consideration the fact that the main character is sometimes put into situations where she is sexually objectified for the sake of comedy, a kind of humor that is similar to our previous example and that is not expected to be well-received by mainstream medias especially when involving an underage character. However, it seems that this basic modification was not enough to facilitate the game's transition to and acceptance within the North American regimes of value.

Similarly to *Hyperdimension Neptunia*, *Aterier Rorona* received a mixed evaluation from most major media outlets. Following the trend set by our previous example, some reviewers' criticism was mostly based on the game's place within the culture of circulation of video games of their locale rather than for the game's real execution flaws. New IGN.com reviewer Jack DeVries exemplifies this situation quite vividly by dedicating most of his review article to criticizing fictional assets and what he perceived as unchallenging and boring gameplay:

> If Atelier Rorona was more fleshed out, and I was actually involved in gathering and alchemic recipes, then it could be a compelling RPG. But its standard battle system, cute style, and WTF dialogue don't make the game good. It does make the game one of those titles that cause your friends to worry you've gone all creeper, though, so it's got that going for it. (DeVries)

Both the critiques brought up in the article and the tone it uses to present them suggest a rejection of the game not based on technical flaws, bugs or gameplay balance, but rather based on the reviewer's gap between what is featured in the game such as the *moe* elements, visual novel gameplay and so on with his expectations defined by his locale's regimes of value. Here again, the reviewer fails to negotiate the game using the body of knowledge related to its genre, which is necessary to make sense of the product. On the other hand, while not clearly stated, this review also reinforces the idea that the featured alternative gameplay elements of the game are not only foreign, but also irrelevant when compared to “proper”, more challenging and frantic action-oriented gameplay mechanics

featured in games he usually gives favorable reviews. Although Japaneseness is not clearly stated by the author, it is suggested by the numerous comments left on the review page by users. Contrary to the review, these comments justify the gameplay elements deemed misguided by the author as signs of Japaneseness through the use of specific terms like JRPG and Japanese game conventions. In this case, it is the interpretative communities, through responses to a review process judged unfair, that describe differences as elements of the video game's Japaneseness. Here again, we get hints to a broader issue of binarization in the video game culture of circulation, and it is on this aspect that this chapter will conclude later on.

These examples of *Hyperdimension Neptunia* and *Aterier Rorona* demonstrate what dynamics force video game editors to transfigure their products and how some video games can be rejected by interpretative structures because of the presence of elements unsupported by the locale's regime of value. However, the level of rejection within these case studies remains relatively limited. It is important to note that there are also cases when the pressure of media uproar surrounding the possible circulation of cultural products featuring elements perceived as deviant can become unbearable for the producers to the point where they are compelled to enact preventive measures against their games' transnational circulation. This is also an example of a conflict that further enacts the performative definition of Japaneseness based on another set of elements. The last phenomenon worthy of investigation in our study of conflicts in video game circulation and localization is the Japanese video game developers' reaction to the rejection of erotic video games—or *eroge*—by North American interpretative structures' regimes of value.

Recent media uproar and denunciation by major media outlets such as CNN concerning the existence and possible accessibility in North America of disturbingly pornographic PC video games in Japan have pushed the Japanese game industry to implement measures to prevent their circulation overseas (Quigley). Although there is no concrete evidence of this, one can assume that these

measures are part of a broader project by the Japanese government to “sanitize” the Otaku mass entertainment business, also including the manga and anime industries, in order to capitalize on its soft power on an international scale for both its economic contribution and international prestige (Lamarre). Part of this new acknowledgment of the power of the Japanese cultural industry deals with the image that the Western countries and consumers have of this “cool Japan” construct as they are ultimately responsible for sanctioning what is a legitimate cultural product and what is improper. From this perspective, it is essential for the Japanese video game industry to prevent the circulation of cultural products deemed improper by the West but somehow overlooked in Japan. Measures like regional lock control on PC softwares and Japanese IP-based authorization access to *eroge* development studio websites like AliceSoft and Minori, for example, are just a few examples of attempts to restrict the audience of these games to their originally targeted Japanese audience, thus minimizing the risks of circulation overseas and preventing the tarnishing of Japan's image as a legitimate, major exporter of cultural products. For example, while trying to access Minori's website in the wake of the media uproar by CNN concerning the Illusion Soft developed eroge *Rapelay*; visitors were met with a message disclosing the restriction access to foreigners:

> This website cannot be browsed excluding Japan. Some foreigners seem to be having an antipathy against EROGE. Therefore, we (*sic*) prohibited the access from foreign countries, to defend our culture. Sorry for you of the fan that lives in a foreign country. (Chalk)

The ambiguity of audience definition is clear in this message. While the website access restriction is based on nation-state borders, the studios acknowledge in part that the “culture” they want to protect might pass the same borders and reach gamers from multiple ethnic origins. This nuance is ultimately lost in the means taken to ease the tension further supporting the interpretation of *eroge* as an element partly constitutive of video game Japaneseness by interpretative structures. However, as we will see, the power to allow or deny circulation on an international level is not always theirs

to control, as there are also other emergent forces pushing for their localization.

Certain fan communities dedicated to the translation of Japanese video games carry the self-attributed goal of facilitating the international circulation of products located outside the socially-accepted realm of media entertainment by working on PC pornographic adventure games. This sort of legally unclear fan work is similar to what has historically allowed the anime and manga industry to flourish outside Japan and for this reason it has generally been tolerated by Japanese studios. However, when it comes to entertainment products dealing with graphic depictions of pornographic content, measures to control the studios' copyrights and prevent the proliferation of fan patches are enforced on a more regular basis. The case of the now defunct translation group Sanity Ends demonstrates this situation well. Upon the release of the translation patch of the game 監獄戦艦 (*Kangoku Senkan* or *Prison Battleship)* that proved to be their last project, the translation group received a letter from the video game studio Lilith requesting the removal of all translation patches concerning their products as they wished to prevent their international circulation so as not to offended the sensibilities of Western audiences and be in accordance with government policies (Insani). In order to prevent legal action, the community website was shut down, leaving members to communicate via IRC private chat channels in order to continue their activities, thus successfully diminishing the circulation and potential impact of their work through the internet, but failing to completely shut down the amateur translation group. This issue provides us with yet another example of conflicting situations regarding the localization and circulation of Japanese video games. However, in this case, the industry's reaction towards the media's rejection and the government's endorsement of cultural entertainment products was not to regulate their products but to prevent its circulation overseas as a mean of reducing the tension.

These examples of conflict both concerning the tension and dissatisfaction of fans towards localized products as well as the rejection of localized games by the interpretative structures' agents

provides us with a better understanding of what is at stake with the transnational circulation of video games in a global economy. The tension here really lies with the different kinds of repurposing and reappropriation that the objects undergo as they circulate from one locale to another. For fans, the axis of appreciation of localized games lies in retaining the product in its original form as much as possible so that the process of recognition of the game still makes use of its original, alternative regime of value. The games' transition to another regime of value through transfiguration goes against this principle, as what the fans consider to be important untranslatable elements are tossed aside. Interpretative structures' patterns of negotiation and repurposing are also hindered when foreign products are not sufficiently transfigured, thus exacerbating conflicting situations that result in the cultural object's rejection from the locale's culture of circulation. In other words, if we were to address Gaonkar and Povinelli's question regarding the border of untranslatable elements of McDonald's' BigMac, we could say that it depends on the consumer's regimes of value.

