Japanese Role-Playing Games: Genre, Representation, and Liminality in the JRPG

by

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JAPANESE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES
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Edited by Rachael Hutchinson and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon

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Synopsis

Japanese Role-playing Games: Genre, Representation, and Liminality in the JRPG examines the origins, boundaries, and transnational effects of the genre, addressing significant formal elements as well as narrative themes, character construction, and player involvement. Contributors from Japan, Europe, North America, and Australia employ a variety of theoretical approaches to analyze popular game series and individual titles, introducing an English-speaking audience to Japanese video game scholarship while also extending postcolonial and philosophical readings to the Japanese game text. In a three-pronged approach, the collection uses these analyses to look at genre, representation, and liminality, engaging with a multitude of concepts including stereotypes, intersectionality, and the political and social effects of JRPGs on players and industry conventions. Broadly, this collection considers JRPGs as networked systems, including evolved iterations of MMORPGs and card collecting “social games” for mobile devices. Scholars of media studies, game studies, Asian studies, and Japanese culture will find this book particularly useful.
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The editors would like to thank the organizers of the Replaying Japan conference and Digital Games Research Association conference (DiGRA) that took place in Kyoto in August 2019, hosted by the Ritsumeikan Center for Game Studies. These two conferences in particular provided many of the papers that were later developed into essays in this book, and we took much inspiration from conversations in panels and hallways, in the Ritsumeikan cafeteria, in bars and cafés near campus, as well as the many hours spent on (thankfully air-conditioned) Kyoto buses in the 110 degree heat. In particular, we would like to thank William Huber from DiGRA, Koichi Hosoi and Aki Nakamura from RCGS, as well as members of the organizing team Geoffrey Rockwell, Mitsuyuki Inaba, Martin Roth, James Newman, Martin Picard, Keiji Amano, Shuji Watanabe, Hiroshi Yoshida, Mimi Okabe, Kazufumi Fukuda, Akito Inoue and Muneyuki Takahashi for creating a collegial atmosphere in Kyoto where so many scholars from around the world could gather and discuss videogames together. We would like to thank Fanny Barnabé, who hosted the 2020 conference online after originally planning to hold the event in person at Liège University, Belgium. The Discord channel and social events (including a tour of the Liège Game Lab completely recreated in Minecraft) allowed us to continue conversations about the JRPG and realize our vision for this book. Of course, this was very much a project completed in Covid times, and we would like to extend our sincere thanks and appreciation to the contributors, who patiently dealt with numerous rounds of edits, style changes and suggestions, as well as questions double-checking spellings of game titles, their platforms, years of release in different countries and so forth. The results of their hard work are clearly visible in the finished product, and any errors that remain are surely our own. We are particularly thankful to everyone for working to our schedule and deadlines, something that proved especially difficult with children at home doing online learning in the next room, dealing with illness of self and family, and generally managing with the logistics of life under lockdown, quarantine and travel restrictions. Natural disasters compounded the problem, with floods, snowstorms, blackouts and even a volcanic eruption working against us. However, we made it through, and we hope that working on this project provided some mental space for our contributors to (however temporarily) inhabit another world, of role-playing games and words on a page, as it did for us. We are also happy to note that contributors experienced some exciting life events during the writing process, with a new baby, a wedding, new jobs, promotions, transfers to new countries and new pets enlivening our email communications.

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A Note on Japanese Names and Sources

Japanese names are used according to Japanese convention, with the family name first and given name second – Horii Yūji rather than Yūji Horii, for example. For gamers used to the English name order, this usage will underscore the idea that the games under discussion are Japanese works. Macrons are retained, so we will use Kōei rather than Koei, for example. In the bibliography, all names appear surname first. Print works are listed according to the language in which contributors used them. In the case of translated print works, the publication date of the original version is indicated in square brackets.

Japanese game titles which consist of one word, untranslated for English release, are kept as they are (Ōkami) with an explanation of the meaning in the text. If the game title is a katakana rendering of English words, (Fainaru fantajii for Final Fantasy, Doragon kuesuto for Dragon Quest) we have used the English. Other games are discussed using the English title, with the Japanese in brackets at first mention, for example The Legend of Zelda (Zeruda no densetsu) or Tower of Druaga (Doruaga no tō). When Japanese and English releases use completely different titles, this is indicated in the text or explained in a footnote. As some Japanese games were never released in English, authors offer a translation in the notes for purposes of understanding. Authors indicate whether they used the Japanese or English release of the games under study in the reference lists for each chapter – if the game is listed as Doragon Kuesuto, they used the Japanese version, for example. In cases of comparison of games across languages, the reader will note both versions listed in the references. Games released only in Japan with no official translated title will appear in the references under the Japanese title. Readers can also use the abbreviated notations for game...
publications to see the market where that game was released: JP (Japan), KOR (South Korea), NA (North America), AU (Australia), EU (Europe) and WW (worldwide). Both developers (dev) and publishers (pub) are indicated; where the game was developed and published by the same entity this appears as (dev/pub). Although popular fan sites and blogs typically try to avoid ‘spoilers’ – revealing important plot points and/or endings to videogames – this is not possible for the current project. Critical analysis of texts involves taking the meaning of the whole text into account, which often means discussion of the plot and ending(s). On the other hand, most of the games studied here are now considered old or canon, and their plots well known, freely disseminated on the internet through wikis and walkthroughs. Gamers particularly sensitive to a certain series are encouraged to play the game first before reading the analysis.

Introduction

Japanese Role-Playing Games: Genre, Representation and Liminality in the JRPG

Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon and Rachael Hutchinson

The Japanese role-playing game (commonly abbreviated as ‘JRPG’) is one of the most popular genres of videogame in the world. Globally produced and distributed by major corporations like Sony, Nintendo, Sega, Square Enix, Capcom, Bandai Namco, and others, the release of new entries in acclaimed series such as Final Fantasy, Pokémon, or The Legend of Zelda is often a landmark event in gaming culture across the world. New JRPG titles consistently top annual lists of ‘most popular game titles’ in magazines like Time and PC Gamer, as well as online blogs like Polygon and IGN, selling millions of copies on Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo platforms, not to mention personal computers, smartphones and mobile devices. JRPG titles have featured in the Smithsonian Museum’s ‘Art of the Videogame’ exhibit in 2012, and in permanent collections at the Strong National Museum of Play (Rochester, USA) and the National Videogame Arcade (Sheffield, UK). The World Videogame Hall of Fame includes Final Fantasy VII (Square), The Legend of Zelda, Pokémon Red and Green, and Animal Crossing (Nintendo), all significant works from the genre. Classic titles from the 1980s and 1990s are periodically re-released in updated high-definition formats on new platforms, while major studios and independent developers increasingly take inspiration from these games to produce and market new titles, some of which make their JRPG origins a selling point. Despite its critical acclaim, global popular sales and large online following, the JRPG has received little scholarly attention, with no academic book-length studies devoted to the genre. Chris Kohler (2005) introduced Western audiences to the subject, with a comprehensive picture of the place of role-playing games in Japan and their deep convergence with other popular media. The few pages that Matt Barton (2008) dedicates to JRPGs contextualize the genre in a broader tradition, albeit relying on preconceived notions of linearity and visual style. Martin Picard (2013) argued for the specificity of Japanese geemu as a media form, followed by his essay with Douglas Schules and Jon Peterson (2018) locating the origin of early Japanese role-playing games on personal computers, deepening our comprehension of the genre. Mia Consalvo (2016) underlines the profound influence that Japanese games have had on gaming culture globally, and how their design and iconography constitute reference points for fans and industry creators. Rachael Hutchinson’s Japanese
Culture Through Videogames (2019) highlights how the design and narratives of some of the most popular Japanese videogames engage with deep-seated sociological issues and cultural themes, identifying ways in which the interactive nature of the medium is mobilized to explore them. Special issues of academic journals are increasingly taking Japanese role-playing games as a theme, while the Replaying Japan conference and journal recognize the impacts of Japanese videogames on both industry and society. On the other hand, examinations of specific genres and sub-corpora in the Japanese context have not had the degree of scholarly attention given to Western genres, demonstrating a gap of representation and knowledge creation between the two traditions. The scholarly literature described above remains shoehorned in a bigger discussion dominated by a North American narrative that relegates Japanese games to the margins. Further, the analysis of Japanese games often takes a purely formalist approach, eliding cultural meaning, or bluntly applies Western frameworks of knowledge to the Japanese object without recourse to Japanese understandings – a problem identified by Marc Steinberg and Alex Zahlten (2017) in relation to Japanese media studies. To combat these issues, we have sought to include a plurality of voices in the volume, with respect to both authors and the theoretical frameworks they employ. Through the book, European structuralists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are placed in conversation with Japanese theorists like Osaka Jun, while media critics Azuma Hiroki and Ōtsuka Eiji make multiple appearances. From Nakazawa Shin’ichi on the mythologies of Pokémon to Fukushima Ryōta on the network society, the work of Japanese scholars enriches the discussion and provides fresh perspectives for the English-speaking audience. Contributors draw on Japanese game criticism from weekly publications like Famitsu and writers like Sayakawa or Aoki Mashu, alongside interviews with game designers and work by designers-turned-scholars such as Endoh Masanobu.

