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2019.24: Ben Whaley: What I Write About When I Write About Gaming

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I am about twenty-five hours into *The World Ends with You*, a Japanese role-playing game about a socially-withdrawn teenager who inhabits an afterlife modeled on Tokyo's youth district Shibuya, when I am thrust into yet another random battle against a group of pink jellyfish monsters. How I hate these jellyfish! They clone themselves when attacked and quickly multiply to overtake your screen. Having already bested this frustrating enemy multiple times during the last hour of play, I sigh and put down my Nintendo DS portable system. Despite what my colleagues and students might think, playing videogames for academic research is indeed hard work!

Even if you don't actively play videogames, you've likely heard the argument that classic Japanese games such as *Space Invaders* (1978) and *Donkey Kong* (1981) revitalized the North American gaming industry as it stood on the brink of collapse in the 1980s. These games, and others like it, continue to occupy a central place alongside manga (print comics) and animation within Japan's transmedia ecosystem. Videogames are a pretty big deal in Japan: each year, over 250,000 people attend the annual Tokyo Game Show; Wi-Fi hotspots in Tokyo's Akihabara electronics district allow passersby to download limited-edition content for their favorite portable games; Mario and Luigi appear on video quiz shows regularly broadcast throughout Tokyo subway cars; and the interactive urinal videogame developed by Sega known as *Toylets* (2011) even lets men compete in different mini games based on the volume and intensity of their pee.

While there are many reasons to take videogames seriously (well, except for that last one), to my mind, the necessity to critically analyze videogames within an academic context comes not solely from the money, time, or cultural impact they generate, but also from the ways they allow for a virtual experience of the human condition. In my own work, I research Japanese videogames and write about the ways in which they engage with social and personal issues prevalent in contemporary Japanese society, including traumas. For my purposes, this means analyzing console games that address issues such as a declining birthrate and aging population,[1] disaster trauma,[2] and war memory. Yet, the more I research games, the more I am reminded that analyzing them presents some tangible challenges for researchers in Asian Studies.

Videogames differ in many ways from literature and film, both "high-culture" forms that have previously dominated the focus of academic thinking about representation. The first and most obvious difference is player interactivity. When writing about videogames, it is tempting to fall back on the axiom that games are uniquely equipped to affect players emotionally, owing to their sense of interactivity and immersion when compared to passive, linear media. This argument rarely goes far. We must certainly analyze games as players interact with them, but academic research show that emotional engagement with a virtual world or virtual character is incredibly complex, dependent on a variety of factors, and highly personalized. Ethnographies centering on the responses of real-life Japanese players to particular videogames are insightful, but often necessarily limited in both size and scope. For those of us accustomed to literary and cultural studies, one of the unique aspects of contemporary videogame play is that it allows for a plurality of narrative and emotional experiences. It is likely impossible to speak of how a particular videogame might affect all users, particularly when a game's multiform narrative is authored by each player's individual choices, and two players could finish a game having experienced entirely different resolutions to a story.

Contemporary videogames therefore complicate our standard practices of analysis by presenting many different layers to consider – graphics, sound, gameplay, and interface, among others. When writing about a specific game, I often have my laptop next to me and repeatedly pause the game as I play to copy down in-game dialogue or take notes on a particular scene or gameplay mechanism. In this sense, I approach a game with the same "close reading" techniques I would a piece of literature. Online resources such as YouTube videos and fan wikis make it even easier to revisit specific parts of a game or view alternate endings. Instead of theorizing how a game might affect all players on an emotional level, I often highlight particular gameplay elements and discuss how they enhance our gameic experience as a whole. For example, within my larger discussion of *Catherine* (2011), a puzzle game that I argue grapples with Japan's declining birthrate and aging population, I discuss an in-game

polling mechanic which forces users to answer questions about relationships, childrearing, and marriage after the completion of each level. These answers are then indexed and graphed alongside other players' responses, providing an interactive and self-reflective component that strengthens

the weight of the core narrative.