Both of these conflict-contentious situations allow us to understand more clearly how interpretative communities and interpretative structures interpret forms of Japaneseness in video games in different ways. For interpretative structures, Japaneseness is a performative concept always in motion that appears in specific elements, be they fictional assets or gameplay mechanics. Japaneseness is thus an open term that can include various assets in accordance with the developers' interpretation. These elements can then be targeted to be modified or eliminated according to the developers' marketing intention without altering the product's text. In the case of the interpretative communities, Japaneseness is a constitutive part of some Japanese video game genres or individual titles that cannot be taken away or transfigured without putting proper interpretation in limbo. Here again the notion of Japaneseness is performative and remains relatively open as it can contain various fictional and gameplay elements.

What we identified in these of conflicts is that they can exacerbate a binary perspective of

the video game culture of circulation. In denouncing the transfiguration of games within the industry's processes of localization and the removal of certain gameplay and fictional assets deemed essential for interpretation, interpretative communities further strengthen the ties between certain genres or individual titles and Japaneseness. As an example of such a situation, *Yakuza 3*'s dating simulation mechanics were estimated to be an essential part of the product's text as a gateway to Japanese culture and Japanese gaming culture. Similarly, when interpretative structures denounce the circulation of certain deviant or worthless localized video games, it is sometimes achieved through marking them with foreign cultural qualities of Japaneseness. Our case study of *Hyperdimension Neptunia* examplify this: it rejected partly because it featured a collection of *moe* protagonists considered to be a Japanese “senseless cultural curio”. Some video game elements are thus in both cases classified as representations of video game Japaneseness embodied in video games, while other elements are considered to represent Western video game culture.

Through the study of conflicts in the interpretation of localized Japanese video games, we discussed the notion of Japaneseness as common to both interpretative structures and interpretative communities, but formulated and negotiated in very different ways. We also identified another phenomenon through the analysis of the tensions between both interpretations: the tendency towards the establishment of a binary perspective on the video game culture of circulation based on elements representing Japaneseness and elements representing Western video game culture. As the final point of investigation, it is this very phenomenon of a binary culture of circulation to which this thesis' focus will be turned to in order to uncover the implications of this notion and the elements at stake in its establishment.

Chapter 4

Beyond Nations and Games—Uncovering the Risks Entailed by the Binary Perspective on Video Games

The three previous chapters successively introduced important concepts regarding the multiplicity of audiences in a single locale, the multiplicity of products' circulation and localization methods, and finally how friction between audiences and localization methods can arise due to opposing interpretations of the media. This has led us to shed light on a single phenomenon underlying both localization practices and instances of conflict: a tendency towards the establishment of a binary interpretation of the video game culture of circulation through the performative creation of different forms of Japaneseness by both the interpretative structures and the interpretative communities. To be more precise, both the interpretative structures and the interpretative communities seem to create parallel interpretations of how Japaneseness is enacted in video games through repurposing methods such as localization. While the interpretative structures' interpretation of Japaneseness is very mobile and is based on the identification of elements which they will often subsequently remove or modify, the interpretative communities interpret Japaneseness as a constitutive part of some video game genres and titles and thus inseparable. These different methods of video game interpretation in relation to Japaneseness, however, share a common perspective. Indeed, these different interpretations of Japaneseness in video games are then used in their own way to establish a binary perspective of the video game culture of circulation in which Japanese video game elements contrast with Western video game elements. Most video games we analyzed were transfigured or localized to North America according to this perspective.

In the final chapter of this study, I would like to investigate the elements at stake regarding this binary perspective towards the video game culture of circulation. Although both the

interpretative structures and interpretative communities enact different interpretations of Japaneseness in video games for different purposes, we have to be aware of the risks entailed in relying too much on a culturally-based binary perspective of the media. Indeed, as much as it is tempting to simply culturally divide video games into binary categories of Japanese and Western video game elements, such an emphasis can hinder an audience's ability to negotiate directly with the media beyond imposed culturally determined categories. It is also important to be aware of the fact that such a binary perspective could also be repurposed by other agents with the goal of focusing on Japaneseness as an essence related to certain games. This last chapter will focus on exploring these risks and presenting examples that both demonstrate the possible repurposing processes of Japaneseness in video games and show how games can defy cultural-formed binary classification.

As a first step, we will take a look at how this binary perspective on video games, based on a performative and open interpretation of Japaneseness in video games, can be repurposed to hinder direct audience negotiation with games by framing titles in specific categories in order to influence the customers' perspective. This will be done through the introduction and analysis of case studies featuring developers' and publishers' discourse around the marketing of their own titles.

Second, we will observe the video game culture of circulation beyond this binary perspective. Through the introduction of key examples of games that cannot be classified into clear categories of Japanese or Western video games, we will see that it is not always possible to reduce the worldwide production of video games into this opposition. In order to avoid the risks of only considering games in regards to cultural categories, it is essential to expand our comprehension to include games that defy static classification.

In the final part of this chapter, we will use notions of critical theory concerning cultural product's production and circulation in order to better grasp what is at stake in framing games and game elements as Japanese in different ways. To this end, we will explore Appadurai's notions of

disjuncture and deterritorialization as a framework to identify the dynamics of cultural product's production and consumption in a globalized economy. We will also further uncover the risks of considering the video game culture of circulation in an exclusively binary fashion by considering its possible repurposing by Japanese essentialist theories—namely, *Nihonjinron*—and structural anthropology with the example of Caillois' early attempt at a global study of man and manifestations of play forms.

As a final element of this chapter's introduction, I have to state that interpretations of Japaneseness in video games created by both the interpretative structures and the interpretative communities are not necessarily misleading or bad. There are indeed elements that can be identified as Japaneseness that are difficult to separate from a genre or specific title without changing the product's text, such as we saw earlier with the Yakuza crime genre from *Yakuza 3*. Similarly, it is undeniable that transfiguring a game's fictional elements, such as replacing Japanese pop music with American pop music in *Elite Beat Agent*, is a type of necessary change for marketing the product to a North American audience. However, the point of this chapter is to highlight the risks that entail an overuse of these culturally determined categories. Attributing Japaneseness to dating simulation gameplay, for example, or transfiguring characters from being androgynous to being muscular and empowering in order address a predetermined notion of Western taste contrasting with Japanese taste are both examples that rely too heavily on this binary perspective. As we will see, such overuse can potentially hinder an audience's ability to interpret the game beyond these cultural binaries.

Repurposing Japaneseness—An Analysis of Video Game Discourses in the Industry

A critical observation of the discourses enacted by different development and publishing studios around video games and Japaneseness is essential to understand how the latter is at risk of to being repurposed towards marketing goals, hindering a direct negotiation of the product by different audiences. These case studies demonstrate how the interpretation of Japaneseness from the interpretative structures and interpretative communities can be reinterpreted so as to serve marketing purpose imposing an interpretation of games through their ties to a specific cultural origin within the binary perspective of video game culture of circulation.