It is notable that Japanese scholars themselves have differing approaches to Japanese role-playing games – Nakazawa Shin’ichi and Endoh Masanobu (2018) take an ethnocultural view of games Japanese people enjoy, touting the JRPG as a non-violent alternative to gameplay forms more prevalent in North America, such as the first-person shooter. We open and close the book with chapters by Japanese game scholars Koyama Yuhsuke and Nakagawa Daichi, who analyze the JRPG genre from its PC origins to its most recent iteration on smartphones and mobile ‘social games’ or soshage. Both are prolific scholars in Japan, having published books on the Japanese game industry. Their differing uses of the term ‘JRPG’ points to its fundamentally subjective status, but shows the diverse range of meanings attributed to the games associated with the genre.

Many gamers and critics struggle with the question: what exactly defines a ‘JRPG’? While answers vary, it is commonly assumed that some of the design decisions and choices in representation that shape role-playing games produced in Japan set them apart and warrant their own examination, which leads to the development of new knowledge tied to this distinction. The JRPG structures its knowledge on two axes – the conventions and dynamics of the digital role-playing game on one hand, and the Japanese production context on the other. Koichi Iwabuchi famously theorized that videogames, as an
audiovisual product like animation and walkmans, were a 'culturally odorless' commodity, that the roots of their production could be easily 'masked,' or erased through translation (2002: 27).

Interestingly, this statement is formulated at around the same time that, as a quick search for 'JRPG' on Google's Ngram viewer indicates, mentions of the JRPG picks up steam in the Anglophone world, re-emphasizing Japaneseness as a seemingly valid interpretative strategy, compelling us to look beneath the surface to uncover the games' 'Japanese' fragrance. This emphasis on the national in the context of the globalization of videogames as a cultural commodity begs for a reassessment of how knowledge on games and genre has been structured in game culture broadly, but also for a reflection on the function and effects of discursive categories. The Japanese role-playing game cannot be easily boiled down to a specific formula, and has fluctuated constantly to the rhythm of electronic platforms' transformations and the involvement of new designers, ideas, and innovation incentives. It remains outside the bounds of this project to establish the validity of the term 'JRPG' as an absolute. We recognize that, for many, the idea of the Japanese role-playing game is a source of discussion and debate that sparks exchanges, the mixing of ideas, and, more importantly, socialization. Genre, after all, can be said to be fundamentally a form of social action (Miller 1984: 153). However, the objective of this anthology is to broaden the range of postures towards the genre, highlighting, in the process, its functions and effects in relation to a gamic aesthetic that is framed as culturally-situated. Some of our contributors embrace the term 'JRPG,' finding in it a pertinent framework to establish a specific lineage, while others problematize the term, exposing assumptions born of their differentiation. This anthology adopts a text-centered approach, setting aside generalizations that have defined much discussion of the genre in the past in favor of close readings and deeper investigations of ergodic, aesthetic and thematic aspects. We have found that this helped generate a mosaic of interpretations and perspectives that account for the large, diverse, and messy corpus of the genre that can be best described not 'as a binary, but as a sliding scale' (Bitmap 2021: 8). As a category of digital product, the name 'JRPG' itself implies a notion of difference, something other than the more general 'role-playing game.' Its difference has been marked, and often defined by, its cultural origin, which this anthology partly attempts to unpack and complicate. Indeed, the 'JRPG' nomenclature, which emerged in common parlance amongst gamers before migrating to journalism and critique, and later to academia, mainly functions as a distinctive marker, separating it from the Euro-American design inclinations of role-playing games (Pelletier-Gagnon 2018). Themes, visual aesthetic, accessibility, technological affordances, media ecology, national origin and narrative development are only a few of the aspects of Japanese role-playing games that have long been identified as a differentiating factor. This collection of features, often expressed through a binary perspective, commonly assumes that role-playing games originating from territories associated with the 'West' (essentially pointing to North America and Europe) act as the normative standard, dividing the broader corpus between two poles where region and game design intertwine, encouraging exoticizing interpretations founded upon perceived socionational
perspectives. It also acts as a structural framework where texts that don't neatly fit into categories defined by Euro-American scholars tend to be overlooked. Thus, while the JRPG label brings our attention to different aspects of digital gaming, it also comes with assumptions and structural biases that can potentially pose prejudice to efforts for a more diverse understanding of videogames from a transnational perspective. These questions, some of which are explored within the pages of this book, warrant investigation from both game studies and Japanese studies scholars.

The Japanese role-playing game provides an interesting and complex research subject precisely because its specific sociocultural creation context (both real and imagined) is so deeply intertwined with a set of generic conventions and expectations. From the perspective of industry history, Japanese role-playing games, like RPGs designed and played all around the world, have their origins in tabletop games like Dungeons and Dragons (Gygax and Arneson 1974), themselves deriving statistics-based battle systems from military wargaming. Digital role-playing games like Ultima (Origin Systems, 1981) and Wizardry (Sir-Tech, 1981) had a large influence on succeeding iterations of fantasy roleplay on computers and consoles, solidifying certain kinds of aesthetics, settings, monsters and battle systems.

Japanese role-playing games in the 1980s were diverse, played on the PC, consoles and handheld systems, designed by small teams, some of which included non-Japanese creators. Some of these games would not fit the present idea of 'the JRPG,' which over time has come to mean a certain kind of party-based quest game with a certain kind of 'feel' and 'look.' Exactly how to define this feel and look is a matter of much debate and contention, but players, critics and reviewers seem to know whether or not specific game titles fit their expectation of what a JRPG is supposed to be like. Japanese role-playing games are thus defined in a circular fashion, with the 'fit' of individual texts in the category determined by comparison to other, already-existing texts. The 'JRPG' is thus a term indicating a discursive field, pointing to a textual formation made up of prior texts. Game texts signal their belonging to the genre by acting in accordance with convention, as well as referencing other titles through repeated or similar motifs, imagery, narrative themes, settings, character behaviour, and algorithms built to manage battle actions, item usage, inventory and so forth. Repeated iterations of small actions reinforce expectations and confirm to the player that the game fits the genre – saving gameplay by sleeping in a bed or by touching a magical crystal, practicing swordplay and archery on targets and rodents before taking on a real opponent, meeting different characters through the game environment who provide advice and assistance, buying items at shops in towns – all these actions tell the player they are playing a JRPG.

The postcolonial scholar Edward Said provides a method of analyzing textual formations, interrogating the connections between a text and its surrounding genre through the idea of intellectual authority. In literature, an author gains legitimacy for their work by positioning it in terms of other works that have gone before, through references and repeated textual elements. In his 1978 book Orientalism, Said explained: Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient; translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of
structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his texts – all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader… (1995: 20). Paraphrasing this theory in relation to videogame designers, we could similarly say that every creator of a Japanese role-playing game must locate themselves vis-à-vis the imagined idea of the JRPG; translated into the game, this location includes the kind of narrative structures they adopt, the types of structures they build, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in their games – all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the player, signaling that ‘you are now playing a JRPG.’

In Said’s theory of textual analysis, ‘strategic formation’ can be described as ‘a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large’ (1995: 20). This idea of strategic formation is very helpful when thinking about the JRPG. Said was discussing a writer’s positioning vis-à-vis the imagined ‘Orient,’ arguing that precedent and previous knowledge were crucial when creating the new artistic work. The author both refers to and relies on precedent, thereby affiliating the work ‘with other works, with audiences, with institutions,’ and ultimately with the discourse itself (1995: 20). Thus, we can say that every designer of a JRPG assumes some kind of JRPG precedent, and every game title in the JRPG genre affiliates itself with other titles, with audiences, with institutions, and with the genre itself, a circular and self-determined feedback loop that reinforces the discourse and extends it incrementally without placing it in danger of too-rapid change.7 In this way, creators and players are constantly positioning the game text vis-à-vis other texts. The formation we think of as the ‘JRPG’ is at the same time constantly in flux and strangely stable. The ‘JRPG’ is sufficiently stable as a term of art to cause game designers and critics to periodically declare it dead, stagnant, a genre whose time is up. An issue of the now-defunct magazine Gēmu hihyō (Game Criticism) devoted to the ‘essence of RPG’ provoked readers with murmurs of the ‘saturation’ and ‘stagnation’ of the genre as early as 1996, asking whether the genre had reached the peak of its development (Gēmu hihyō staff 1996: 50). The same year saw the release of Pokémon (Game Freak, 1996), one of the most recognizable franchises on earth. Over time, any genre will mature and new iterations will seek to distinguish themselves in some way – thus the player-character in Pokémon does not personally engage in battle, but sends monsters to battle on their behalf. Similarly, player-characters in Monster Hunter (Capcom, 2004) do not level-up their own health and strength, but acquire various scales, bones and hides from the monsters they kill which can then be crafted into stronger weapons and armour. From such small deviations the genre grows to encompass a more varied set of texts, and a historical perspective allows players to ‘fit’ the game title into the genre’s trajectory. On the surface, there may be little similarity immediately apparent in Monster Hunter: Rise (Capcom, 2021) and Persona 5 (Atlus, 2016). But knowing their roots, we can see how the games are related, and how they each contribute to the textual discursive formation we call the ‘JRPG.’ On the other hand, when the difference is something perceived as more fundamental, the debate will intensify or perhaps be rejected out of hand. Thus the battle actions of player-
character Link in The Legend of Zelda (Nintendo, 1986) do not depend on turn-based menu systems but rather direct action, using the controller to directly operate Link in a method closer to the joystick and jump/fire button of arcade cabinet controls. This difference leads to the categorization of The Legend of Zelda as 'action adventure' rather than 'role-playing game,' even though many other elements are shared with Dragon Quest (Enix, 1986) released the same year. Despite this historical debate over the game's classification, many scholars, critics and reviewers now see the latest iteration The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo, 2017) as a JRPG, its open world having much in common with Final Fantasy XV (Square Enix, 2016) released the year prior.

