ATARI TO ZELDA

Japan's
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in Global
Contexts

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Acknowledgments

It feels as though I have been writing this book for a very long time, and I doubt it will stop feeling like that even after it has come out in print. I still check the game industry news for reports of Japanese companies, and I gather stories of players who find their games compelling in some way. Yet I needed to stop writing at some point, and so you have this book now, an investigation of how Japanese videogames and the Japanese videogame industry have affected the North American industry and its players and developers. I have been successful in one sense: I still find the topic of Japanese videogames endlessly fascinating, so I doubt this will be the last I write on the topic.

Parts of this book have been published in different forms and altered as this book took shape. Much of chapter 1 was published as "Cosmo-Play: Japanese Videogames and Western Players" in *Critical Social Policy and Video Game Play*; a shorter version of chapter 2 was published as "Unintended Travel: ROM Hackers and Fan Translations of Japanese Videogames" in *Gaming Globally*; pieces of chapter 4 came from "Persistence Meets Performance: *Phoenix Wright, Ace Attorney*," published in *Well Played 1.0: Video Game, Value and Meaning*, and from "A Localization Shop's Tale: Bringing an Independent Japanese RPG to North America," published in *The Routledge Handbook of Participatory Culture*; and an earlier version of chapter 5 was published as "Dubbing the Noise: Square Enix and Corporate Creation of Videogames" in *A Companion to Media Authorship*.

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Introduction: The Floating World Travels West

The roots of my career as a game studies scholar took hold when my sister and I received our first home game system—an Atari 2600—for Christmas one year. My favorite game for it was *Space Invaders*. Although I was never a hardcore player, I occasionally got into the zone of playing the game, holding the perpetually descending horde of aliens at bay as my cannon slid left and right, shooting and fleeing shots at the same time. I also remember playing *Pitfall*, *Combat*, and the disappointing Atari version of *Pac-Man*.

Sometimes I went to the local drug store's arcade, usually after school report cards had been given out because the store rewarded each A grade with a certain number of tokens. Given my strong academic status at the time (I was a nerd), my pocket bulged with tokens, and I usually played *Centipede* or *Pole Position* until the tokens were gone. I also played the cabinet version of *Pac-Man* at our favorite pizza place while waiting for dinner to arrive. After a few years, I put away my console and stopped playing games, at least until I bought a PC in graduate school and discovered the world of CD-ROM games. During those early experiences, I never thought about where the games or consoles came from or who had made them. Yet even the few games and systems that I was familiar with reveal a mixture of American and Japanese games and systems comingling at the beginnings of a global game industry.

When I came to game studies in the early 2000s and wanted to reacquaint myself with the world of console games, I first bought a Sony PlayStation along with games from Square, EA, and other major global publishers. There was a curious absence in early scholarship about games, however. Where was the discussion of Japan's early influence in the industry? How could Nintendo be criticized for its depiction of gender roles without anything being said about the origin of many of the company's games? How

do players from many different countries think about games that come to them from near as well as far away? And how do the games themselves warp and shift as they make that journey?

Even when I was writing *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*, I had those questions in mind and knew that I needed to explore them in some depth. But the topic of Japan and its role in the game industry deserves more space than I was allowed in *Cheating*. Although I gradually outlined some topics and areas that were suitable for exploration, the terrain felt so vast and the responsibility to get it right so daunting that the project went on for much longer than I initially planned. While I was writing this book, the industry, developers, game players, and games themselves kept evolving. Now there is a thriving indie scene, a mobile game economy, freemium and free-to-play economic models, gaming in the cloud, social network games, and more. How could one book do justice to such a plethora of materials? In the end, I determined to keep things simple by bracketing my field of study and focusing on a few topics in depth, in a set number of areas, to understand the contemporary Japanese game industry. I had to jettison many topics and ideas for the sake of getting it done, but in the end it is a stronger book because of that framework.

From the Game Industry to Many Game Industries

It no longer makes sense (if it ever did) to talk about "the Japanese game industry" or even "the game industry" as if it were a monolithic entity. Platforms have expanded, the game-playing demographic is wider than ever before, and games are now large, small, polished, experimental, two-dimensional, three-dimensional, text-based, gestural, genre-specific, or mashed up. Game developers can work for large multinational corporations like Square Enix and Nintendo, or they can work in an apartment and sell their game at a site like the Tokyo Comic Market or online. Either version now also has the chance to be localized and sold in multiple markets outside the game's country of origin.

Growing industry segmentation makes sense and also signals a maturation of the market. Rather than focus on creating big-budget games for everyone (or more likely, young adult males) via all possible outlets, many industry actors now specialize and target their creations for particular demographic groups via carefully chosen platforms and through specific genres,

pricing conventions, and the like. More games are being sold as chapters in a series or with downloadable content (DLC) that adds more than just additional outfits or weapon packs. Some segmentation of the industry has always been present, but it has grown over the past decade. When I attended the Game Developers Conference in 2005, Microsoft's keynote message was that we were entering an "HD era" where core gamers would demand more visually sophisticated games than ever before. Although we have seen expected increases in processing power (for consoles) and polygon counts (for game graphics), we also have witnessed the release of the Wii, which changed who plays games and how people think about them.

We also have seen a rise in mobile games via platforms that did not exist until the mid-2000s. They include Apple's iOS and its App Store as well as Facebook, which gave developers a platform and hundreds of millions of individuals to target for the creation of social network games. New markets have emerged or solidified in Southeast Asia, China, the Middle East, North Africa, Russia, and India. Women now dominate certain markets and platforms, and older players are a key population segment courted by the industry. Markets also have bifurcated via platform segmentation—handheld games becoming more popular in Japan, console games in the United States, PCs in Europe, and online games in South Korea. Networks such as Steam and Xbox Live Arcade also have opened the gates for smaller, indie game developers to sell their games alongside industry giants.