The first studio whose products and discourse will be investigated is the Tokyo studio Team Ninja, whose flagship titles include of the *Dead or Alive* fighting-game series and more importantly the *Ninja Gaiden* series, an action adventure series that narrates various conflicts involving magic-wielding ninja clans in a depiction of Japan that mixes mythology and techno-futuristic elements. Led initially by its former lead designer Tonobu Itagaki, Team Ninja has been publishing games mainly for Microsoft's Xbox and Xbox 360 consoles up until 2009. With this attachment to a system much more popular in North America and Europe than in Japan, it is widely recognized that Itagaki had been a key figure in the history of transnational audience targeting in video game marketing, as most of the games he directed were admittedly targeted at the Western market (Nardozzi). This orientation can be identified through the reformulation of Japanese feudal history and myths, as well as the archetype of the ninja represented in the Western regimes of value through various various video games and movies such as *Mortal Kombat* or *American Ninja*.

Hoping to minimize the impact of Itagaki's departure on the company's public image, Team Ninja underwent the process of re-establishing its place within the transnational video game culture of circulation. Part of this effort included the establishment of a new English website featuring an

speech aimed at fans of the *Ninja Gaiden* series. Part of this presentation—told in Japanese by head designer Hayashi Yosuke and subtitled in English—is important to consider when thinking about the risks entailed by the binary interpretation of the video game culture of circulation: “As a Japanese development team we are going to be developing games with our Japanese sense that we hope will surprise and delight you” (Hayashi). This statement—especially coming from a company targeting Western audiences—clearly suggests the promotion of products as belonging to a certain category of games within the binary culture of circulation. Team Ninja thus encourages customers to interpret their products as belonging to the category of Japanese video games solely based on the origin of the studio and staff, denying customers' own negotiation and interpretation of the product. At the same time, Team Ninja positions itself as a mediator of Japanese video game culture without concretely defining how they represent it. Japaneseness remains vague and undefined but at the same time takes great importance in the game's text. We can say that Japaneseness is thus used as an elements infusing value to the game.

Another example of the risks of a binary perspective on video games is the company Square Enix, a much more internationally-recognized Japanese development and publishing studio. Square Enix is responsible for a large part of the sales figures of Japanese games in North America, with acclaimed video game series like *Final Fantasy*, *Kingdom Hearts* and *Dragon Quest,* all of which lie at the heart of the so-called JRPG genre dominated by the same company. Since the milestone event of the transnational success of the title *Final Fantasy VII* in 1997 by Squaresoft, the company has made major improvements to its localization department throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Now it is considered a major company, having offices around the world, publishing games from subsidiary Western developers such as Eidos Interactive and publishing localized Western games in Japan (Fenlon). It is important to note that after the fusion of Squaresoft and Enix, the establishment of Square Enix (maybe the most prestigious video game studio in Japan) and its international

expansion through the purchase of foreign studios as well as targeting other international audiences, Square Enix has also been actively promoting Japanese music and *manga* as part of its approach to representing Japaneseness in a transmedial fashion. Well aware of their extensive popularity in North America and Europe, this can be seen as a way to further project an image of a company embodying many forms of Japaneseness in entertainment media.

In the wake of the North American release of latest installment of Square Enix's highest-grossing series *Final Fantasy XIII*, the latest representatives of the company accorded interviews to numerous journalists in order to promote their game and further establish it as the heir of one of the strongest video game traditions since the 1980s. Of these interviews of Toriyama Motomu conducted by Christian Nutt for the website Gamasutra is particulary relevant to our focus on the risks entailed in a binary perspective of video game culture of circulation. When questioned about the origins of the game as a Japanese product and the way its expresses this “cultural style”, Toriyama replied:

> Yeah, as long as you know that we as Japanese developers are creating it, our style comes through; our Japaneseness comes through. So it's not something that's really ever going to go away. (Nutt)

Here the notion of Japaneseness in Final Fantasy is defined as indistinguishable from the title's core text, an interpretation in line with that of the interpretative communities. The game's style is attributed as a representation of Japaneseness in video games, however, it seems that Square Enix tries to repurpose the notion of Japaneseness in video games so as to encompass elements that could be better tied to individual style and talent, imposing an interpretation of the game on its audiences. Indeed, later in the interview, Toriyama clarifies that this particular Japanese style is widely attributed to the recognized visual work of Nomura Tetsuya, the famous in-house artist who has defined the company's visual style for many years. Although the artist is Japanese and can produce work considered Japanese by virtue of his cultural origin and influences, such an attribution of his

work granted on the sole basis of his cultural origin, by emphasizing individual talent and interpretation, is oversimplifying the creative process. Considering this, it is clear that this establishment of the binary interpretation of the video game culture of circulation can be used to present video games in a simplistic fashion, relying less on direct contact with titles and genres and more on repository cultural terms with marketing purposes like Japaneseness and Western games.

The third and final case study of publisher's discourse analysis is the the American company Monkey Paw Games, specialized in localization and publishing. Founded in 2010, Monkey Paw Games is led by the former president of the Japanese publisher Hudson Entertainment's US division, John Greiner, and focuses on localizing and digitally releasing both old and new Japanese games previously unpublished in North America. At the moment, the company is only using digital platforms like the PlayStation Network Store and Nintendo's Virtual Console on the Wii (Caoili). This emphasis on publishing video games that were not previously judged appropriate for the international market drives the company to address its potential customers in a particular way that stresses the products' ties to the Japanese gaming culture. The company's statement of purpose as published on its official website embodies much of this discourse, and begins by segregating the binary concepts of Japanese and Western gaming as well as introducing the idea that some Japanese games can be more "Japanese" than other:

> MonkeyPaw Games was created to give gamers a taste of other worlds. Our mission is to bridge East and West. We believe each hemisphere deserves each other's games. We operate from a global perspective on development and license acquisition. We want to mix Japanese eccentricity with American ingenuity and European pizzazz. (Monkey Paw Games)

Considering this statement, it is obvious that Monkey Paw Games strives to repurpose video game Japaneseness in order to define its place within the video game industry. Greiner here identifies

“eccentricity” as an element constitutive of Japaneseness in games. Eccentricity is thus integrated to the performatively-created definition of Japaneseness in video games and it is identified as the reason why some products were not deemed exportable to other markets before. Japaneseness, drawing from the interpretative structures' definition of the concept, is not limited to the manifestation of the language or fictional settings drawing from Japanese culture, but also specific gameplay mechanics and, in this case, eccentric fictional elements. Although this is a term that seems to aptly describe some of the games in Monkey Paw's catalogue such as *Cho Aniki*, a grotesque shooter game featuring erotic bodybuilders, this situation exemplifies the risks entailed by a binary perspective on video games, one of associating differences in games to cultural manifestations. More than a risk of influencing audience's direct negotiation with the titles, it also entails the risks to mediate the broader Japanese culture for the audience. Using repository terms like Japanese games and Western games in the context of a binary perspective of video games may thus have the effect of simplifying video game interpretation and justifying a title's individuality with cultural manifestation.

These three examples demonstrate how relying exclusively on a culturally determined binary interpretation of video game culture of circulation entails certain risks concerning the repurposing of Japaneseness by marketing agents, promoting simplistic culturally determined interpretation of video games. What is at stake in this phenomenon is the prevention of the audience's direct negotiation with video games as digital entertainment products and cultural artefacts. This critique is not a rejection of Japaneseness as a way to interpret certain elements featured in video games; rather, its purpose is to warn against the potential repurposing of the concept for marketing strategies relying on completely tying products to simple cultural manifestations. Thus, used in the context of global circulation of a cultural product, this binary model runs the risk of promoting the presentation of games as mediators of Japanese or Western culture by hindering audiences' ability to

perceive video games for what they are, without cultural mediation.