In editing a book of this kind, it is necessary to balance coverage of 'the canon' with space for unorthodox works that shed light on our expectations and perceptions of the genre. If asked to delineate a canon of the JRPG, one might quickly reel off a roll-call of series such as Dragon Quest, Final Fantasy, Tales of, Megami Tensei, Secret of Mana and Breath of Fire, in addition to cult titles like Chrono Trigger, Xenogears and Skies of Arcadia.8 Certain game titles and franchises fit the 'JRPG' mold so well that they encapsulate what audiences expect to see in Japanese role-playing games, and in turn feed genre-based knowledge boundaries and development, creating a circular genre representation that limits its corpus to what amounts to little more than stereotypes. Furthermore, dedicating chapters to each of these game series is simply not possible, and perhaps not desirable. The current volume has many gaps which we hope future researchers will fill – particularly regarding well-known series like Fire Emblem, Suikoden or Kingdom Hearts, and others which non-Japanese publics have yet to officially encounter, and which represent another challenge posed to our collective understanding of the genre. Instead we have made space for texts that directly challenge our expectations of what 'JRPG' are, such as Black★Rock Shooter: The Game, Dark Souls, and the mobile title Fate/Grand Order. We call these games 'liminal' as they often stand on the border of, and create bridges between, different generic or cultural territories through mixing formal design elements, situated cultural representations, and even discourses about the genre itself. The inclusion of Final Fantasy XIV, for example, may raise eyebrows as the only MMORPG under close discussion in the volume. But as the most successful online iteration of a well-established JRPG series, it stands as an exploration of what happens when expectations tied to the Japanese role-playing game encounter the online multiplayer context. Moreover, as shown in several chapters, this interest in online connectivity is not a new element of the JRPG genre, but casts light on our assumptions regarding player interaction – with the game, with other players, with networks in various forms. This is the type of new connection that we hope will be generated by navigating the margins.

The initial idea for this anthology emerged from the context of increased interest given to the study of Japanese videogames in various international conferences, particularly the Replaying Japan conference series. Initiated by the Ritsumeikan Center for Game Studies and the University of Alberta, this forum is instrumental in fostering communication channels between scholars and graduate students from Japan and elsewhere around the study of videogames. Many of the contributors of this collection are long-term
participants of this forum. Together, this volume groups interventions from both established
scholars and junior researchers coming from a diverse array of cultural backgrounds, including
North America, Europe, Asia and Oceania, which is itself reflective of the reach of Japanese role-
playing games as transnational cultural products and their subsequent co-construction in
different regions. The anthology is divided into three parts that group chapters examining
different aspects of the JRPG genre through the close reading of a case study. Part One,
'Genre,' assembles essays that seek to untangle and problematize traditional narratives and
definitions of Japanese role-playing by zooming in on specific aesthetic, technological, formal
and marketing elements that characterize their lineage. Koyama Yuhsuke opens this section by
taking the reader back to the 1980s, with a provocative reexamination of the dominant narrative
positioning of Dragon Quest (Enix, 1986) as the work that cemented the arrangement of formal
elements that have come to define role-playing games in Japan. Koyama recounts the
incremental development of role-playing game conventions in Japan from early computer-based
dungeon crawling simulation experiments to the 'ease of play' revolution that paved the way to
early entries in the Dragon Quest series, described as 'transitional works' between a design
direction heavily influenced by Western aesthetics and the development of a local Japanese
tradition. Nökkvi Jarl Bjarnason next adopts a platform-centric perspective, arguing that
Japanese role-playing games have long been tied to console development and marketing, both
on an aesthetic and technological level. JRPGs released on Nintendo's Family Computer
navigated console limitations and found their appeal through a simplified cartoony design.
However, technological leaps and planned obsolescence that define transitions from one
console generation to the next mean that manufacturers need to regularly convince customers
to purchase new play hardware material. Role-playing games in the Final Fantasy series, for
example, became prime showcases to demonstrate what new hardware had to offer from a
visual perspective, from larger sprites to high quality computer-generated cinematics.
Fanny Barnabé invites us to take a deeper look at a distinctive type of denizen that populates Japanese
role-playing games, the tutorial character. Barnabé develops a typography that accounts for the
many rhetorical strategies through which designers convey the game's rules and elements of the
fictional world to the player through the voices of characters themselves. This register of
expression constitutes a guiding thread of the language of JRPGs in creating affect, but also, as
in the case of ironic tone employed in the Mother series, inviting the player to adopt a self-
reflective posture 'in relation to their playful practice and to their life.' The role of characters as
purveyors of narrative development in Japanese role-playing games also constitutes Joleen
Blom's contribution to the anthology. Drawing on Ōtsuka Eiji's theory of narrative consumption
and Espen Aarseth's notion of scriptons, Blom challenges the commonly received idea of
linearity in JRPG narratives by shifting our focus to the layered development of character stories,
best illustrated through the character profile slot mechanic in Trails of Cold Steel III (Nihon
Falcom, 2017). The conditions and pace at which information on characters is delivered asks the
player to reevaluate and restructure their knowledge regarding the gameworld, a phenomenon
described as 'additive comprehension.' This exploration of linearity also points to the underlying issue of Orientalism in the reception and discourse developed regarding Japanese role-playing games worldwide and the need to examine our relationship to the genre from a postcolonial perspective, which is the principal object of Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon's contribution. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's model of transnational circulation, Pelletier-Gagnon highlights how both the studio Imageepoch and the game Black★Rock Shooter: The Game articulate a process of reindigenizing Euro-American discourses on JRPGs, reaffirming the agency of the Japanese studio-turned-publisher in defining the genre, but also emphasizing its national origin as a site of legitimacy at odds with contemporary expression of the genre. This invites us to look at the 'JRPG' as a regime of knowledge that replicate marginalizing power structures.

Part Two of the book, 'Representation,' analyzes specific titles to interrogate notions of identity and portrayals of the human condition, which also extends, in some cases, to shedding light on the dialogue between text and players. This section investigates Japanese attitudes and beliefs expressed in these games surrounding gender, disability, youth empowerment, and issues of representation, not only relevant to contemporary Japanese society, but also finding an echo in publics around the globe. Ben Whaley first considers the adaptation of parodic elements of the representation of the United States of America in EarthBound (Ape Inc., 1995). In particular, he addresses the implications of the localization of the Happy Happyist cult as a reference to the Ku Klux Klan racist organization, part of the assemblage of elements that designer Itoi Shigesato included in the game. This instance of 'harmonized dissonance' confronts the player through a case study in which adaptation does not completely 'overwrite problematic nuances of the original parody,' generating discomfort in the midst of otherwise whimsical farce.

Loïc Mineau-Murray next examines the portrayal of female protagonists in Tales of Phantasia (Bandai Namco, 1995) and Tales of Berseria (Bandai Namco, 2016) from the point of view of fighting styles. The comparative analysis focuses on the link between ludic and narrative agencies, and how available battle commands and armaments reflect on the placement of female characters within the development of story events. Both the heroic fantasy and shōnen traditions, which have served as major inspirations in JRPG development, were traditionally preoccupied by gendered male-centric power fantasies, while women were limited to healing and support roles. This lineage is challenged in Tales of Berseria where Mineau-Murray sees Velvet as representing the turn towards a queering of offensive roles, which, in this case, means leaving medieval weaponry aside in favor of demonic claws. In new fighting styles tied to the identities and struggles of their wielders, the player is confronted with a 'decentering of the male protagonist's point of view' on both levels of gameplay and themes.