All of these developments point not to one global game industry but instead to many small and diverse game industries. Each smaller industry is not necessarily isolated from the others, but we no longer can say anything with certainty about "the" game industry. Instead, we need to reconsider how disparate actors—such as the casual U.S. game developer and publisher Big Fish Games in Seattle, Canadian RPG-stalwart BioWare in Edmonton, publisher Tencent in China, and indie game maker Crispy's in Japan—are making different marks on a diverse industry and how different segments of a games industry are taking shape. Are the correct divisions console, mobile, social, and indie? Is there another way to distinguish between players other than hardcore and casual? Is region-locking still a viable way to divide up the global market? Segments of the game industries have their own answers to these questions, but deeper analyses and better answers are needed. In that way, game studies can help situate our understandings of

these overlapping game industries and their competing as well as collabo-
rating interests.

Japaneseness and Videogames from Japan

In the early days of arcades and Nintendo, many Western players did not
recognize that Japanese games were coming from Japan. They were simply
new and interesting games to play. Yet conversations among fans and in
the games media and games industry have arisen about the Japaneseness of
particular games and the potential benefits and drawbacks of such a marker.
Game developers and publishers speculate on whether a Japanese game's
Japaneseness should be downplayed or erased completely to avoid unpleas-
ant cultural "odors"—accomplished through extensive localization.[1] Oth-
ers wonder if Japaneseness in a game (such as in *Okami* or *Tokyo Jungle*)
should be highlighted, enhanced, and made a selling point. Critics try to
determine the elements within a game that actually express Japaneseness.
Is it simply the use of traditional Japanese cultural elements, or are there
technical or stylistic elements that can be considered Japanese?

It is difficult to identify a singular industry, and it is even more difficult
to say what a Japanese game is. Instead, I believe the concepts of "Japanese
games" and "games from Japan" have increasingly become convenient sig-
nifiers that push us to reify cultural origins and ignore or downplay other
factors, including industrial histories, funding structures, fan activities, and
the changing political and social contexts in which games are made, sold,
and played.

Scholars of Japanese anime also have thought about these issues in
relation to the animation industry and offer instructive ways of moving
past essentialist understandings of Japanese videogames. One useful entry
point is Thomas Lamarre's call to look beyond thematic analyses of Japanese
popular culture because most often the result is "a simple reproduction of
unitary, self-identical, and monolithic Japaneseness."[2] In such approaches,
according to Ian Condry, culture ends up "a dead specimen, studied as if
pinned to a board."[3] He believes that "interactions among businesses, spon-
sors, fan cultures, and genre conventions reveal the limitations of more
common explanations for anime's success, such as underlying Japanese
cultural foundations, the vision of individual auteurs, or economic
determinism."[4] Lamarre also points out that Japanese animation can still

"express or critique Japanese values,"[5] but focusing on those elements while omitting other considerations leads to "endlessly pointing and proclaiming, 'This is Japan, this is Japanese.'"[6] As Brian Ruh writes, part of the problem is that anime has come to signify Japan to such an extent that it is no longer due to "necessary elements within the text"[7] but simply because of its place in popular discourse, where anime itself signals Japan and Japaneseness.

What these scholars and other researchers reveal is that the question of Japaneseness in relation to popular culture is complex and evolving. Because of that constant evolution, however, it's useful to consider the history of how we have thought about Japaneseness and Western cultural products and practices. Of particular concern to me are not the lineages of certain art or cultural forms but recognition of how cross-cultural influences have been a constant between Asia and the West. Despite some recent proclamations of such "new" phenomena (such as Western interest in Japanese or Korean pop culture), taking a look at how we have theorized these relationships can help us to understand the current conditions in which culture is made and remade.[8] To that end, the next section goes back in time and into art history to explore some of the roots of Japanese culture and how they have become entangled with Western interests. This review is not comprehensive but is instead offered as an amendment to discussions of contemporary popular culture, which tends to erase origin stories or too easily settle for one line of history as the established one. The goal therefore is not to create a new history for Japanese games and Western interest in them, but to unsettle what we think of in terms of cross-cultural encounters, borrowings, and understandings in relation to the games we play.

Art History and the Visual Arts

Historically, certain cultural goods have been designed, implicitly as well as explicitly, to leave their country of origin—to meet the demands of a particular foreign market, to find a larger audience, or to serve the souvenir and tourist trades. Relative to those practices, certain types of Japanese creative arts have strongly influenced Western art and been a subject of fascination since well before the purported official opening of Japan to the West in the 1850s.[9] The influence was called *Japonisme*, a word that was coined in 1872 "to designate a new field of study of artistic, historic, and

ethnographic borrowings from the arts of Japan."[10] That interest—particularly in ceramics, textile design, and furniture making—extended from Europe to the United States.[11] Even before the term was coined, practices arose in the West to imitate and copy expensive or rare forms of Japanese art. For example, popular attempts to imitate the expensive and beautiful lacquerware products that were created in Japan led to the fad of japanning, which involved using imitation lacquer and in the late 1600s was thought to be "a fashion and a social accomplishment for a young lady."[12]

Art history is replete with discussions of the cross-cultural interests—borrowings, appropriations, and reappropriations—of any group being examined. As Warren Cohen argues in relation to the influences of Japanese and Chinese art in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "Asian aesthetics have affected American taste and the American conception of what constitutes art and beauty; they have influenced American architects, painters, and potters. Art is one part, one more piece of evidence for demonstrating that … the study of Western Civilization is not enough to explain American society."[13]

Japanese art found an audience in artists and art collectors in Europe and then the United States, and they all contributed to the success of Japonisme, "the late nineteenth century taste for exotic Japanese aesthetic properties."[14] That fascination led to the incorporation of Japanese objects (such as fans, kimonos, and cherry blossoms) into paintings, the borrowing or adaptation of Japanese styles or motifs, and the dissemination of those markers into American art more generally.