The next part of this chapter will deal with how this perception of games can be nuanced by expanding our knowledge of the worldwide video game creation and consumption.

Japaneseness Without Borders?—Confronting Binarism with the Uprooted Video Game Japaneseness

In the previous section, we analyzed how developers and publishers generate risks while repurposing performatively-created notions of Japaneseness in video games formulated by both interpretative structures and interpretative communities. It became clear that relying too heavily on a binary interpretation of the video game culture of circulation can have the effect of trading titles' and genres' individuality with culturally-defined, all-encompassing notions of Japanese and Western gaming practices.

In the next section, we will broaden our understanding of the worldwide production and consumption of video games and observe the media's culture of circulation beyond binary terms. By observing some specific examples of video games that defy simple, culture-based categorization patterns, we will discover that it is essential that consumers retain the ability to negotiate directly with games beyond developers and publishers' repurposed cultural binary model. In doing so, we will understand how closed this model of interpretation is when compared to the actual practices of game production, as we realize that Japaneseness is not always rooted in Japan and that titles created in Japan are not necessarily vehicles of Japaneseness. We will also explore how, despite developers' attempts to design products that break cultural boundaries, the identification of Japaneseness in video game elements is difficult to completely frame because of its performative nature.

First and foremost, several examples of industry-produced video games—as opposed to amateur-produced ones—invite us to go beyond the simple classification of game elements as Japanese or Western. Indeed, following the international success of JRPGs in the 1990s, some examples of North American video games demonstrate that elements that both interpretative structures and interpretative communities establish as constituting Japaneseness in video games are not geographically tied to a cultural environment, but rather that this Japaneseness can be uprooted from Japan and rearticulated outside country-defined boundaries.

In 1999, while JRPG genre titles, led by the *Final Fantasy* series, were at the peak of their popularity and proliferation, PC video game *Septerra Core* developed by Valkiria Studios was released and is the first example contributing to our investigation of uprooted Japaneseness in video games. Trying to adapt Western RPG crafting to the current popular trend, developers of *Septerra Core* chose to implement a great deal of Japanese-marked elements into the product such as visual design inspired by the conventions of JRPG, turn-based battle mechanics, and high production-value cut scenes that punctuate the narrative. Although it is not possible to deny the fact that the game was intended to take advantage of, and blend into the regimes of value of the time (that strongly supported JRPGs and Japanese games), the success of the game and the existence of a strong fan base supporting its circulation and interpretation even today indicates that Japanese companies are not the only ones who can negotiate these elements (Junkyard's Paradise). It suggests that Japaneseness as a performatively-created collection of video game elements can be uprooted and rearticulated in different cultural environments.

This phenomenon can also be seen in other more recent games coming from the North American video game industry. The 2001 RPG *Anachronox*, released by Ion Storm, also exemplifies the transnational use of video game elements embodying Japaneseness through the use of turn-based battles and random encounters, core elements that bring its lineage closer to the *Final Fantasy* series than the Canadian developer Bioware's *Baldur's Gate* RPG series. With the recent

decline of the idea of Japaneseness as a sign of product quality in the last three years and the reinvention of RPG game design in the West, the use of elements such as turn-based battle systems has become increasingly rare in North America. However, the focus on the new iPod and iPad platforms offering inexpensive games has allowed the development of titles featuring influences from a large array of genres, including those described as being typically Japanese. Among these titles we have to consider *Eternal Legacy* by Gameloft and the *SEED* series by Chillingo, a self-declared international game development studio based in many cities around the globe and a United Kingdom-based developer, respectively. With such a large array of development studios creating games with elements deemed representative of Japaneseness in video games, it is obvious that Japaneseness in video games can be uprooted and rearticulated by foreign audiences, and be repurposed to participate in a sort of cosmopolitanism in the video game culture of circulation. Rumours of big studios like Ubisoft developing a JRPG title in order to expand the genres available in their catalogue only strengthen this idea that Japaneseness in video games can be uprooted from Japan to a certain extent (Plunket). At least, it seems that the form of Japaneseness pertaining to gameplay elements and style can be internationally rearticulated. The next set of examples will prove this last point by investigating the other forms of video game development that fall outside mainstream practices.

Following our general framework of establishing the difference between top-down and bottom-up media interpretation-generating groups as well as their different approaches to video game localization and creation, we will now consider the emergent creation of independent video games by fans and interpretative communities in general. This other type of creative project conducted by amateur programmers and artists who find their motivation outside the bounds of the market is rarely investigated by video game studies and provides us with a scope of analysis more focused on the mobility of video game Japaneseness outside geographical bounds.

Our first example brings forth the interesting case of the international fan force creating a video game within a genre usually strongly marked with Japaneseness. Indeed, the PC game *Katawa Shojo*—yet unreleased at the time of writing—is an independent project started in 2007 by a team of fans, programmers and artists from a variety of national backgrounds. The project's concept originated from the famous image board 4chan when an anonymous contributor posted the conceptual drawing of an *eroge* visual novel based on a fictional high school environment designed for the needs of disabled teenagers, a original take on the high school life genre associated with video game Japaneseness by both the interpretative structures and the interpretative communities. Members of the forum then became interested in the idea and proceeded to organize an international amateur development team named called For Leaf Studio, which began to work on the creation of the open source game. Judging from the extensive list of languages in which the blog is available—English, Chinese, Japanese, French, Italian, Finnish, etc.—it is evident that the background of fans involved in the project is very diverse (Four Leaf Studios). Contributions to the game are open to anyone willing to dedicate time and effort to the project by writing segments, producing art assets, programming the game or providing management for the community forum and blog. Upon completion, the game will be free of charge and authorized to circulate without restriction on the internet.

This case brings a new take on the issues of Japaneseness in video games, yet unexplored in this thesis: considering the articulation of specific genres like visual novels and *eroge* by a diverse international community, to what extent is it appropriate to restrict their association to Japan? The game *Katawa Shoujo* demonstrates that genres that are supposedly representing Japaneseness in video games can be rearticulated outside Japan in both their fictional and gameplay elements. In this case, we saw that in the process of the rearticulation of the genre, the fictional setting of a modern Japanese high-school environment—often featured in this genre in visual novel titles produced by Japanese studios—was retained. Although the game is being developed by an international team

with very little input from Japanese contributors, it seems that the game was developed according to the interpretative communities' interpretation of the genre's translatable and untranslatable elements, establishing Japanese fictional elements as part of the genre. The game's untranslated Japanese title is symptomatic of this state of affair. This observation leads us to think that Japaneseness as interpreted by the interpretative communities can be uprooted from geographical and cultural settings and rearticulated in other locales.