Following the evocative trail of status ailments common in role-playing games, Andrew Campana uses Chrono Trigger (Square, 1995) to explore how disability is negotiated within JRPG texts and in their periphery. While 'the act of gameplay itself is the arrangement of enablings and disablings,' it emphasizes the ableist roots of RPG logic as a statistic-raising enterprise; any status effect is temporary hurdle in an inescapable race for proficiency. Characters coded as disabled allow us to come in contact with
the realities of disability in an embodied, and thus more intimate, fashion, be it through a defective robot or a mute protagonist. This reading then turns towards the other side of the screen where Campana offers us a glimpse of the world of Japanese RPG audiogames designed by blind and low-vision players, sonic and tactile alternatives to the occulocentrist conception of games as a cultural and technological assemblage. Rachael Hutchinson next invites us to reconsider the Final Fantasy franchise from the perspective of its disabled characters, to expose its techno-centric narrative where impairment is interpreted as an opportunity to better one's power and agency. Illustrating this tendency is the case study of Final Fantasy XV (Square Enix, 2016) through the companion character Ignis who, over the course of the game, experiences a loss of vision, leading to meaningful moments representing the agency and subjectivity of disabled people, but ultimately finding an unrealistic conclusion as a condition to overcome. Hutchinson exposes the normative nature of the genre in establishing fixed personas and archetypes, further accentuated by editorial choices in leaving select narrative elements outside of the main story, establishing a hierarchy of knowledge within the game as a 'simultaneously "open" and "closed" text.'

Social critique of contemporary Japan is pervasive in Persona 5. But in its denunciation of daily injustices and the Japanese political climate, Frank Mondelli finds a counterproductive idealization of individuality as produced by mass media. In his chapter, Mondelli brings the game director's concept of 'experiential semiotics' (a metaphorical visual regime that finds value in exaggerating a subjective perception of the world) into dialogue with Osaka Jun's idea of historical time and the quotidian, converging into a discussion of the game as a ludonarrative assemblage that reinforces a sense of routine and everydayness. Mondelli walks us through Persona 5's evocative streets, subway, calendar system, and user interface to highlight how the game message of political reform is restrained by its design choices.

One of the goals of this anthology is to acknowledge the elusive nature of the JRPG, with texts that bridge the local and the global, technological platforms, and formal design elements, forcing us to reconsider the value of generic borders that we commonly draw. Part Three of this anthology, 'Liminality,' stands as an experiment and an exercise in purposefully loosening our footing regarding the expected nature of Japanese role-playing games, focusing on outlier cases that help us better understand the lineage of the genre.

Douglas Schules first examines the development of Japan's network communication technologies between the 1990s and 2010s, finding online connectivity as a discursive practice embedded in many of the role-playing games developed during this period in Japan. It is by now well established that videogames act as discursive objects, and as textual statements in a broader cultural discourse. Schules extends this work by investigating the 'community system' (or 'social link system') of Persona 3 (Atlus, 2006) in terms of networked practice, that itself may be read as a discursive structure. Emerging virtual platforms such as the PlayStationmk2, Nico Nico Doga, and Ebook Tops reviews position Persona 3 not only as a transitory text, but as a rhetorical object that illustrates and pushes forward the transition between print media and digital platform communication. Where Persona 3 appears in the context of online connectivity, Miyazaki...
Hidetaka's Souls series turns it into a core component, making visible the overlapping simultaneity of the space shared by players, but without allowing them to truly control socialization in a game where sudden apparitions and interruptions are the norm. Daniel Johnson explores the uncanny opacity of socialization nurtured in the Dark Souls series and posits the asynchronous socialization of evocative bloodstains, ambiguous messages and ethereal phantoms as evidence of a system that walks the line between isolation and connection. In preventing (but always showing signs of) player companionship, the game evokes its mesh of interconnected clients, but grounds its players to their own particular database iteration, or, as described by Fukushima Ryōta, their own individual 'myth.' Connecting the aesthetic regime of the series to the 'network effects' that come to define our interactions with digitized information and database structures, Johnson reads the uncanny repurposing of the staple elements of Japanese role-playing games as a self-reflective text on the nature of connected games.

William Huber next interrogates the weight of political allegories structured by the geography of Hydaelyn, the world of Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn (2013). As in many MMORPGs, the game interconnects regions and territories, populations and cultures, that find their inspiration in uprooted human societies from different historical periods, creating a patchwork of politically-charged spaces. Drawing on criticism of Jameson's definition of allegories as national struggles in non-Western contexts, Huber redefines the function of political representations provided by Final Fantasy XIV in regards to Ōtsuka Eiji's theory of narrative consumption, meant to 'provoke attitudes and affect regarding the fictive setting' as well as potential allegory for the nature of the materiality of gaming itself.

The closing chapter explores how Japanese studios have adopted mobile platforms, augmented reality and 'social games' to deploy and rearticulate the conventions of role-playing games. Nakagawa Daichi expands on Nakazawa Shin'ichi's work on mythological thinking and Azuma Hiroki's concept of game-like realism, to discuss the stakes behind the transition of Japanese role-playing games' change of focus from narratives to collections. In Fate/Grand Order and Pokémon GO (Niantic 2016), Nakagawa sees a return to humanity's pre-narrative mythical thinking through the free association of characters and symbols, coming closer to addressing humans' fundamental drive for unrestricted play. Nakagawa further states that these structures reveal the challenges of contemporary information societies and their imaginaries in which the pluralization of micronarratives embodies a vector of diversity, but also fuels the post-truth era. Often criticized for their ruthless monetization practices, Nakagawa unpacks the lineage and situates the cultural significance of Japanese role-playing games on mobile devices.

In sum, the volume constitutes a desire to establish a groundwork for the study of the corpus of games known as 'JRPGs' from their origins to contemporary representatives of the genre. Expressing different perspectives and critical approaches, the individual chapters of this collection converge to support a central thesis which puts forward the fluidity and liminality of the genre known as the Japanese role-playing game. We hope this book will serve as a fruitful provocation for further research, producing new conversations around genre, roleplaying and the global videogame industry.
the Strong National Museum of Play, the World Videogame Hall of Fame may be viewed at
Accessed 28 September 2021.2. Consalvo (2016) explores the leverage of ‘Japaneseness’ in
the game industry, both in Japan and overseas.3. Examples include Kinephanos: Journal of
Media Studies and Popular Culture (5:1, December 2015), Journal of the Japanese Association
origins in detail. While Dungeons and Dragons was not the only tabletop RPG to influence
videogame development, it is arguably the most well-known.5. Young (2018: 4-6) describes the
same circularity in the defining features of fantasy literature.6. On the importance of reiterating
the details of convention to create familiarity for the player in RPGs, see Voorhees, Call and
Whitlock (2012: 12-13).7. Of course, such paraphrasing is simplistic and does not take account
of the power dynamics operating between Western artist and their imagined Orient in the
Orientalist discourse. Taking such power structures into account in this case, the JRPG can be
seen simultaneously as a Japanese response to Western game industry expectations as well as
a Western audience response to particular kinds of role-playing games designed in Japan.8. To
preserve readability here, studios and years of release are not listed in in-text citations, but may
be found in the references.9. See for example McAllister (2004), Paul (2012), Hutchinson
(2019).

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Part I Genre
Chapter 1 Evolution of a Genre

Dragon Quest and the JRPG

Yuhsuke Koyama

Introduction: Is Dragon Quest a JRPG?

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the birth of the Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) and its unique development by examining the history of the reception of Western RPGs in Japan and the early Dragon Quest trilogy, which had a profound influence on the spread of early RPGs. Dragon Quest is one of Japan's most iconic RPG series, a fantasy adventure game with turn-
based battles, where three to four characters form a party to explore the world. The game designer was Horii Yūji and the character design was by T oriyama Akira (of Dragon Ball fame), while the publisher was Enix, currently Square Enix. It is difficult to overstate the significance of Dragon Quest in terms of sales and popularity in Japan, as well as its role in shaping the genre known as the JRPG. This chapter will situate the original Dragon Quest trilogy as both a transitional and foundational text in the context of role-playing game adoption in 1980s Japan.1

Dragon Quest has a long history, across many platforms: the first game was released in 1986 for the Family Computer in Japan, and titled Dragon Warrior for release in North America on the NES (Nintendo Entertainment System). It was soon followed by Dragon Quest II (1987), III (1988) and IV (1990) for the Family Computer, then V (1992) and VI (1995) for the Super Famicom in Japan (although they were not released for the SNES in North America). The interval between releases widened later, but VII (2000) was released for the PlayStation, VIII (2004) for the PlayStation 2, and IX (2009) for the Nintendo DS. Dragon Quest X (2012) was originally released as an online RPG for the Wii console, but has also been ported to Windows-compatible platforms. The most current version is XI, which was released for the Nintendo 3DS and PlayStation 4 in 2017. Dragon Quest is so popular that a number of games have been released in which systems from other hit titles and series have been tweaked and adapted for the Dragon Quest world and characters.2 Square Enix has also released many derivative games, manga and animations based on the world and characters of Dragon Quest.3 Along with the Final Fantasy series, Dragon Quest is one of Square Enix's most important IPs.