Anime scholars also discuss the origins of Japanese art and the ways that it influenced later Japanese art and culture, seeking to warn us against easily constructed trajectories between particular cultural practices. Condry relates how media studies scholar Takuji Okuno believes that the roots of today's "cool Japan" initiatives trace back to those foundations, where "picture scrolls of the twelfth century led to the early comic-book-style *kibyōshi* of the Edo era, which became manga in the twentieth century. He identifies lavish kabuki performances as the precursors of anime."[15] Lamarre points to the problematics of such practices, arguing that "looking exclusively at the art side of anime tends to encourage an acceptance of received lineages for traditional art, and consequently the emphasis on Japanese art traditions easily turns into an insistence on the unity, antiquity, and continuity of Japan and Japanese traditions."[16]

What I want to signal here is not any unity or purity of origins for Japanese art but instead the continual ways that cross-cultural influences and interests kept arising between Japanese art and artists and their Western counterparts. Those early activities set the stage for the continual cultural crossing or interweaving of Japanese and American cultural influences. Even though many of the artists most strongly affected by Japonisme were European, those artists were considered the dominant, most influential practitioners of their time. The Impressionists, for example, are still regarded as masters of color and light in painting. Exploring how the aesthetics, artistic practices, and context of Japan played a role in their artwork also helps us to understand Western culture and aesthetics. American artists drew from those same sources and with similar results. How have those elements of culture carried over into Western game design? How American is an American videogame?

That linkage or nascent global practice is also an articulation (in Stuart Hall's sense), drawing together or conjoining two separate areas of inquiry or artifacts and demonstrating their connections.[17] Even during the time of Japan's alleged isolation from the world, artists and merchants from the West traveled there to do business and gain inspiration. That led to cultural borrowings and appropriations on both sides. Events such as World Fairs and World Expositions brought Japanese art and culture to a wider audience than simply the art world. It suggests that the recent success of Japanese media products globally is not a historical anomaly or a new phenomenon. Although both periods of history draw from different types of culture—high culture and popular culture—they demonstrate the hybridity that culture cannot escape. The "artistic nationalism" that Winther-Tamaki argues Japanese and American artists tried to preserve was never fully successful in maintaining clear boundaries for what was/is "Japanese" and what is/was "American."[18]

In this brief history of the popularization or spreading acceptance of Japanese art in the West and in the United States, in particular, certain themes and practices emerge. At first, most Japanese art was considered simply foreign, but American art collectors and museum directors slowly began to draw distinctions between various forms of art and make judgments concerning its quality. For example, the popularity of Japanese porcelain in Europe (which began to be manufactured in the seventeenth century) led

to specialized production processes because "some pieces were especially made for the export trade, depicting Dutch merchant ships and brocaded 'Japan' patterns."[19] The popularity of Japanese art did not abate over time: "The enormous demand in Europe and America for Japanese fans radically altered production methods. Mass-production techniques were brought in from the early 1860s when vast quantities of fans were exported in order to satisfy the ever-growing demand for 'something Japanese.'"[20]

With that growing influx to the West, dealers, collectors, and museum directors learned to take greater care in seeking out "serious" quality pieces of Japanese art rather than accepting only the cheaper "export" models that were beginning to proliferate. Yet that popularity was not uncritical or unshaped by the biases and particular interests of individuals who had the authority to make purchases or influence the tastes of others. Thus, the painter John La Farge "sincerely admired many of the Japanese art objects with which he came in contact, [but] he tended to favor small, intricate objects such as sword guards of refined miniature metalcraft…. [T]his focus on diminutive qualities of Japanese culture was often constituted as a gendered contrast with American masculinity."[21]

As collectors and dealers traveled to Japan, Japanese art began to appear in exhibitions and museums, in regular and special collections, and in traveling shows based on particular themes. At the Centennial Fair in Philadelphia in 1876, the Japanese government "devoted tremendous resources to stage an impressive show of Japanese arts and crafts for the first major introduction of Japanese culture to the American public, and the response was enthusiastically positive."[22] Certain museums became known for their extensive collections of Japanese art, including the Seattle Art Museum and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (which collected over seventeen thousand works of art from Japan).[23] European and American painters traveled to Japan to learn about indigenous styles and to incorporate Japanese motifs, styles, techniques, objects, textiles, and artifacts into their own images. Exposure to Japanese arts spread, and the styles of that art were diffused into the work of more and more Western artists.

Such activities are never ideologically neutral and do not occur with little thought or consideration. Art collectors and dealers deemed certain styles and forms of Japanese art "more sophisticated' and "more authentic" than other styles and forms, and so certain artistic goods were more likely to be considered good or worthy by American patrons. Japanese art began

to be popularly associated with particular media (wood block paintings, lacquerware, and fans) and particular styles (asymmetry and vertical rather than horizontal spaces). Art collectors and consumers were encouraged to develop tastes for particular styles and forms of art to make distinctions and judgments. Key gatekeepers functioned to give access to art and also to interpret that art, defining both what was available for critique and what the terms of that critique should be. Japanese art entered into circulation in America in a multitude of ways—but in none that could be deemed natural or inevitable.

Such early practices and interests demonstrate the long cultural history of the influence of Japan on the West and vice versa. If we ignore that history, we exclude important parts of culture from analysis, and we also bring to more recent cross-cultural encounters a notion that each culture is somehow free or pure from past influence. Much recent interest in Japanese popular culture, in other parts of Asia and in the United States, provides a framework for understanding the appeal of popular culture products transnationally, but it couches that argument in a somewhat ahistorical manner.[24] It also fails to address, in any depth, the centrality of digital games to that circulation. Games form a central part of what Mizuko Ito terms the "media mix," which enjoys worldwide circulation and therefore demands corresponding study.[25]

Moving from art history to more contemporary cultural contexts, we continue to discover the many Japanese cultural products that were fashioned for global sales even before manga and anime became popular. Marc Steinberg explains that after World War II, Japan's toy industry continued its trend of producing items primarily for export "and particularly toward export in the United States, which continued to be their greatest consumer, even after the end of the occupation in 1952."[26] Anne Allison also explores the export from Japan of tin toys after World War II,[27] explaining how those efforts were generally couched as isolated in their influence and limited in their ability to "transmit" aspects of Japanese culture abroad:

the influence of export greatly shaped the early designs of postwar toys. For example, Newsboy, a doll made by Nikko Toys in the late 1940s with a celluloid head and a body built from tin cans, was clearly designed for an American audience. All the written script (on the package and the newspaper held in Newsboy's hand) was in English, and the doll's torso was draped in the Stars and Stripes.[28]

She concludes that such early goods were designed so that their national origin or "flavor" could be "effaced or deleted when goods (particularly cultural goods) left the country."[29] Koichi Iwabuchi has coined the term "cultural odor" to describe the element of Japaneseness that often was designed out of products intended for export.[30] He argues that a lack of such cultural odor was what led to the success of products such as the Sony Walkman, which conveyed ideas about sleekness and portability and effaced references to its point of origin. Other cultural products, such as television shows and films, have had a more difficult time finding global popularity due to their closer cultural connections to Japan, including use of the Japanese language, attention to Japanese holidays, and different genre conventions.