This uprooted Japaneseness in video games can also be observed in other interesting cases that are closer to the other interpretation of video game elements identified earlier. For example, let us consider the independent studio Winter Wolves, which frequently designs games oriented around visual novels and dating simulator gameplay elements. Although their games also clearly use a visual style most commonly associated with Japanese artists as represented in *anime* and *manga*, the studio does not really enforce or stress its Japaneseness through fictional settings and context (like the case of the studio For Leaf Studio, it is not based in Japan). Thus, by using gameplay elements from dating simulators and visual novels and attaching a new context and theme to it—such as in the game *Love and Order*, which takes place in a fictional Crown Attorney office in Montreal—they provide new ways for an international audience to negotiate with these mechanics. This rearticulating, as we saw, is based on an interpretation of Japaneseness mostly promoted by interpretative structures, in which Japaneseness is not a constitutive part of video game genres and can thus be identified to be either removed or used as a value-inducing selling point.

With these examples, we established that video game Japaneseness as a set of both gameplay mechanics and fictional elements can be uprooted and rearticulated in other locales by different audiences using the interpretation of Japaneseness from both the interpretative structures and the interpretative communities. This provides an interesting insight to part of the transnational movement of Japaneseness in video games and the video game culture of circulation as a whole.

The next step in our investigation of the use of a simplistic binary perspective on the culture of circulation of video games is to observe how Japaneseness is not necessarily inherent to games made in Japan in the now globalized video game industry.

We previously established how dissatisfied fans were when news of the exclusive North American localization of *NieR: Gestalt*, featuring its infamous muscular character, hit the internet. However, in order to really understand what is at stake here, it is necessary to investigate deeper in to this particular case. The case of *NieR* brings up the issue of the fans' expectations regarding the locale's perceived video game culture. In other words, it allows us to emphasize the problem of expected Japaneseness from products developed in Japan. Indeed, it is essential to underline that, in the case of *NieR*, the version featuring the older, fatherly character supposed to resonate better with the Western audience is actually the original version of the game, and that the game was originally developed to target the Western audience. The androgynous character featured in *NieR: Replicant* is part of the localization effort that the development team put in order to eliminate the risks of releasing the game in Japan, as Square Enix did not predict the title to be successful in Japan in its original form (Leone). *NieR: Replicant* is thus a Japanese-localized version of a Japanese game for the local market. While gamers perceived *NieR: Replicant* to be the original product as it embodied video game Japaneseness as presented in the binary perspective of video game culture of circulation, they were deceived by relying on this binary perspective and prevented from to directly negotiating with game. Although it might sound paradoxical at first, this example brings up the complexity of discussing authorship based on a binary cultural perspective in the today's internationally focused video game industry.

The actual trend of video game design at work behind most high budget titles represents more generally this situation in which it becomes more difficult to rely on a binary approach to classify video games based on Japaneseness and Westernness. In order to better sell video games on

the international market, major companies such as Capcom and Konami promote a video game design strategy characterized by the absence of elements marked as Japanese at both the fictional and gameplay levels. Employing Iwabuchi Koichi's study of the reception of Japanese media in parts of Asia in 1990s, I would call this philosophy of game design focused on international market *mukokuseki* game desing. In order to describe the commodities exported from Japan to North America and Asia in during the period of economic growth up to the 1990s, Iwabuchi links most of the industrial commodities such as cars, the Sony Walkman and video games such as the *Mario* series on the Nintendo Entertainment System to the concept of *mukokuseki* (Iwabuchi). This term primarily indicates the absence of cultural markings in exported products, the absence of an expression of the "Japanese lifestyle", its cultural odour or, as Carlson describes it, cultural references (Carlson 7).

It seems, however, that this vision of video game production as a cultural product falls short of addressing our concerns with the performative definitions of Japaneseness in video games by different audiences. As established earlier, any definition of video games or cultural products as culturally marked or unmarked fails to consider the idea that Japaneseness is constructed peformatively by the industry—or localization teams—and fans, a concept that implies a constant redefinition and reframing of what constitutes Japaneseness. New elements or new gameplay mechanics introduced in a particular Japanese video game, for example, can eventually be identified as Japanese by interpretative communities or interpretative structures and thus either preserved or removed by virtue of comparison with Western products. While the industry seems to design products with the objective of breaking cultural boundaries in order to target the widest audience possible, differences can easily be reappropriated in a binary perspective by both interpretative structures and interpretative communities in different ways. Thus, it is not an issue of how to frame Japaneseness, but how differences are perceived in regards to their cultural origins. This shows how the binary model of the video game culture of circulation can repurpose a wide range of elements

towards Japaneseness and how it is important to see through this facade.

With these examples, it becomes clear that relying entirely on the binary perspective of the video game culture of circulation entails certain risks concerning direct negotiation with the product. Part of this phenomenon can be explained by the fact that Japaneseness in video games is a concept that is always in motion. This means that it can be rearticulated in multiples ways by different game designers both in the industry and amateur development communities on the international level. Japaneseness is not confined to Japan. At the same time, with the case of *NieR*, we saw that games designed in Japan are not restricted to a set of elements automatically attributed to Japaneseness. With the globalization of the industry, it seems that some studios are driven to articulate other collections of culturally marked elements to target other audiences and expand their presence on the market.

Parallel to this situation, we further explored the implication of the performative nature of the definition of Japaneseness by both interpretative structures and interpretative communities. The term itself is thus constantly in motion and ultimately defies the developers' objective to create culturally unmarked—or *mukokuseki*—products as they can be culturally remarked by either interpretative structures or interpretative communities based on other sets of differences. Given the uprootable and performative nature of Japaneseness, it is thus essential to avoid relying completely on a binary perspective based on Japaneseness or Westerness to negotiate the media. Environment and *mukokuseki* game-design both imply a definitive framing of the term that can influence a direct perspective on the product.

The last part of this chapter will bring us to another scope of analysis of the issue of the video game culture of circulation. We will explore a theoretical framework that will provide us with a way to make sense of the preliminary results that we uncovered so far regarding the dynamics driving audiences, processes of product localization and Japaneseness.

Japaneseness and Disjuncture—Uncovering the Transnational Dynamics of Video Games' Creation and Consumption

As the final aspect of this investigation of the culturally based binary video game culture of circulation through the analysis of localization processes of Japanese video games, we will explore the potential impacts of considering video game culture of circulation as a binary concept and how it could be repurposed through specific theoretical framework. In addition, we will take a look at Arjun Appadurai's notion of disjuncture and deterritorialization in regards to the global circulation of cultural products. It is through these concepts that we will be able to identify the dynamics that are the most in line with our concerns regarding video game, localization and Japaneseness.

First, what springs to mind to the scholar of Japanese intellectual history when observing this situation, is how it shares similar terminology with a particular trend of Japanese social theory and that this similarity could easily be used as a gateway for video games to be added to this specific intellectual tradition. This current is that of *Nihonjinron*, or the Japanese nativist theories that have been part of Japanese social theories since the *Edo* period. As an intellectual project, *Nihonjinron*—or theory of the Japanese—can be described as a collection of texts that emphasize the explanation and establishment of Japaneseness as an essence and specificity embedded into Japanese society (Morris-Suzuki 154). Most works that find lineage in this intellectual tradition have a common point in that they insist on the existence of a Japanese spirit common to all Japanese that is formed and passed along through society, climate, geography and family structures amongst many things. Enthusiasm for this kind of intellectual project in the 20th century can be attributed to the desire of explaining the success of Japan as a nation at the spearhead of the movement of Westernization of Asia at the beginning of the century represented by Tetsuro Watsuji with the theory of relationship between climate and ethnic groups as well as its economic boom following

the American occupation from the 1960s to the 1980s represented by Nakane Chie through the focus on an homogenous society (Watsuji in Morris-Suzuki 145, Nakane in Morris-Suzuki 127). It can be argued that it has been used as a state apparatus to enforce a certain conception of what the Japanese as individuals should embody as a work and life ethic—such as the community spirit in order to attain national economic success.