This is not to say that all Dragon Quest titles, or all Japanese role-playing games, have met with equally positive reception outside Japan. Part of this is due to the image of 'JRPG' which titles are expected to fit. Individual JRPG titles have certainly gained acclaim in the West, as evidenced by the jubilant reception that Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo, 2016) has enjoyed around the world. As a genre, however, JRPGs have a surprisingly negative reputation, and 'JRPG' has even been used as a derogatory term. The reputation of JRPGs abroad can be summed up with the words of Bioware co-founder Greg Zeschuk, who said they were characterized by 'a lack of evolution, a lack of progression' (Burch 2009). Because JRPGs tend to come with low hardware requirements, some even say that all JRPG should be released on mobile hardware (Sterling 2009). What makes discussion of JRPGs difficult is the fact that not all Japanese RPGs are perceived as 'JRPG-like.' A typical example is Dragon Quest IX (Square Enix, 2009). The famous Dragon Quest series of games is credited with popularizing RPGs in Japan and is considered something of a national treasure. However, the ratings for Dragon Quest IX by review sites was not high, and the feedback was mixed.4 The main problem seemed to be that Dragon Quest IX allows for character creation, much like Dragon Quest III, but as an effect of this, the characters cannot 'chat' the way fully formed premade characters can.5 Players felt that party members were insubstantial, and they did not seem deeply involved in important narrative events. This is exemplified by the titles of the articles on the fan site: 'I was sad that my friends were too dry (dorai) because I could make my
own character.’6 The character system did not align with many players’ perception of what an RPG or JRPG is supposed to feel like. Experienced gamers would know that Dragon Quest games have always had a non-speaking player-character, a tradition that new installments in the series tend to honor. However, this would hardly make a difference for other gamers. What matters is that Dragon Quest IX did not neatly fall into the ‘JRPG’ category.7 So, what is a JRPG then? This chapter aims to present a historical analysis of how JRPGs as a genre evolved out of Western RPGs to form specific sets of expectations, that set them apart from other role-playing game traditions. My conclusions are as follows: First, the games of the original Dragon Quest trilogy (I, II, and III) are transitional, and therefore atypical examples of JRPGs. Second, the original Dragon Quest trilogy was a milestone in the sense that it created a beachhead for RPGs in Japan and marked the starting point of the history of JRPGs. Third, the early history of JRPGs is essentially the history of how subsequent Japanese RPGs attempted to differentiate themselves from the original Dragon Quest trilogy in a trial-and-error process that would greatly influence Dragon Quest IV and later sequels. These three points are discussed in the rest of this chapter.

Definition of JRPGs

The word ‘JRPG’ did not originate in Japan, and it is uncertain when it first emerged abroad. Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon (2018) surveyed 2054 reviews of Japanese RPGs from 1992-2014 from Anglophone gaming news and review websites. According to him, the first appearance of the word JRPG was a review on the British site Eurogamer for Tales of Symphonia published in 2004. Later, old Japanese RPGs were released on the Wii’s Virtual Console, and the word ‘JRPG’ appeared repeatedly in Eurogamer’s reviews. This seems to have popularized the term JRPG. As for books, Kohler’s 2005 volume on Japanese games does not mention ‘JRPG’ or ‘JRPGs,’ but Barton’s 2008 history of computer RPGs in the United States contains the terms a total of 71 times (‘JRPG’ 20 times and ‘JRPGs’ 51 times). The term ‘JRPG’ seems to have come into wide use around this time. The Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 were released in 2005 and 2006, respectively, and since then, the status of Japanese games overseas has declined significantly. In this sense, it may not be wrong to characterize ‘JRPG’ as a word that symbolizes the stagnation of Japanese games.

A variety of recurring claims are made about the differences between Western RPGs (hereafter referred to as WRPGs) and JRPGs. Schules, Peterson, and Picard (2018: 114) summarized those claims based on an analysis of online forum discussions (Table 1.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JRPG Traits</th>
<th>WRPG Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confinement to world</td>
<td>Sandbox exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defined characters</td>
<td>Character customization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anime/cartoon style art</td>
<td>&quot;Realistic&quot; art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited narrative choice, singular story</td>
<td>Narrative plurality, multiple story paths/endings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy world</td>
<td>Medieval world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While many Japanese people may be inclined to agree with these claims, the issue of artwork does deserve some attention. JRPGs tend to favor anime or cartoon/manga-like artwork, while WRPGs have mostly featured realistic artwork since they were commercialized in the 1980s. This difference probably reflects a simple difference between Japanese and Western preferences in general rather than some noteworthy difference between JRPGs and WRPGs. Additionally, it should be...
noted that not all JRPGs use anime-style artwork. Since Japanese RPGs were created using Western RPGs as a reference, some of them have adopted Western-style artwork as their 'authentic' artwork. A typical example is Wizardry Gaiden I: Joō no junan (often translated as 'Wizardry Gainen I: Suffering of the Queen,' 1991) and its sequels created in Japan. JRPGs began to deviate significantly from WRPGs a long time ago, so a comparison between current JRPGs and WRPGs might only end up confirming preconceptions about differences. What is most important is the following two questions: when did JRPGs begin to diverge from WRPGs, and from what type of RPG did JRPGs diverge? The answers to these questions are that JRPGs began to diverge from WRPGs in the early 1980s, and that JRPGs diverged from Western role-playing games that were released up until the early 1980s such as Wizardry or Ultima, which were said to be the two biggest RPG series overseas in Japan. This means we need to first look at the question of what a computer RPG was like in the early 1980s. We will refer to game scholar Matt Barton's 'Three influences [on computer RPGs] that were at least as important as D&D (Dungeons and Dragons)' (Barton 2008:13) and game journalist T ama Yutaka's concept of 'three generations of TRPGs' (T ama 1995). Matt Barton's 2008 book, one of the few historical accounts of the history of computer RPGs, identifies tabletop sports simulation games and war games as the precursors of the tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) like D&D that became the ancestors of computer RPGs. First were tabletop sports simulation games and war games, both being 'games of dice and data.' The important point of these games was to deal appropriately with some immediate situation caused by various probabilistic factors, to utilize or sometimes conserve resources at hand (for example, substitute players or reserve troops), and to achieve a goal. The second influence was J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy. The third was the computer game Colossal Cave Adventure (1976) that recreated Tolkien's world as a computer adventure game. Next came D&D, the precursor of all TRPGs, and lastly MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) games and roguelike games on early large computers, or mainframes. Regarding the difference between RPGs and adventure games, Barton (2008: 6) says that 'the adventure gamer works with definitions and syllogisms; the CRPG fan reckons with formulas and statistics.' Barton also states that inductive reasoning is a frequent component of RPGs but rare in adventure games. At that time, the essence of an RPG was not about appreciating sprawling stories, as was the case with adventure games. Instead, player-characters enjoyed battle-filled adventures in well-circumscribed small worlds in which they experienced small stories. In contrast, T ama Yutaka's 1995 book tried to clarify the concept of an RPG by framing the evolution of TRPGs as involving three generations and identifying the ways in which early CRPGs echo those generations in Japanese perspective (see Table 1.2). The first generation of TRPGs was mainly based on the battle systems typical of D&D (Dungeons and Dragons) and T&T (Tunnels and Rolls). The CRPG equivalents of these games would be Wizardry I, II, and III. The second generation of TRPGs involved painstakingly constructed lore and worlds, examples being Traveler, Rune Quest, and so on. These games placed greater emphasis on the player becoming a resident of the world. Equivalent CRPGs would be Ultima I, II, and III. The third
generation of TRPGs emphasized characters and stories, with the Star Wars and James Bond 007 RPGs being representative of this generation. Equivalent CRPGs would be the fourth installments of Ultima and Wizardry (Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar and Wizardry IV: Return of Werdna), with game scenarios written by Roe Adams.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Emphasis on TRPG</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>CRPG Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Battle system</td>
<td>D&amp;D (74)</td>
<td>T&amp;T (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wizardry I, II, III (81,82,83)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Game world</td>
<td>Traveler (77)</td>
<td>Rune Quest (78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ultima I, II, III (81,82,83)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Characters and narrative</td>
<td>James Bond 007 (83)</td>
<td>Star Wars RPG (87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ultima IV (85)</td>
<td>Wizardry IV (87)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fourth installments of Ultima and Wizardry are precursors of JRPGs in the sense that they assign great importance to the characters and the story. However, both series are also famously difficult to complete, which is decidedly anti-JRPG-like. In Japan, computer RPGs were the first RPGs to really gain traction because few people ever played TRPGs. As a result, the word 'RPG' in Japan came to be associated with such third generation CRPGs (Tama 1995: 83). Tama also wrote that Horii Yūji, a creator of Dragon Quest, saw RPGs as 'a system for talking about stories' and believed that Japanese people considered RPGs 'storytelling media that contain a system for having characters grow' (ibid: 82). In this chapter, however, I assert that the narrative properties of the Dragon Quest trilogy are not substantial enough to cast them as typical of the JRPGs that followed those early Dragon Quest games.