From Art to Games

Compare the history of Japanese art to early Japanese videogames. After the U.S. industry crash in 1983, Nintendo was cautious about reentering the North American market. It carefully screened all games made for its system to determine which would be accepted for production and which would then be released in the West. Through its magazine *Nintendo Power*, it helped define for readers what a good game looked like and how to judge or rate games. Nintendo released only certain genres of games and titles, based on what company executives thought that a foreign market would find acceptable—not too strange, too foreign, too different.[31]

Into the 1990s, Japanese games became increasingly localized, and although certain genres (such as role-playing games and stealth games) found an audience, other genres (such as horse racing, pachinko, and board games) still had trouble with sales and dominant American opinions about what a digital game should be. Japanese games are not simply released "as is" in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Germany. They are localized after a host of technical, cultural, and social decisions and changes are made. Again, this process is not natural or inevitable.

Early American (and European) artists studied Japanese art and incorporated Japanese images and elements into their paintings, drawings, and artifacts, and they also studied the forms, techniques, and tools that were used by Japanese artists and incorporated those forms and techniques, to greater and lesser degrees, into their own work. Now American and European game designers attend the annual Game Developers Conference for

the postmortem panels on and talks about popular Japanese games such as *Animal Crossing: A New Leaf*, *Tokyo Jungle*, and *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*. They do so to learn about the forms, techniques, and tools that are used in those productions. Again, that process goes both ways: Japanese developers also incorporate American styles and elements into their own games, furthering the hybridity of digital games. Although it is useful to draw attention to such wider histories and speculate about their relevance, we also must keep in mind other power relations and the ways that they have been expressed in the past and in contemporary culture. In any examination of the relationships between East and West, questions of Orientalism, power, and influence must also be addressed.

Japonisme/Orientalism Revisited: Japaneseness and (Neo) Techno-Orientalism

Although a vast body of literature critiques and explores Orientalism, only a slice of it is relevant here (including a brief account of Edward Said's foundational work) for understanding the origins and relevance of this discourse. Writing in 1978, Said sought to critique the project of Orientalism—the study of the East by mainly Western scholars. He pointed to the constructedness of the concept, writing that the Orient "is itself a constituted entity, and that the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space is equally a highly debatable idea."[32] Writing in support, Bryan Taylor argued that any "orientalist discourse" was indeed "ultimately about the origins of the West, not the origins of the East."[33] Yet Taylor also sought to challenge the belief that all Orientalist writing was therefore wrong or simply negative, adding that "it is simplistic to see the Western analysis of oriental society in a completely negative light because the notion of 'oriental society' was not always used merely as a negative stereotype."[34] Although we need to be careful of how the East is positioned relative to the West or via Western eyes, such imaginings are not always negative or false. The realities are usually much more complex.

David Morley and Kevin Robbins further resituated Orientalist discourse with their coining of the term *techno-orientalism* and a focus on discussions of the "Japan Panic" of the 1980s.[35] During that time, they argued,

Westerners began to fear that the "robot-like" Japanese were outdoing them in business and international trade. How Japan was viewed in the West shifted to a discourse about the cold, alienlike qualities of the Japanese and their seeming overreliance on technology in daily life. Mizuko Ito traces the appearance of those fears in popular culture expressions such as cyberpunk literature, where the technoculture future is heavily influenced by Asian styles and aesthetics and where a dystopic fusion of bodies and technologies (evidenced in much Japanese anime and manga) is pervasive.[36]

Larissa Hjorth has investigated Korean discourses of the "techno-cute," which seek to humanize seemingly "cold" technologies, and also the emergence of a "neo-techno-orientalism," which reclaims "part of the new imaginings attached to Korea's role in producing and exporting new technologies in the Asia-Pacific region."[37] Such theorizations suggest that deployment of the term *Japaneseness* is a complex act that runs through and against Orientalist and techno-Orientalist terms. It will be particularly key to understand how developers are using the term as a signal to gain some sense of how such games are positioned in wider discourses about games and game talk in the contemporary game industry.

The potential presence of Orientalist discourses in videogames has received limited attention, although even race as a signifier is undertheorized in game studies.[38] Christopher Douglas critiqued *Civilization III* for its imperialist elements, finding that the game's ideologies included domination and cultural strangeness and possibly contained a "subversive potential to challenge notions of Western supremacy."[39] Leigh Schwartz examined representations of foreign cultures in four contemporary games, finding that in the game *Suikoden III*, for example, "game designers used othering as a narrative theme," which "emphasizes the natural tendency to define and fear the unfamiliar."[40] And Jeffrey Ow examined the game *Shadow Warrior*, finding that elements of very different Asian cultures were mixed together to signal Asian "cool" despite their disparate origins and meanings.[41]

Elmer Tucker writes more broadly about Japanese videogame titles, arguing that "Orientalism persists as the default framework through which gaming depicts Eastern cultures."[42] That framework can be found, he believes, in Western titles that depict "strange and exotic" cultures, such as the *Prince of Persia* series, as well as in games made by Japanese developers themselves, who are "internalizing and catering to the Western audience's fetish" and thus are "able to commodify their cool, and use the marketing

power of their cultural archetypes in the capturing of the electronic gaming market."[43]

Although such critiques and studies bring attention to potential otherings and problematic racial, ethnic, and cultural representations and activities within games, there are some problems with the simplistic use of terms such as *the other* and *exotic*. Schwartz, to take one example, defines any opponent in the games she studied as "the other" without defining the term or its use. When she discusses *Shenmue*, she writes that although the player takes on the role of a Japanese individual who must avenge the death of his father, he interacts with many Chinese characters who "are portrayed as exotic … not overly negative."[44]

She continues by saying that the depictions of the Chinese "are clearly different from the Japanese protagonist" and that "this othering is engaged by the player toward virtual inhabitants of the game world."[45] This raises two questions: is "different" equatable with "othering," and is this difference necessarily bad, particularly because there is nothing "overly negative" about the depictions of the Chinese?