Selecting appropriate games for analysis is often a process of trial and error. Foundational media theorist Marshall McLuhan reminds us that games are "popular art, collective, social *reactions* to the main drive or action of any culture."[3] Indeed, contemporary Japanese videogames serve as useful reflections of the country, culture, or auteur from which they came. However, if we are being honest, many videogames seem wholly unconcerned with making political or ethical statements. While I'm sure someone has written an insightful article discussing how *Dr. Mario* (1990) relates to the affordability of prescription drugs for seniors, early Japanese videogames and home systems were designed and marketed largely as children's toys. Games have traditionally resisted explicit social commentary in a way that film and literature have not. Kojima Hideo, the celebrated game designer behind the *Metal Gear Solid* series of stealth action games that frequently interrogates Japan's nuclear legacy, states, "Now I don't think you see many games that ... [go] beyond just being an entertainment medium. I think that's part of my role, part of my duty, to put in my games what I experience through movies."[4] When I choose a game to write about it is my contention that it has something interesting to say about Japan. While not all videogames address real-world issues, or are particularly memorable to play, the work we do in Asian Studies often necessitates self-selecting games with strong narratives, emotional aspirations, or memorable characters upon which to base our arguments.

In my own work I am constantly asking myself what my chosen game can tell us about Japan. Recognizing Japanese cultural elements within videogames is not so hard. If my doctorate in Japanese Studies is good for nothing else, at least I can successfully recognize that, in *Super Mario Bros. 3* (1988), Mario's famous "Tanooki Suit"[5] is modeled on the real-life Japanese "raccoon dog" (*tanuki*).[6] What's more, holding the down arrow and B button on the controller enables Tanooki Mario to transform into a statue. But not just any statue – a "*Jizō* Mario"[7] to be precise! With his red bib and staff, Mario's appearance now visually appropriates the well-known image of the bodhisattva protector of deceased children and travelers whose small statues dot temples and graveyards throughout Japan.[8] Most of our analytical work with Japanese games in the humanities involves teasing out and arguing for these sorts of connections between game elements and broader Japanese culture and society. But, simply recognizing these connections is not enough. As games researchers we must creatively consider how the narrative and simulative content align as media in the service of experiencing histories, societies, mindsets, traumas, and cultures in new and interesting ways, while resisting the urge to highlight the supposedly "uniquely" Japanese (or Asian) elements of the games we play. After all, as interesting as the Mushroom Kingdom may be, sometimes a mushroom is just a mushroom.

Readers of this post up until now will have likely noticed a conspicuous lack of discussion of specific methodologies for analyzing videogames. Unlike film and literary studies, in which accepted terminologies and methods are codified, videogames continue to inspire new debates depending on the disciplines involved. This means that, for better or worse, we scholars are still putting these arguments together as we go, drawing on literary, media, and cultural studies sources as appropriate to reinforce our interpretations. I have always been partial to Japanese cultural critic Azuma Hiroki's discussion of the "gameic" from his book on "gameic realism" (*gēmuteki riarizumu*).[9] His term encourages us to examine the non-traditional ways in which videogame structures inform non-game media and shape our everyday interactions. Certainly, university courses, conference panels, and academic journals are increasingly making the importance of games visible within Asian Studies. We would all do well to pick up the controller and enter the game. But first, if you'll excuse me, I'm back to finish off those damn jellyfish!

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[1] Whaley 2018.

[2] Whaley 2019.

[3] McLuhan 1964, 235.

[4] Peckham 2014.

[5] See https://www.mariowiki.com/Tanooki_Mario (https://www.mariowiki.com/Tanooki_Mario).

[6] See https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/stories/what-the-heck-is-a-tanuki-8-things-you-didnt-know-about-raccoon-dogs (https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/stories/what-the-heck-is-a-tanuki-8-things-you-didnt-know-about-raccoon-dogs).

[7] See https://www.mariowiki.com/Jizo (https://www.mariowiki.com/Jizo).

[8] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%E1%B9%A3itigarbha (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%E1%B9%A3itigarbha).

[9] Azuma 2007.

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