I will now consider the definition of 'JRPG' based on the above information. To clarify the argument, we need to separate game mechanics (notably character movements and battles) from the narrative that moves the story of the game forward toward its conclusion. Early RPGs had very limited game mechanics. In Wizardry I, it was almost impossible for players to do anything but engage in battle and move around. Dungeons contained no treasure chests; the only loot available was that dropped by defeated enemies. Throughout the history of WRPGs, evolving game mechanics have brought progressively greater degrees of freedom for players. The Ultima series began to allow players to fight and kill non-player characters. Dungeon Master (FTL Games, 1987), which is a dungeon crawling game, is a real-time adventure that requires players to react quickly. Role-playing games were also influenced by the Grand Theft Auto series (ASC Games, now Rockstar Games), which allowed players to freely commit crimes inside the world of the game. There is no doubt that WRPGs have developed to be more and more like simulators that allow gamers to play freely in a virtual world. In this context, it should come as no surprise that the action role-playing game (ARPG) has vanished as a separate genre in the West. If all games aim to simulate reality, every RPG becomes an ARPG. The one feature of JRPGs that really sets them apart from WRPGs is that JRPG developers come up with all sorts of ingenious ways to make the command-driven battle system fun to use for players.

As for narrative differences, the diversity and richness of RPGs produced in Japan should not be underestimated. JRPGs are not simply RPGs that follow a single narrative path. Differences in the ways JRPGs and WRPGs handle narrative do matter, but they are hardly so stark that they define JPRGs as a genre. Lastly, it should be noted that 3D
dungeon crawlers in the style of Wizardry have long been regarded as obsolete in the West but continue to be developed and released in Japan. The copyright and trademark rights of Wizardry are now owned by the Japanese company Drecom. Some of these works are even released in Western markets, for example, the Etrian Odyssey series (originally Sekaiju no Meikyū) by Atlus. Based on these arguments, we can define JRPGs as follows: Typically, they use a command-driven battle system and anime/manga-style artwork (although this visual style does not apply to all JRPGs), and the narrative style is split into two distinct types. One is the narrative RPG which follows a single narrative path and relies heavily on the enjoyment that players get from conversing with other characters. The other type is the dungeon-crawler RPG, strongly influenced by Wizardry and characterized by hack-and-slash game design. The original meaning of JRPG is, of course, ‘RPG developed in Japan.’ Games such as The Legend of Zelda series (Nintendo, 1986-), and Ys series (Nihon Falcom, 1987-), Dark Souls series (From Software, 2011-), Dragon’s Dogma series (Capcom, 2012-), and Soul Sacrifice series (SCE Japan Studio, 2013-) are not categorized as ‘RPG’ but as ‘ARPG’ in Japan, but are sometimes included into JRPG category in the West simply because they are RPGs that were developed in Japan. Today, however, non-Japanese indie developers also create games that use JRPG-like artwork and command-driven battle systems. For that reason, ‘developed in Japan’ is not necessary for the definition of a JRPG. It is notable that when a Japanese game company releases an RPG, it does not name the genre of the game as JRPG because JRPG is an imported term in Japan and not popular yet.

Popularizing RPGs in Japan

Computer RPGs and non-computer RPGs such as TRPGs and game books were introduced to Japan almost simultaneously. That means JRPGs were directly influenced by CRPGs; any impact from Barton’s ‘three influences’ was minor at the most. The process by which RPGs were popularized in Japan can be summarized as follows. Few non-Japanese RPGs were translated or adapted for release in Japan, except for some game books. Dedicated efforts by RPG enthusiasts to raise awareness of RPGs among Japanese gamers had a huge impact. The release of Wizardry ported for the Family Computer (1987) went a long way toward popularizing RPGs in Japan. After that, major titles were localized to better fit the Japanese market. In the initial stage, popularity rose among dedicated fans who mounted an awareness campaign. RPGs were first introduced to Japan during the latter half of the 1970s and the early 1980s. Some early adopters obtained copies of Wizardry or Ultima, which could only be found in shops at Akihabara in those days, and played them on Apple II computers. Most Japanese gamers who first encountered RPGs felt rather confused. They were unfamiliar with both fantasy world settings and the game mechanics of RPGs. At the time in Japan, ‘games’ meant mainly simple action games and shooters such as Donkey Kong (Nintendo, 1981) and Space Invaders (Taito, 1978). To most gamers, RPGs looked intriguing but too difficult to play. However, some early adopters became enthusiastic RPG fans. Some made their own RPGs while others wrote articles about them in gaming magazines (see Fig. 1.1). These concentrated efforts to make mainstream gamers more aware of RPGs were a pivotal moment in the history of RPGs in Japan.

Figure 1.1 The “R.P.G.

Gaming magazines published a wide range of content aimed at raising awareness of RPGs, from introductions to non-Japanese computer RPGs like Wizardry and Ultima to articles about TRPGs like Dungeons & Dragons and Tunnels & Rolls, explanations of Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings books and the fantasy world of Middle Earth that they depicted, and introductions to non-Japanese mythologies like those from Babylon, India and northern Europe. At the same time, game books were being translated as well. After 1984, many works by Steve Jackson and Ivan Livingston were translated. These fan activities continued apace even after the release of Dragon Quest I in 1986. Young gamers who fell in love with RPGs were voracious in their demand for materials that would help them understand the histories and stories that lay behind these games. In addition, the gaming magazine Comptiq published a series of TRPG replay articles entitled Record of Lodoss War (Rōdosu tōsenki, 1986) that were also published as a novel in 1988. The result of these many and varied awareness-raising activities is that most modern-day Japanese gamers have a thorough understanding of Western fantasy worlds.

Adapting Action Games and the ‘Ease of Play’ Revolution

Considering the localization process, we see role-playing games moving from a niche to a mainstream market. Japanese game developers absorbed RPG elements into their work in two ways: first, by adding RPG-like elements to action games, and second, by developing new RPGs with systems that were simple and easy to understand for Japanese gamers. RPG-like elements included the use of hit point systems instead of having players suddenly die, gaining experience points to level up, equipping and using items, and narrative content. Some examples of action games that included RPG-like elements were the arcade game The Tower of Druaga (Doruāga no tō) (Namco, 1984), the console game The Legend of Zelda (Nintendo, 1986) and the PC game Hydlide (T&E software, 1984). These games established the ARPG as a genre. ARPGs were trailblazers in the sense that they paved the way for the introduction of RPGs in general to Japan.

Examples of simplified Japanese RPGs include The Black Onyx (BPS, 1984) and Mugen no Shinzō (Crystal Software, 1984), both released for PC-8801 and other PC platforms which were sold in Japan only. The Black Onyx was the first hit non-action RPG in Japan. Players assemble up to five party members and explore a pseudo-3D underground labyrinth. However, characters could only execute warrior-type attacks and recover their hit points by taking medicine. Mugen no Shinzō adopted easy-to-understand elements from the two great RPG series that were popular at the time, taking Ultima’s 2D overhead view and Wizardry’s command-driven battle system. It preceded the first Dragon Quest by two years but had a user interface that was very complex and imperfect compared to that of Dragon Quest.

Another point to consider is the ‘ease of play revolution.’ When RPGs were beginning to spread in the first half of the 1980s, games were much more difficult to play than they are today. One reason is that games of the time were much smaller, meaning that developers relied on increased difficulty to keep players entertained for longer periods. Raising the level of difficulty is relatively easy for an action game, but adventure
games and RPGs are different. For games that have a story and an ending, some easy ways to increase difficulty include incorporating riddles that cannot be solved easily, laying traps that players must defeat in order to continue, creating expansive maps, and so on. This led developers to create games packed with extremely complex riddles. The trend peaked with Romancia (Nihon Falcom, 1986), which was full of absurd riddles and traps that would make it almost impossible to complete without game strategy information.

It was adventure games that preceded RPGs in the shift to easiness: command selection was adopted for the user interface. Until then, adventure games required players to enter commands as words and part of the goal of the game was to find the words. After the introduction of command input, the player could simply choose their next action from a list of available commands in that situation, and the gameplay became more about enjoying the story. The first Japanese adventure game to use the command input system was Hokkaidō rensa satsujin: ohotsuku ni kiyu (Hokkaido Serial Murders: Disappearances in Okhostk) (1985, LOGiN Soft), by Horii Yūji before Dragon Quest. The RPG that finally chose a different path was Ys I: Omen (Nihon Falcom, 1987). It was advertised as 'an RPG for a kinder time' and aimed for a level of difficulty that would keep it accessible to all players (Fig. 1.2).

Figure 1.2 Advertisement for Ys I: Omen in Beep (September 1987 issue). Image courtesy of Beep, magazine.

In Ys I, however, the player-character reaches the highest possible level after entering the final dungeon (the Tower of Dahm). After that, the game turns into a simple action game, making it impossible for players without skill at action games to complete the game. All ARPGs required some player skill, which is mostly likely one reason why most JRPGs moved toward a command-driven battle system that did not require gamers to have any skill at action games.

The 'ease of play revolution' also affected narrative. A large degree of freedom is often part of the attraction for RPG enthusiasts, but for beginning players, too much freedom is more of a hindrance than a help. In Hydlide (T&E Soft, 1984), players can freely move around the map. However, the placement of items that they need to enter new locations and the distribution of enemies serve to guide players toward where they need to go and make it clear to them what battles they should fight. This technique, devised to keep hapless players from getting too confused, was adopted in many subsequent works. The narrative RPGs that became prevalent after JRPGs became popular used not only such implicit guidance but also explicitly linear gameplay to make the story unfold.