Similarly, Tucker paints all games that portray Japan and the East with the Orientalist brush, no matter what their country of origin is. Although it is fair to say that countries and cultures can internalize particular images and beliefs about themselves that may not be positive or can be reductive, that argument is too broadly cast to be helpful. Is Mario Orientalist? We need more careful attention to such details before we can make such broad assertions.

Videogames may include images of samurai and ninjas and representations of "different" cultures and ethnicities, but those events occur in a context that extends beyond a facile application of Orientalism. Historically, a great deal of power has been exercised by both Japanese and Western game publishers and studios. Games from both sides employ pastiche and cultural borrowings, which may not necessarily imply any deep strangeness or hidden currents of meaning. They simply may be evocative of a new style or expression, but we need more and deeper analysis to say for sure.

Japan, North America, and the Digital Game Industry

Originally, this book was going to be about Japan's videogames and their influence, although when I started asking "Influence on what?," things

got complicated. To make the book practical, its scope was limited to Japan's role in the Western videogame industry and in the lives of Western game players. That choice meant not investigating the role of Japanese games in Japan itself.[46] Such studies are now emerging. Martin Picard has written about the early market for Japanese games in Japan,[47] and Martin van de Weyer has done extensive analysis of early Nintendo games and the ways that they reflect Japanese cultural longings, desires, and fears of their period.[48] This project instead focuses on what happens when Japanese games travel outside their country of origin and are used, thought about, and transformed by individuals, companies, and groups in the West. To investigate those questions, I talked with players of Japanese games, played many of the games, interviewed Western developers about their design influences, and examined the business side of the industry—in terms of specific elements (like localization) and more general industry trends (such as increasing globalization and the rise of smaller games in the indie, mobile, and social space). I also explored Japan's influence on Europe but only slightly. Europe has a different history relative to digital games. The console crash did not happen there, and PCs, not consoles, spread game popularity. Consoles were a late arrival. I talked with some European fans of Japanese games and some European game developers, but overall my focus has been on how Japanese games have influenced North America, which as the dominant Western market and a significant cultural force has shaped the global game industry and game culture.

Such an investigation adds to game studies' understanding of our play history and the game industry, demonstrating the complex interplays that make it a global culture. Yet the work is also intended to contribute to wider theories of globalization, culture, and cosmopolitanism. Despite some discussion of media industries in globalization literature, the game industry has been overlooked in theorizing such flows. Theoretical discussions of the global usually become stuck at the macro level, charting artifact flows and the workings of transnational companies. Yet how does that process translate into selling copies of *Final Fantasy XV* or *Resident Evil 6* in Japan, North America, and Europe? In addition to showing the usefulness of such theories for game studies, game studies has much to offer to theorists of globalization and cosmopolitanism, due to the global nature of the game industry and the activities of game fans around the world.

Finally, one key challenge that persisted throughout the writing of this book was the game industry's secrecy surrounding game sales, particularly the number of units sold by region. Although some companies (such as Capcom and Square Enix) list their sales figures in multimillion units on their websites, others, particularly those that are not publicly held companies, are more circumspect. To make arguments about the relative successes and failures of various titles, franchises, and companies, I sought sales figures from a variety of sources, attempting to verify findings via different sites wherever possible. Many times, I ended up using data from the site *VGChartz*, which collects data from various worldwide sources. The accuracy of this data has been challenged, and there are valid concerns about its reliability.[49] When I was left without other sources to consult, I decided to use its data, but with a grain of salt as to its reliability. My arguments do not rely exclusively on a title's sales figures—overall trends and business decisions trump those—but I need to acknowledge the limitations of the available data.

Inside the Book

The book begins with players in chapter 1, "Playing with Cosmopolitanism: Japanese Videogames and North American Players." I began this project with players, the ways that they think about games, and the reasons that they make the choices that they do. Fans of Japanese videogames became a way for me to dig deeper into this phenomenon and learn about why players liked Japanese games, how they talked about them, and what those interests led them to when not playing games. The first chapter explores their interests in games and in Japanese culture and language. It also situates players on a spectrum of cosmopolitanism, arguing that such game players are exemplars of contemporary cosmopolitan citizenship due to their varying habits and practices.

In chapter 2, "Unintended Travel: ROM Hackers and Fan Translations of Japanese Videogames," I move to a second type of videogame player— the ones who reconfigure Japanese games to make them more accessible to English speakers. Fan translators and ROM hackers engage in technical, skilled work that has helped to bring more Japanese games to the West than the official industry originally deemed practical. In doing so, hackers and translators rewrite game history and enhance it—creating experiences that

at first were a crucial way to circulate Japanese games and now form a key practice in delivering pieces of Japanese games history to a wider audience.

From hacking to playing, chapter 3, "Playing Japan's Games," is a study of several contemporary Japanese games that have been released in North America for console and handheld systems. The book would not have felt complete without a discussion of Japanese games themselves, and so titles like *Ni No Kuni*, *DmC*, *Game Dev Story*, *999*, and *Fire Emblem: Awakening* are analyzed here. The point is not to uncover their varying degrees or aspects of Japaneseness (although where it is present, I discuss that) but instead to show where current innovations in Japanese games are coming from and how game studies should think and write about games moving forward.

Moving more solidly into the AAA realm, chapter 4, "Much Ado about JRPGs: Square Enix and Corporate Creation of Videogames," is a deep dive into the practices of Square Enix. Going back to theories of cosmopolitanism, this time focusing on corporations rather than individuals, the chapter delineates the histories of Square and Enix, their different approaches, and how the now joint company is moving forward to stay competitive in a global marketplace. Key to their (relative) success is their mobilization of a cosmopolitan disposition, which pushes them to take risks, continually encounter the other, and be open and willing to changing themselves in those processes.