With the coming of the Meiji Era and the new focus on modernity as an enlightening project, *Nihonjinron* intellectuals had found an "other" in the form of the European nations against which it could establish its specificity in a more or less black-and-white fashion: the West. I would argue here that this binary intellectual construct featuring Japan and the West in oppositional terms is partly compatible with the binary perspective of video game culture of circulation as defined by the interpretative structures and interpretative communities in their own ways. Both approaches often establish Japan and the West as contrasting entities with very performative dynamics of definition of the terms. Although the idea is not often articulated, this similarity also entails the risks of capturing the media of video games and repurposing it in the *Nihonjinron* theoretical framework. This implies that, with this kind of broad oppositional concepts between the West and Japan, it could be tempting for some intellectuals to try to explain Japaneseness in video games in regards to Japanese cultural and ethnic origins. For example, considering the absence of the popularity of visual novels in Western mainstream video game culture: links could be established between Japanese culture and the visual novel genre as a set of gameplay mechanics. This state of affairs could then lead to discussions and debates with the objective of elucidating why and how Japan is unique and specific in its relation to the video game media and going back in history to find evidence explaining this preference in the present. However, as we found out, this is a potentially misleading attitude as Japaneseness as defined in video games is a generally performative concept as opposed to an already determined and unchangeable set of elements. This interpretation also eludes the multiplicity of audiences on the international level as well as globalization of the media's

circulation. In other words, essentialist interpretations for the sake of cultural determination of the media also prevent direct negotiation of the products by customers.

To the video game scholar, this approach might be reminiscent of the early attempts at anthropological studies of the relationship between men and forms of play. With the globalization and democratization of digital entertainment, it is tempting to apply anthropological structuralism notions to video games, attributing certain genre mechanics to certain nations and explaining differences in regards to social and cultural origins. However, it ultimately falls flat to address the actual dynamics of audiences' formation and products circulation as we know it today. Pioneer French game scholar Roger Caillois' study in *Les jeux et les hommes* exemplifies this incomplete approach. In his book more known for the introduction of the concepts of play (agon, alea, mimicry and ilinx), Caillois emphasizes that "form of plays and cultures are interdependent" :

> Expression ou exutoire des valeurs collectives, les jeux apparaissent nécessairement liés au style et à la vocation des différentes cultures. La relation est lâche ou étroite, le rapport précis ou diffus, mais il est inévitable. (Caillois 168)

Although this statement, as a basis on an approach to the study of games, has its merits on certain aspects, what I want to point out is the risks it entails when discussing video games and Japaneseness. This approach can neglect the performative nature of Japaneseness in video games and suggests an interpretation that relies too heavily on culture as the origin of all aspects in games. This exerpt from the introduction of the article *Clash of Cultures* featured on *1up.com* articulates this idea:

> Creating a game requires more than just blood, sweat and tears. Every area of a game is heavily influenced by the culture that produced it, whether it be the visuals, the musical scoring, or even important aspects of the gameplay. (Kurt)

This statement suggesting a direct correlation between national culture and video games serves as

the justification for the rather straigforward list of video game genres and characteristics associating to either Japanese gaming culture or American gaming culture. This list gives the sense of a “us” and “the other” duality. For example, it suggests that the American thirst for freedom—illustrated by various concepts such as the American Revolution, market competition and the preference of cars over public transportation—is transposed to video games, notabily by the ability of camera control during gameplay. In opposition, Japanese video game design is seen as providing gamers with ta more cinematic experience, an aspect explained as a symptom of a population more sensitive to motion sickness and a general preference towards retro game design and more focused experiences. The result of such discourse is a reafirmation of cultural identities based on distinct and opposing video game cultures presented as an easily graspable binary concept. As we can see in this case, trying to address differences between Japanese video games and Western video games without considering the performative nature of their definition can thus be misleading in certain aspects and reduce our understanding of both the products and the media in general. It seems that preventing this direct negotiation of games beyond cultural binary references is a practice more favorable to marketing strategies rather than the actual comprehension of products. By investigating a more nuanced set of critical theory, we might find concepts better suited to address the media. I suggest that this goal will be achieved by using Arjun Appadurai's notions of disjuncture and deterritorialization.

In his study of the transcultural circulation flow, Appadurai describes imagination as the key contemporary force driving power relationships in regards to ethnic, technological, media, finance and ideologies (Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference” 296). Considering that the flow of all of these elements becomes increasingly borderless, their deterritorialization becomes a main catalyzing incentive shaping the way they are imagined by different sorts of agents. The disruption between elements such as media, ethnicity and milieu through deterritorialization thus allows the shaping of

these agents according to their accentuated state of imagination seized back by the state and other capital-wielding agents.

If we bring the idea of the circulation and localization of video games in both industry and amateur communities closer to Appadurai's notion of deterritorialization, it is possible to acknowledge the phenomenon of the binarization of the video game culture of circulation as symptomatic of the disjuncture between media and audience, the separation between products' production and their consumption. As we saw, the nature of localization processes—essential for transnational circulation—is to identify Japaneseness as differences according to a model of translatable and untranslatable elements. The performative establishment of certain titles' characteristics—such as linear narrative patterns or dating simulator elements—as embodying Japaneseness through either their rejection by interpretative structures or integration to genre by the interpretative communities is an effect of this disjuncture, emphasizing certain aspects of the product as mediators of its cultural and ethnic origin[6]. Deterritorialization between audiences and cultural products has the tendency to accentuate the binarization of products according to their origin through the process of localization, or adaptation, to this new locale.

Further complicating this phenomenon, the internationalization of the video game industry brings about the disjuncture not only of the production and the consumption, but also, as Appadurai points out, the tools, talents and means of production, describing this phenomenon as cultural fetishism through the dissemination of production. With Japanese companies now purchasing studios and financing project in North America such as the case of the *Deux Ex: Human Revolution*, developed in Montreal by Eidos Interactive Studios, a property of Square Enix or the case of Nintendo's delegation to the tributary developer Retro Studio in of the development of the *Metroid Prime* series in Texas, it is no longer possible to deny that video games are now becoming more transnational products in their development itself. Returning to our previous example of *NieR* and

[6] As we previously observed with the clear example of reimagination of Ico's game cover art, not all instances of fan repurposing emphasise Japaneseness. However, certain types of interpretative communities do base their interpretation around the national origin of games.

considering these additional ones, it becomes more difficult to establish a game's authorship on cultural qualities. Furthermore, with the importance of localization processes in both the industry and fan communities, establishing the difference between an original product and a copy is much more ambiguous as games are often localized at the same moment of their development and in more than one language. The recent video game entitled *The Witcher 2* exemplifies this situation as the text heavy game was written in both Polish and English at the same time, a feature that even proved to be seen as a selling point.