**Dragon Quest as a Transitional Work**

This brings us back to Dragon Quest. Enix published the first installment of the Dragon Quest series in 1986, just as RPGs were achieving wider popularity in Japan. The game system used by Dragon Quest became a standard for RPGs in Japan. Notably, Dragon Quest was released for Nintendo's Family Computer (NES), which was used mostly by elementary and junior high school students. Previous RPGs had been released for PC only. At the time, few elementary or junior high school students had access to a PC, meaning that most young gamers knew little about RPGs. To fill that knowledge gap, Dragon Quest creator Horii Yūji began penning a column in the manga magazine Weekly Shōnen Jump to introduce readers to the game and give strategy advice for how to play it. Enix also aggressively released TV
commercials. They were rewarded for their efforts: Dragon Quest was released in an initial run of 700,000 copies (Ohshita 2001: 97). This may not sound like much by today's standards; however, the record holder in these days, T&E Soft's 1984 PC Game soft Hydlide had a total run of only 1,000,000 copies.17 Dragon Quest was the one of the greatest hit RPGs in Japan. Moreover, thanks to word of mouth, sales soon exceeded one million. Horii Yūji spent the three Dragon Quest games educating young gamers. To make the game easier to understand, Dragon Quest was made to be an adventure story about a single hero, and only one enemy was generated in battle. In Dragon Quest II (1987), players would be adventuring with a party of three. However, in order to help players get used to the game system, the game was designed to start with a single main character and add party members while playing. It was only in Dragon Quest III (1988) that the system was changed to allow players to form a party of up to four people to explore from the beginning of the game. Each time the series continued, sales grew as well. Dragon Quest II sold 2.4 million copies and Dragon Quest III sold 3.8 million copies (CESA 2001). The overwhelming success of the Dragon Quest series made its 2D field of view and command-driven battle system the de facto standard for RPG game mechanics in Japan. I would now like to consider some classic game elements present in Dragon Quest, as well as game elements that Dragon Quest made into classics. Compared with various previous RPGs, the initial Dragon Quest trilogy has a very simple adventure system. The number of character stats are very limited compared to those of many WRPGs of the time. There are neither wildly difficult riddles nor sprawling and impenetrable dungeons. Players can reach the final scene by leveling up, defeating enemies, and solving puzzles. The success of the Dragon Quest trilogy cemented the above-mentioned ‘ease of play revolution.’ Besides ease of play, the original Dragon Quest trilogy also emphasizes visual effects that accompany events. In Dragon Quest I, the screen flashes in seven brilliant colors when the hero uses the Rainbow Drop. In Dragon Quest II, using the Eye of Malroth in the poisonous swamp to open the Cave to Rhone causes rock to split and reveal the entrance to the cave. Consoles of the time had limited amounts of memory, so such events required the writing of dedicated programs. The combination of simple game mechanics and special programs for cinematic sequence direction highlights the emphasis that Dragon Quest places on the story. To repeat Tama's analysis, Dragon Quest is built on the premise that RPGs are ‘storytelling media that contain a system for having characters grow’ (1995: 82). Dragon Quest is very JRPG-like when it comes to the way it handles story as the narrative RPG, which follows a single narrative path and relies heavily on the enjoyment that players get from conversing with other characters. In other respects, however, the original Dragon Quest trilogy remains faithful to the basic tenet of the WRPGs of the time: the player is the hero. A player can name their character and turn it into their alter ego in the game world. Player-characters never speak a word, and even when asked to give an opinion, they can only offer ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ This is done to keep a player from getting the feeling that their character is saying things that they themselves would never say. The hero mainly acts in accordance with the player's imagination. Also, characters other than the hero do not speak again after the hero has befriended them. In
the middle of the game of Dragon Quest II or III, the player-character can acquire a ship. After that, the range of activities available to the player widens considerably. Also in the middle of the game, the player-character travels around the world collecting all sorts of event-triggering items (crests, orbs, special weapons, and so on), known as ‘flags’ in Japanese usage. Completing the collection lets the player-character enter the final dungeon, and the story reaches its climax.

Players having a certain degree of freedom, for example the freedom to collect the flags in any order, is an aspect of Dragon Quest that is more reminiscent of a WRPG than a JRPG. Thus, Dragon Quest is a liminal game, acting as the transitional point between Western influence and the development of a Japanese tradition.

In sum, we can say that elements inherited from classical WRPGs are as follows: first, the main character is the alter ego of a player: the hero does not speak a word during the game to avoid getting in the way of the player’s imagination. Second, players have a large degree of freedom when moving through the story: key items do not need to be collected in a particular order. Third, the narrative is not intricate: battle and adventure are prioritized over a relatively simple narrative. On the other hand, elements established as characteristic of JRPGs are as follows: First, the use of 2D maps, including for dungeons.18 Second, a command-driven battle system. Third, a low level of difficulty to enable all players to complete the game, and fourth, visual effects for important scenes.

In short, while the initial Dragon Quest trilogy has some JRPG-like characteristics, the games have an identity of their own as transitional works that cemented the mass popularity of RPGs in Japan. That is why this chapter argues that the early Dragon Quest games are not easily classified as JRPGs. It is hard to argue when ‘real JRPGs’ started. As will be seen in the next section, the image of JRPGs has developed as each RPG has differentiated itself from the Dragon Quest trilogy. And those differentiation efforts are also incorporated into the Dragon Quest sequels. As for me, I would like to think that JRPGs began with Dragon Quest IV (1990). In Dragon Quest IV, the main character appears in the fifth chapter after the first four chapters in which characters in each chapter are different. This game design, which emphasized individual characterization, became the basic element of later JRPGs.

Breaking away from Dragon Quest: A New Identity for JRPGs

The story of Dragon Quest is extremely basic: a heroic player-character travels around a fantasy world until they defeat a final boss. The RPGs that followed were forced to differentiate themselves from Dragon Quest, with varying results. The following ‘characteristic’ JRPG elements emerged as games attempted to differentiate themselves from Dragon Quest: increasing emphasis on visual elements and bishōjo characters; ensemble casts and romance; and complex battle systems. I will now examine each of these in turn.

Many JRPGs use cutscenes or animated sequences not only during important points in the narrative but also in the middle of battles. In addition, many characters are bishōjo (beautiful girls) to please the primary male target audience. The Fantasm Soldier Valis (Mugen Senshi Valis, Japan T elenet, 1986), a series of action games with RPG-like elements, pioneered this use of animated sequences and bishōjo characters. In one animated sequence, Valis shows the main character (Aso Yuko) together with her rival the Queen (Kirishima Reiko), who has led her in a wild chase
around the world, and the enemy boss (Demon King Logless). Such cinematic directing style had a massive influence on later RPGs like Emerald Dragon (Bashou House, 1989). Animated sequences were also used in RPGs released for the PC Engine console. This console released a CD-ROM player as a peripheral; developers, mainly Hudson, were looking for ways to make use of the storage capacity of CD-ROMs. Tengai Makyou Ziria (Hudson, 1989) was a title released on CD-ROM that used many animated sequences and character voice-overs.

Animated sequences and character voice-overs become standard in JRPGs made for next-generation game consoles such as the Sony PlayStation and Sega Saturn. When telling a story using animated sequences, it is not easy to stick to the old RPG rule that the player-character is the hero. The player and the hero character inevitably become detached from each other; the player then becomes tasked with advancing the story while enjoying the antics of an ensemble cast that has the hero character at its center. This storytelling method requires that all characters, including the hero character, are treated in an essentially objective manner. This makes it possible to depict scenes that do not involve the main character. It also makes it possible to show the main character as caught in the middle of a large-scale unfolding event, only to eventually resolve the incident. If the concept that the main character is not an alter ego is taken even further, it becomes possible to let players switch between different characters in the middle of a scene or control ensembles as a group.

JRPG scenarios settled on a standard plot: a party of characters, including the hero (the main player-character), becomes involved in a serious incident and progresses the story to its conclusion, while performing side quests specific to each character. This is the plot of many still-running JRPG series including Final Fantasy (Square Enix), Tales of (Bandai Namco) and Trails (Nihon Falcom). Working with an ensemble cast consisting of multiple characters also allowed developers to depict relationships between characters. As major RPG series were released for home consoles, many of which were owned by teenagers, many games came to include a romance element. Finally, whatever the story is like, RPG players always spend a great deal of time engaged in battles. To make those battles fun, developers tweaked battle systems and character growth systems while retaining the basics of the command-driven battle system. Examples are Final Fantasy's Active Time Battle (ATB) system and the Linear Motion Battle System (LMBS) that characterizes the Tales of series.