Chapter 5, "Localization: Making the Strange Familiar," straddles the line between fan activities and professional work. In addition to building on the history of localization that began with the discussion of fan translators, the chapter compares the activities of small do-it-yourself localization studios and large corporations. It explores how elements of participatory culture and new online networks have changed the landscape of doing localization work and have enlarged the scope of who can benefit. Through studying the work of indie localizer Carpe Fulgur alongside the work of Capcom, we see the arrival of the culture broker, a skilled professional who translates culture and determines which elements of Japaneseness might transfer in one situation but not in another.

Chapter 6, "The Japanese Console Game Industry: Capcom and Level-5," studies the Japanese game industry through two different companies. Comparing the business practices and strategies of the two companies in the wider context of the AAA console industry, the chapter offers a detailed examination of how both Capcom and Level-5 approach the question of

staying competitive and selling games in the West. The chapter details their different approaches to including Japaneseness in games and to either diminish its presence or play to its appeal in certain markets. Using games including *DmC*, *Lost Planet*, *Ni No Kuni*, and *Guild01* as examples, the chapter argues against simple solutions and posits that Japaneseness will always remain a slippery concept with which companies must continually grapple.

Chapter 7, "A Game's Building Blocks: Western Developers and Japanese Games," focuses on Western developers and the ways that Japanese games have influenced them and their design practices. Adding to the growing literature on studio studies, this chapter examines how various generations of Western game developers think about Japanese games and incorporate elements of them into their games—or in some cases work against those designs. The chapter explores how generation matters to this practice and how design elements vary: some elements are seen as universally excellent, and others are admired for their Japaneseness.

Finally, the "Conclusions" chapter summarizes the key points of the book. It centers on a few concepts—the notion of Japaneseness and the term's meaning going forward; the greater role for game studies in theories of globalization and the central role played by the culture broker and cosmopolitan dispositions; and the need to stop talking about "the" digital game industry and instead talk about multiple, overlapping game industries, including ROM hacking or DIY localization. Diversifying how we write and conceptualize the game industries also signals the greater complexities now involved in that process and our need to avoid simplistic answers and analytic categories in our work.

1 Playing with Cosmopolitanism: Japanese Videogames and North American Players

The first Japanese videogame that Omnistrife[1] remembers playing is *Final Fantasy VII*, which she encountered when she was about nine years old. At the time, she "didn't know it was Japanese." Her father installed it on a computer in the house and said to her, "Okay, play with it until it breaks." She got about midway through the game before the video card died. That was her introduction to what became her favorite game of all time and to Japan and Japanese culture.

Although most North American player origin stories with videogames do not involve breaking a computer, many from the 1990s do involve playing Japanese games on Japanese console systems. Many players of those games were like Omnistrife, who did not realize that the "really good games" they were playing came from another country that was not Western. Because of the peculiar structure of the videogame industry at that time,[2] games had a global distribution, and many (if not most) of the most-played games were created in Japan.

Another player I talked with, Ohako, observed that many early games had what he termed a "cultureless cover" in that the Japaneseness of the games (or systems) was not obvious to the casual player. This lack of cultural markers also may have been a result of the technical limitations of the games at that time. Graphics and dialogue were relatively simple, leading to fewer required changes than something like a television series or feature film. But as Koichi Iwabuchi argues, early Japanese game companies worked to varying degrees (depending on the company) to eliminate any residual sense of foreignness that their games contained (through localization and adjustment of gameplay difficulty levels) to gain a wider market.[3] So Japanese games may have easily entered foreign markets because of their

early simplicity as well as because of the marketing and business acumen of companies such as Nintendo and Square.

What resulted was much more than success in global sales. Some of those early game players were nudged into considering a world beyond their own—not simply the game space itself but the culture and country that produced them. For some players, a global consciousness and even a cosmopolitanism emerged in their attitudes and world views. This chapter explores that process and argues that Western players of Japanese video-games inhabit multiple spaces along a continuum of cosmopolitan dis-positions. It contributes to the discourse of cosmopolitan theorization by offering empirical evidence from an overlooked field—game studies.

Cosmopolitanism: A History of a Term

Zlatko Skrbis, Gavin Kendall, and Ian Woodward provide a helpful start-ing point for understanding cosmopolitanism, writing that "cosmopoli-tanism—as a subjective outlook, attitude, or practice—is associated with a conscious openness to the world and to cultural differences."[4] Beyond such a baseline, scholars disagree on how to apply or even understand the term. The history of the terms *cosmopolitan* and *cosmopolitanism* is long and complex, and the concepts have become popular as theorists seek to under-stand how individuals and groups grapple with the processes of globaliza-tion that are shaping our world. They have sought a concept that focuses on the human and the role of the nation-state in a world that now seeks to dissolve and reinvigorate its various borders with zeal.

In this debate, cosmopolitanism has been conceptualized as a social cat-egory, social ideal, quality of individuals, and general condition of a society or culture. Many definitions have been debated, although the idea of the "world citizen" is always central in some way. Debates also focus on the centrality of mobility. Is cosmopolitanism present only in those who have physically moved around the globe? It could be either for work (business travelers), lifestyle or work choice (expatriates and tourists), or even invol-untary movement (such as refugees).[5] Further, scholars question whether individuals must choose voluntarily to be open to other cultures and ways of life or unconsciously consume cultural artifacts as we are all increasingly exposed to media, financial concerns, and ideological actions from diverse groups globally.