In this context of media deterritorialization and disjuncture, we can state that fans also partly enact similar dynamics of fetishism when it comes to establishing video game Japaneseness through the divide between the translatable and untranslatable elements. Differences between titles and genres are identified as either elements of Japaneseness or Westernness: cultural differences. The form of Japaneseness that is thus created does not seem to have a strong footing in actual Japanese culture; it could very well bear the markings of another culture. There are thus risks of considering Japaneseness in video games as mediating Japan through a set of shared prejudices. What is at stake then is relying too much on Japaneseness as established by both interpretative structures and interpretative communities, hindering direct negotiation with games as international products created in ever more disassociated contexts. What is also at stake, is looking at Japan through the fetish of video games and trying to make sense of those digital products as Japanese product.

This last chapter brought forward the risks that entail a perspective of video game culture of circulation that relies too much on binarism between Japanese and Western video game elements. Considering video games in the light of Japaneseness or Westernness as promoted by several agents from the industry driven by marketing incentives entails the risks of relinquishing the benefits of a direct negotiation with the products, and benefits that provide a better understanding of the elements influencing game design. This direct approach to video game negotiation proves to be necessary to

understand how the performatively-constructed concepts of Japaneseness and Westerness in video games are not constrained to a single locale but are frequently uprooted and are highly mobile. Indeed, as we expanded our vision of the global production of video games encompassing the industry and fan communities, we noticed that the constructed notion of Japaneseness can be identified in games made in North America and various other locales. Considering this, interpreting the media solely through a culturally binary perspective, categorizing titles and genres as belonging to solely the Japanese or Western video game tradition, can hinder a user's perception of a video game beyond marketing-driven incentives.

We also explored how a binary perspective of video games can potentially be integrated into other theoretical frameworks; we saw its definition of Japaneseness repurposed to contribute to an essentialist and deterministic conception of games mediating Japanese culture as a whole the 1960s, we have to be aware of the possibility that the same concepts could be repurposed to explain either the success of certain Japanese video game genres or the specificity of Japanese video game culture. This strategy is to be avoided because, as we saw, Japaneseness in video games is performatively-constructed over differences with games from other locales and only a small percentage of it actually takes inspiration from the Japanese cultural environment. Similarly, as demonstrated with the analysis of the writings of Caillois, the practice of attributing forms of play to certain cultures should be subject of utmost criticism. The risks that this practice entails are the same as in the case of *Nihonjinron*: the identification of cultural aspects of a locale to explain the video game assets associated with it in a deterministic fashion. Keeping in mind that Japaneseness is performatively-determined through diverse interpretations of both interpretative structures and interpretative communities might prevent gamers from seeing the media in this way.

As the final theoretical framework invoked in this study, we demonstrated that Appadurai's critical theory concerning global circulation of cultural objects can help us understand parts of the dynamics of video game localization, establishment of Japaneseness and the focus on a binary

perspective on the media. In the current trend of video game production and consumption where there is disjuncture and deterritorialization between production and consumption assets on multiple levels, Japaneseness as established by different localization processes gets more underlined. Indeed, transnational circulation and localization processes performatively identify differences and establish them as elements associated with different cultures. At the same time, however, the theoretical frame also enlightens us with the disjuncture of the production means involved in the creation of titles, putting more ambiguity on games' cultural origins as a kind of authorship. Thus, Japaneseness is not only a very mobile term, but it is also frequently uprooted and rearticulated in other locales. Furthermore, as we came to realize, a binary interpretation of video game culture entails certain risks to mediate the interpretation of the video game culture of circulation uniquely through its culturally-based binary perspective as it prevents customers from negotiating directly with it and uncovering this disjuncture and deterritorialization.

Conclusion—Circulation, Transfiguration and Japaneseness

At the beginning of this thesis, following Lee and LaPuma's interest in an alternative way of studying cultural products, this study set out to investigate Japanese video games in regards to their circulation patterns rather than focusing exclusively on their formal analysis. In the case of media such as video games, where production and consumption are closely tied to transnational channels of exchange, it has become obvious that analyses of different localization processes is a relevant aspect to both video game studies and Japanese studies.

We quickly realized that the emphasis on circulation flow in both the local and transnational level would require us to identify two different kinds of audience-forming agents to address how products are subject to different interpretations. These interpretations are not only directed by the locale *per se*, they are also put into place by smaller interpretation-forming agents that act in different spaces. We called these two basic audience-formation agents interpretative communities and interpretative structures. The first one acts on a macro-scale, mainly through official publications (magazines) and well-established physical spaces (stores, malls) and enacts dynamics of display and recognition. In this dynamic, products are created and advertised in relationship to icons and other elements that are already present within the locale's regimes of value and media environment, thus facilitating their recognition and negotiation by the customers. In the same locale, we also identified parallel systems of audience formation in the form of interpretative communities. We established that this second set of interpretative agents act mainly in virtual spaces and at fan conventions where they can pursue activities related to the establishment of a knowledge economy based on video game's texts as cultural objects. Exploring and considering these two audience agencies was essential to understand the complexity of the product's actual circulation under different regimes of value. Acknowledging the multiplicity of interpretations and audiences on both

the international and local scale was the first step in understanding why games are circulated and, most importantly, how they are modified to facilitate their negotiation.

As we took a closer look at the products themselves, we also saw the need to address localization in other, more nuanced terms. Comparing the industry's pattern of video game localization and emergent patterns of video game localization, it became necessary to distinguish between two main dynamics: transfiguration and functionalist translation. In the first case, we studied Japanese video games that have been subjected to various modifications both at the level of gameplay and fiction so as to adapt to their developers' perception of the target locale's market and video game culture. Certain titles which are thus seen to feature inappropriate gameplay elements, fictional characters difficult to empathize with, or art covers not appealing enough as marketing tools are transfigured by either modifying their assets or removing them entirely. In the case of emergent processes of localization enacted by fans and amateur translation groups, we realized that titles are adapted in different ways. Instead of using the industry's pattern of transfiguration, fans translate previously unreleased Japanese video games in a functionalist mindset. In the examples I provided, we noticed that games thus translated are not modified beyond language issues, retaining most of the original version's fictional assets and gameplay features. Such a minimalist localization pattern suggests a deep schism between industry and fans' interpretation of the medium. This schism is located in a very precise location that is on the degree that separates the cultural product's translatable elements from the untranslatable ones. On a graduated scale, the majority of interpretative structures seem to put this separation mark in a location that allows the interpretation of many elements as being translatable such as the cover art, gameplay mechanics or the representation of characters. On the other hand, fans and amateur translation group are more likely to leave very little space for the translatable elements, thus interpreting most of the game's assets as being untranslatable and essential to the experience of the game. This interpretation thus reduces

localization to the task of changing the basic language assets, acknowledging other assets ranging from gameplay elements to fictional elements as a component of the game that belongs to a particular genre.