Character growth systems include systems in which players get a certain number of points when they level up, systems in which they change jobs, skill trees and so on. Overall, while JRPGs may not seem to have developed or progressed very much, developers continue to innovate within the constraints of the command-driven battle system, as seen in the Turn Press battle system in Megami Tensei and Persona series or Action Time battle system in the Trails series.

Coming back to Dragon Quest, we can see how JRPGs became their own genre. The results of all this experimentation were and are implemented in Dragon Quest sequels. Dragon Quest IV (1990) has a different player-character in every chapter, with all of them banding together in Chapter 5. Other innovations that were adopted included a combat AI which does not require the player to enter commands for each character; simply select 'Fight' and each player...
will act on his or her own initiative. In addition, the actions of each character chosen by the combat AI are taken by the player as an indication of the character's personality, and become part of the character expression in the game. Another popular series, Final Fantasy, also began to make heavy use of animated sequences in installment IV (1991), which had a story that revolved around conflict between characters and made use of the ATB (Active Time Battle) system for the first time. In this way, huge hit series like Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy adopted innovations pioneered by other games and in turn introduced innovations of their own. As players took a liking to these innovations, JRPGs truly became a genre of their own and continued to develop as such.

Figure 1.3 (below) shows the historical role that the Dragon Quest trilogy played in enabling JRPGs to get their identity as a genre. JRPGs became distinct from old-fashioned WRPGs in the early 1980s. During the process of localizing and simplifying the RPG format for the Japanese market, developers made gameplay easier and integrated new narrative properties. Horii Yūji, the designer of Dragon Quest series, played a pioneering role in that innovation.

Figure 1.3 The historical role of the Dragon Quest trilogy in making JRPGs into a genre. Graphic created by author.

The impact of the Dragon Quest trilogy was so strong that Japanese RPG developers began to differentiate their works from the Dragon Quest trilogy. All these trials and errors laid the groundwork for the next mega-hit, the Final Fantasy series (first released in 1987). With the release of Dragon Quest IV, which integrated some of the innovations made by other RPG developers and introduced new ones (including the use of an AI), the concept of 'JRPG' had truly crystallized.

Conclusion: Future Possibilities of JRPGs

In this chapter, I analyzed the impact of the Dragon Quest trilogy to argue that the characteristics of JRPGs were strongly influenced by the specific way in which RPGs became popularized in Japan. The Dragon Quest trilogy played a pioneering role in popularizing RPGs in Japan, but its installments were also different from subsequent JRPGs in important ways. In a sense, the Dragon Quest trilogy served as a bridge between WRPGs and JRPGs, and may be viewed as a transitional work in the foundation of the genre. The process of RPG localization in Japan was also a process of refining what would be JRPG-like elements.

In terms of sales in the global market, JRPGs provide a unique gaming experience and cater to something of a niche, but it is a sizable niche even in the West. Some titles even sell more copies overseas than they do in Japan, for example the Final Fantasy series (Square Enix) and the Persona series (Atlus). The command-driven battle system does not require players to have quick reflexes, making JRPGs more universally accessible than some other types of games. Use of the latest and greatest new technologies is also not where the entertainment value of a game comes from; just look at the Pokémon series (Nintendo), the first installments of which (Green and Red) were released for Game Boy in 1996 even though the PlayStation had already been launched two years earlier.

Returning to the remarks with which we opened the chapter, the lack of evolution and low hardware requirements that are said to be the shortcomings of JRPGs, on the contrary, indicate that they are well-developed vehicles for a satisfying narrative experience. Today, the JRPG format has been adopted by developers around the world and continues to produce a variety of
While proofreading, I heard the news of the death of Koichi Sugiyama, the composer of Dragon Quest. His music was loved by many people, and the Dragon Quest music was used for the marching of athletes in the Tokyo Olympics. It is clear that part of the success of Dragon Quest is due to his achievements. I would like to express our condolences for Mr. Sugiyama.

Series of derivative games released for home game consoles include: Dragon Quest Monsters (Pokémon), Dragon Quest Heroes (Dynasty Warriors), Dragon Quest Builders (Minecraft), and Toruneko no Daibōken (Rogue). Dragon Quest Walk, which was launched as a game for smartphones, is also an adaptation of the Pokémon GO system for Dragon Quest. In addition to these series, there are many other titles for cell phones and smartphones.

Dragon Quest has also been adapted into a number of manga and anime series. Dragon Quest: The Adventure of Dai was serialized in Weekly Shonen Jump from 1989 to 1996, and has been animated twice, in 1991 and 2020. Dragon Quest: The Emblem of Roto was published in Enix's manga magazine Monthly Shōnen Gangan from 1991, and the first part of the story was made into an animated film in 1996. In addition to this, Dragon Quest has been developed in various other forms, including card games and live-action movies.

This was not so strange in the days when characters were represented by pixels, but it is very strange in today's games where characters are represented by 3D graphics.

In Japanese, ‘kyara-maiku dekiru yue-ni nakama-ga dorai sugite kanashikatta.’ The word dorai refers to a personality which is unemotional or overly businesslike, so the fan is complaining they could not make satisfying relationships with these characters.

Nintendo actually thought to release Dragon Quest IX with an overseas launch in mind. Developer Horii Yūji has said that Dragon Quest IX was ‘influenced by Oblivion and Diablo’ (Kollar 2010). It would make sense, then, that Dragon Quest IX is not very JRPG-like.

The original Wizardry series developed by Sir-tech for the Apple II was popular in Japan, ported to Japanese PCs and translated by ASCII Entertainment. There were many ‘spinoff tales’ or gaiden released only in Japan. Wizardry Gainen I was released for the Nintendo Game Boy in 1991 but never released in North America.

Tama Yutaka was a member of the Keiō Head Quarter Simulation Game Club with Naoto Kadokura, and in 1986, he and Hitoshi Yasuda launched Japan's first monthly tabletop RPG magazine, Warlock the Fighting Fantasy Magazine. Tama served as editor-in-chief until Vol. 35 in November 1989.

As Barton (2008) points out, Japanese games The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (Nintendo, 1998) and Shenmue (Sega, 1999) also had an influence on this extension of game mechanics and they played an important role in RPG history in the West. However, in Japanese Wikipedia, The Legend of Zelda series is categorized as ARPG and Shenmue as Action Adventure. These titles are not treated as RPGs in Japan.

Many indie developers are using various version of RPGMaker released by Kadokawa to develop their games. If you search for games on Steam using 'RPGMaker' as a search term, you will find many games by non-Japanese developers.

Record of Lodoss War was published under the Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko label, which was one of the first light novel labels in Japan (Saito...
2016). 'Replay' articles are recordings of how several players and game masters played TRPGs while consulting and conversing with each other. Many of the pieces are written in the form of plays. The serialization of replays of Record of Lodoss War, which began in the September 1986 issue of the magazine Comptiq, had a major impact on the spread of TRPGs in Japan.

Hydlide is an ARPG, first released in 1984 for the PC-8801, and later ported to the X1, PC-6601, FM-7, MSX, MSX2, and PC-9801 (the MZ-2000 version was ported and sold by Carry Lab Inc). In addition, Hydlide Special, which incorporates elements from its sequel, Hydlide 2, was released for the Family Computer. As can be seen from the fact that the game has been ported to various consoles, sales have been strong, with a total of 1 million copies sold on various PCs and 1 million copies sold for the Family Computer version, for a total of 2 million copies sold (Naito and Yamashita 1999: 4).

The Black Onyx was thus not the 'first RPG for PC' but the 'first hit RPG for PC.' According to Schules, Peterson and Picard (2018: 116), at least 15 RPGs were released before The Black Onyx. Super Black Onyx, which was adapted for the Family Computer, was released in 1988. It is noted that the producer of The Black Onyx is a Dutch video game designer Henk Rogers, not Japanese. Mugen no shinzō was not released in English, but could be translated as 'Heart of Fantasy.'

In the sequel, The Fire Crystal (1984), players can also create characters that can use magic.

This adventure game was designed by Horii Yūji as a play on the style of the weekly mystery novel TV dramas that are broadcast in Japan in a two-hour format. The story is about a detective who discovers that a body found in Tokyo is a Hokkaidō native, and as he conducts operations in various areas in Hokkaidō, a hidden conspiracy is revealed.

Much is unknown about Japan's best-selling PC game titles. Nihon Falcom's 1985 PC game Xanadu sold a total of 400,000 copies, which is still listed on Nihon Falcom's web page. However, according to Naito and Yamashita (1999), Hydlide sold a total of 2 million copies, 1 million for the various PCs and 1 million for the Family Computer. Following this, it cannot be said that Dragon Quest became the best-selling RPG in Japan on the launch day. However, both Xanadu and Hydlide are ARPGs, and there is no doubt that Dragon Quest was the best-selling non-Action RPG on its release date.

Displaying field and dungeon maps in 2D makes a game easier to understand for players. In that sense, these maps also belong under point 3. Starting in the latter half of the 1990s, 3D graphics became popular and JRPGs also began using 3D maps. However, Dragon Quest games continued to emphasize ease of play. In Dragon Quest VIII, for example, the player can pick up a map of a dungeon near its entrance.

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