How is cosmopolitanism useful in thinking about the activities or identities of Western players of Japanese videogames? Unfortunately, most discussions of cosmopolitanism are abstract and take little notice of the lived daily practices of individuals or groups. As Skrbis, Kendall, and Woodward argue, "our understanding of cosmopolitanism should not be constructed from a series of imaginary, utopian or ideal types; the fluidity and complexity of cosmopolitanism are only likely to be revealed by the empirical study of its mundane reality."[6]

Focusing on empirical evidence, however, is rare in the discourse surrounding cosmopolitanism. A few scholars have tried to focus on particular elements of cosmopolitanism, arguing, for example, that we are seeing the development of "consumer cosmopolitanism," which is an openness to buying foreign brands and possibly the welcoming of those brands based on elements of exoticism and difference.[7] Scholars have argued in a similar vein that the spread of global media has given rise to "pop cosmopolitanism" and "aesthetic cosmopolitanism," which focus not on buying products but on consuming media that comes from outside one's own (home) culture[8] or through the gradual evolution of one's home media to take into account foreign influences, thereby hybridizing the media of at least two cultures.[9]

Media scholars who have investigated cosmopolitan attitudes among contemporary citizens have focused on the global flow of media and its potential effects on creating global consciousness in general viewers. John Urry is one of the few who has examined contemporary media for evidence of cosmopolitan images, finding that television offers us "globes, symbols, individuals, environments, trademarks and advertisements that articulate a banal globalism, which point beyond national boundaries to the edges of the globe."[10] From those findings and in talking with media consumers, he concludes that "television and travel, the mobile and the modem, seem to be producing a global village," yet there are still few "global citizens."[11] Instead, most individuals "demonstrated a mundane cosmopolitanism within their daily lives."[12] Zlatko Skrbis and Ian Woodward further argue that individuals "reservedly deploy their cosmopolitanism" based on past experiences that can be either enjoyable or challenging.[13] At perhaps the most pessimistic end of the spectrum, Robert Halsall fears that "the barrage of global signifiers in the CNN broadcast" can lead forces to oppose cosmo-

politanism, which ultimately serve as "an immunizing and interiorizing force which might cancel out and indeed reverse any such trend."[14]

Despite such attention, there has been little application of cosmopolitanism as a conceptual category in the field of new media studies or digital games studies—partly because of the difficulties of studying transnational fandom. Even when local fans are studied, the tastes that they have for global media products such as anime, manga, or Japanese videogames have not been conceptualized through this lens. Henry Jenkins briefly addresses this topic and coined the term "pop cosmopolitanism" to describe fans of global media such as anime, and Constance Steinkuehler has invoked the concept to argue for the importance of studying virtual world spaces like massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) due to their global player base.[15] There is no real exploration of the literature surrounding the study of cosmopolitanism other than the surface invocation of these terms.

What would it mean if we described North American players of Japanese videogames as cosmopolitans? We would need to see if the label fits or if distinctions can be made between individuals and their understandings of, use of, and resulting beliefs based on their media use. We could determine how this categorization of players shapes or alters theories of cosmopolitanism. It could bring new ways of understanding whether movement between nations or cultures is a necessary condition to achieving cosmopolitanism and whether multilingualism is similarly privileged. If cosmopolitanism can be linked with openness to ideas and a willingness to learn more about other groups and societies, what does that mean for future society? This chapter explores those questions through an analysis of players of Japanese videogames.

Most of the players I talked with for this project have employed videogames and other popular Japanese media not simply as entertainment but also as a springboard for further exploration of Japan and its language and people. They do not represent all players of Japanese videogames, however, because many have little interest in the origins of the games that they play. It might be useful to think of these players' activities (especially in relation to other players) as falling along a spectrum of cosmopolitanisms, particularly as their interests and actions can (and do) shift over time.

A starting point for situating that use would be consumption of Japanese media at its most basic and superficial—the "banal cosmopolitanism" mentioned by theorists such as Urry.[16] Although I have spoken with individuals

with interests beyond unreflective consumption, many of them admit that in their early engagements with Japanese games, they did not realize that the games they were playing (or the anime they were watching) were foreign in any way. Some of the games or cartoons that they watched were so localized that it would be difficult to see any Japaneseness within them unless they were intentionally looking for it.

Although terms such as *banal*, *superficial*, and *unreflective* may appear loaded, such a form of cosmopolitanism is not necessarily negative or reflective of unenlightened consumption. Our daily lives are full of banal cosmopolitanism as we buy strawberries from Mexico at the supermarket, t-shirts made in Bangladesh at the mall, listen to *BBC World News* at home on the radio, and perhaps watch NBC's broadcast of the 2014 winter Olympics from Russia. We do not have the interest, time, or energy to investigate each strand of the global that we allow into our lives. That we do allow and even welcome it, even at the level of consumption alone, indicates our willingness to see the foreign as more than an object of suspicion and foreign peoples (or at least some of them) as perhaps not so different from us.

Banal cosmopolitanism is perhaps a default position that most individuals in the West start from today because we are inescapably surrounded by global media. Yet even at this level of consumption, those who do not wish to pursue interests in another culture, language, or society further can be interested in or pursue media products that come from a specific tradition or culture, such as the stories and visual styles that encompass many Japanese videogames.

Players, Gamers, Fans?

I began this project with an interest in talking with individuals who expressed great interest in Japanese videogames and who had gone on to investigate other areas of Japanese life and culture, and I have struggled with how to name these individuals. They are not all necessarily fans of Japanese videogames. Indeed, many of them expressed preferences only for particular genres (such as role-playing games or fighting games) and not for other genres with strong Japanese roots. And although their interests extended beyond games, I would not apply the label of "Japanese culture fan" to them. That moniker is too sweeping and somewhat dismissive of

their actual beliefs and practices. They remain "players" and sometimes "gamers."[17] But when individuals self-identified as fans or gamers in an important context, I highlight that discourse.

Another group that has received much similar attention would be self-identified fans of anime and manga, who have been studied extensively by scholars such as Susan Napier, Antonia Levi, and Ian Condry.[18] Such research has investigated what draws Western fans to particular media choices, what they find especially valuable and interesting about them, and what fans choose to view and read. A central finding is that such fans enjoy manga and anime for the stories they tell, which many fans believe are different from what they encounter in other popular commercial media. As Napier explains, such fans believe that the stories found in anime are more compelling and complex and often conclude in non-Western ways. Napier writes about fans who argue that anime tackles subjects that are deemed too sophisticated for young viewers and does not shy away from endings that include death or defeat. Whether or not such representations of anime are true, fans use them to characterize their beliefs about anime, and thus they are important in understanding what brings players to anime.