Having established the dynamics of audiences and product transformation, we proceeded to analyze how the relationship between different audiences and localized Japanese video games plays out in North America. The chosen frame of analysis regarding the reception of titles by different audience groups focused mainly on instances of the products' rejection and criticism. This emphasis allowed us to better evaluate the basis on which games are evaluated, resulting in the uncovering of the driving concept behind the global video game culture of circulation. The first part of this important step was to analyze gamers' discontent with some of the Japanese video games localized in the industry and released in North America. Through forums and blogs, we pieced together different experiences of discontentment involving various localized games. This allowed us to discovered that during the transfiguration process, the localization team altered or removed essential elements that were part of an already existing knowledge economy about the game, blaming it on cultural difference or Japaneseness. Gamers felt offended because they were denied the interpretation they wished to apply to the product. Instead, the games were formatted to align with a different regime of value, consonant with the dynamics of interpretative structures rather that of the interpretative communities. The clash here is primarily between the degree of separation between translatable and untranslatable elements. In conjunction with fans' dissatisfaction over localized games, we also had to emphasize a more obvious way in which conflicts take shape. This other phenomenon is the interpretative structures' rejection of certain localized games through game journalism and criticism. Game criticism partly aims to influence the consumer and provide them with tools to evaluate the potential entertainment value of a newly released product within a general regime of value. Elements that are well-understood and sought for by certain audiences can be

denounced by reviewers and marked as bad taste or mistakes on the developers' part. We saw that rejection is mostly present when games undergo a minimal process of localization, retaining most of their genre assets that are thought to be desirable to translate. However, this rejection is not limited to industry-localized games but also extends to Japanese games circulated outside official channels and localized by fans. Rejection can thus be enacted by other traditional medias in order to hinder the circulation of certain games. By investigating these examples of conflict, we observed that these tensions between localized products and audiences are mainly based on both differences in the interpretation of Japaneseness and its treatment in localization processes.

At that point, this study of video games' culture of circulation uncovered an aspect exacerbated by both performative definitions of Japaneseness and conflicts between localized products and audiences: a tendency towards the binarization of video games in regards to Japanese and Western game elements. While denouncing the transfiguration of specific titles, interpretative communities address the issue by exaggerating the importance of Japaneseness as an element constitutive of certain genres. Japaneseness is exacerbated by virtue of its untranslatableness. Similarly, while rejecting the circulation of certain Japanese titles localized for the North American market, interpretative structures point out their differences with the mainstream regimes of value and associate them with Japaneseness. Here, Japaneseness is exacerbated by virtue of its ability to be translated. With this collection of examples, chapter 3 demonstrated how the dynamics of binarization of video game culture of circulation is enacted between Japanese video game elements and Western video game elements.

The final chapter of this study set out to present a closer look at this binarization, and investigate its impacts and potential risks for the video game culture of circulation. We noted that a binary perspective on the media, based on two distinct and contrasting cultural poles, risked being repurposed by publishers and other agents for the marketing of products based on these binary

archetypes. As we established, Japaneseness is a performative term that defies any clear-cut definition and can thus be reinterpreted and repurposed to market products to certain audiences, invoking the terms to promote elements that do not necessarily fall under Japaneseness. It is thus essential to approach the media in a way that does not solely rely on this binary perspective of video game culture of circulation, but also in a way that enables direct, unmediated negotiation with the products.

Having explored this issue, we then proceeded to take a wider look at the global production and consumption of video games in order to see how a binary interpretation of the media is a simplistic approach to negotiating video games. We discovered that video game Japaneseness, as performatively defined by the interpretative structures and interpretative communities, is an ambiguous mediator of Japan's cultural productions. In investigating examples of North American video games enacting elements usually associated with Japaneseness, it became evident that the latter is frequently uprooted and rearticulated in other locales. Fictional and more importantly gameplay elements associated with the Japanese pole of video game culture of circulation can be reappropriated by both foreign developers and amateur communities, diluting its direct link to Japan as a locale and a cultural environment.

These observations finally provided a partial framework on which we could posit our understanding of video game transnational circulation beyond binary perspectives and warn against possible interpretation pitfalls heavily drawing on this conception. We identified some of these pitfalls in the concepts of *Nihonjinron* and anthropological, structuralist interpretations of the media, both of which could be repurposed to promote an interpretation of the media that draws on cultural predispositions to explain the international success of titles or the specificity of certain "Japanese" genres. However, we realized that Appadurai's critical theory of international circulation of cultural objects offered a more nuanced take on the media in regards to the Japaneseness of video games and the influences of the cultural environment. Indeed, Appadurai's notions of disjuncture

and deterritorialization provide us with a more nuanced perspective on the fabrication of Japaneseness in both products' development cycles and consumption patterns. We have to consider that games are increasingly dependent on large media encompassing international industries and worldwide amateur communities and, as a result, deterritorialized means of production and audiences tend to get fractured. It is thus more difficult to associate individual titles or genres with authorship linked to particular cultural origins. However, various incentives inherent to the global economy such as the the overemphasis on cultural marking of video games as a marketing tool to create bridges of understanding with different medias such as *manga* or *anime*, promote fetishizing forms of the media's consumption. In order to directly negotiate with the products, it is essential to call into question any culturally-focused binary interpretation of the media and acknowledge that Japaneseness is a performative and uprootable concept not necessarily restricted to Japan.

Closing Remarks

Driven by the desire to offer an alternative perspective on the relatively new media of video games, this thesis set out to investigate the circulation patterns of Japanese video games in North America. This new focus, inspired by Lee and LiPuma's concerns with media analysis beyond the restrictive practice of text analysis, led us to shed light on the too often under-explored aspect of video game localization. However, this study went down a path relatively different from previous efforts in the field by taking a closer look at the relationship between different types of audiences and video games both made and localized by the industry and by fan communities. This aspect, specific to this thesis, enabled us to consider Japaneseness in a performative fashion based on the degree of separation between a title's translatable and untranslatable elements. This definition then allowed us to question the binary perceptions of the video game culture of circulation, a rhetorical aspect of many writings in both fan communities and official publications that promotes an interpretation of contrasting sets of game elements according to either a Japanese or a Western

tradition. The point of questioning this perspective is to stress the importance of audience empowerment through its ability to directly negotiate the products in today's context of global circulation of commodities where fetishizing perspectives of the media are promoted to easily provide customers with tools to make sense of the products they consume.

As a final remark, I would like to introduce a specific path for future efforts concerning the study of video games's global circulation. Since its beginnings, video game studies have been mostly focused on the Western—or more specifically the North American—side of video game design, text analysis and sociological studies. As a student in video game studies, I think that our discipline should aim at taking into consideration all transnational circuits of the circulation of this specific media, including the underrepresented world of Japanese video game culture and circulation dynamics. As an alternative path of research, I point out the need for an analysis of localization patterns of not only Japanese products to overseas markets, but also an analysis of localization patterns of Western games to Japan. Such research would no doubt be of great interest and useful for the progression of the understanding of the circulation patterns of video games as well as other cultural objects in today's highly globalized economy.

Appendix: Games Cited

Games are presented in alphabetical order featuring their title, gaming platforms, developer, publisher and year of first release. In the case of a series, the dates provided will indicate the release year of first title and of the latest title published. The developers' name is written in italic and encompasses the publisher's name if it is the same. Games listed are by default the North American version unless the Japanese version is specifically discussed in the text, in which case, the Japanese product is also featured and specifically featured on this list. Japanese games' titles are written in their original language, a phonetic transcription is provided in italics within brackets while alternative titles are written in unaltered format.

Anachronox. PC. *Ion Storm*. Eidos Interactive. 2001.

Assassin's Creed (series). Various Platforms. *Ubisoft Montreal, Gameloft, Griptonite Games*. Ubisoft. 2007-2010.

Atelier Rorona: The Alchemist of Arland. PlayStation 3. *Gust*. NIS America. 2010.

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