Scholars also have looked at how fans have sought to expand their consumption of Japanese popular culture through what Mizuko Ito terms the "media mix" that is offered by the industry.[19] This can include tie-in merchandise of the mediated and nonmediated sort and various versions of a media brand as it morphs across print, video, film, and even games. Scholars also point out how anime and manga fans can develop a larger interest in Japanese culture or popular culture and also how Japanese language study has been popularized thanks in large part to the spread of anime in the West. Although scholars take a critical eye to this media mix and acknowledge its component parts, videogames usually are given short shrift. If mentioned at all, it usually is in reference to a megafranchise such as Pokémon, and the specificity of the various games involved is not fully examined. This chapter aims to take games as a starting point and explore how Japanese videogames are important in the lives of game players and how they can make a contribution to players' sense of themselves and their interests in other cultures and in the global condition of cosmopolitanism.

This chapter is based on a dozen qualitative interviews that I conducted with a variety of individuals who enjoyed playing Japanese videogames and

had varying interests in other forms of Japanese culture. Most of them were in their twenties (although some were older) when I began the research, with some in college and others either working or doing postgraduate studies. They were excited to talk about the games that they enjoyed playing and the ways that games became a window into other avenues of interest. I use pseudonyms here that were either chosen by interviewees themselves or assigned by me after the interview. I sought a diversity of interests and tried to get equal gender representation, although the study falls short in terms of finding an ethnically or racially diverse cohort of players. The chapter also draws more generally from my experiences over the past decade in interacting with similar sorts of individuals who have played the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *Final Fantasy XI*, which employed servers that combined players from Japan, North America, and Europe and from various other game-related groups found online. The players represented here enjoy playing different types of games for a variety of reasons. Individuals have different levels of interest in Japanese culture, and they play various roles in contributing to the culture and community surrounding Japanese popular media.

Origin Stories

For most players, their entry point was indeed some form of Japanese popular culture, but for a few individuals, interest arose from childhood experiences that emphasized cultural exploration or from an individual who sparked a desire in the player to learn more about a particular country and way of life that seemed very different. For example, Kelly describes going to the library as a child and reading "all the children's books on Japan or things related to Japan that I could find, which meant I ended up reading about things ranging from food to World War II internment camps in the US." That led to her eventual interest in the popular culture of Japan, including anime and videogames. But for most individuals, popular culture was the entry point, and they were introduced either by a friend or family member. A typical story comes from Omnistrife, who describes her interest with videogames as starting at around the age of nine with *Final Fantasy VII* for the PC in particular: "my dad bought the game for himself, and then he kinda played it for a while, and I guess he lost interest. And I had a friend who ranted and raved about it, so I popped it into the computer, and I've

been playing it ever since. It's my favorite game in the world." Similarly, Doris was first introduced to Japanese videogames through her father and brother, who were playing *Final Fantasy VI*, "and that led me to play the game, play more RPGs like it and then from then on … I started getting into it."

Others were exposed to Japanese popular culture through anime by friends—either through a specific series (such as the Sailor Moon series) or through finding blocks of anime on television (like the cable channel SciFi's Japanimation lineup and Cartoon Network's Toonami series). For Jean, that interest was gradual. It started with the Sailor Moon series, but

eventually I got hooked and [even though] I didn't like it—I didn't even *know* it was from Japan actually, and I was just watching it 'cause it was on TV. But the show stopped at a certain point on Toonami, when it was on Cartoon Network, and I really wanted to know how it ended and so I found somebody online who was like, "I have tapes! VHS tapes of the Japanese with English subtitles. And I'll sell them to you."

Jean went on to find other anime series from Japan that she thought she would like and also began searching for manga that might be to her liking. Such snowballing of interests is common, especially when there are tie-ins across a particular content universe (such as the Ranma 1/2 or Bleach series), which can span anime, manga, and games, making consumption more obvious for fans of a particular series. Not all individuals find different components of a media mix equally compelling, however. Omnistrife, for example, saw herself as a fan of the Naruto anime series yet did not like the related games because they were fighting games. She said that "if the anime creators could come up with a videogame that actually goes along with the story of the anime, you know, it could have a plot. Then I would definitely like to play them." Thus, genre did matter to individuals, and different pieces of a media franchise or mix could meet with different levels of success based on whether they drew from the same elements across media that particular consumers enjoyed.

Age factored differently into when individuals started playing Japanese videogames or when their interests in Japanese culture began. Like Kelly, Miranda reported being interested in Japanese culture from a young age, when she received packages of educational materials about different countries in the mail via subscription. Her interest in Japan's popular culture grew as she played games and watched anime and made the connection

that many, if not most, of the games that she enjoyed playing were from Japan. Others developed their interests in high school or later through friends with those interests. Anna describes herself as a late bloomer in terms of playing videogames. Her first real experience was playing *Kingdom Hearts* at the age of eighteen. After that, she bought a PlayStation 2 console and a copy of the game and started exploring other titles.

Most of these players started out playing games that were considered very popular or mainstream, including various titles from the Final Fantasy series, *Super Mario Bros.*, the Pokémon games, and the Zelda titles. In contrast, for most individuals I talked with, anime viewing came before they started reading manga. They could draw from either popular commercial products officially released in North America such as the Sailor Moon series or from obscure titles found by friends, such as *Ranma 1/2*. That probably reflected the different distribution and technological constraints of the two media of anime (videotape) and videogames (cartridges and CD-ROMs). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Internet was not yet a widely available global distribution network—particularly for the very large files that were needed for videos and games. Although individuals might be able to buy or sell copies of videotapes or videogames via a site like eBay, broadband access was far too limited to make actual uploading and downloading of shows and games practical for distributors or consumers.

In the 1990s, few anime productions (either films or television series) were commercially available in North America, although the format for viewing (VHS) made it relatively easy to acquire or copy offerings that were not yet broadcast, thus easily increasing the potential pool of offerings. In contrast, the videogame industry was building a strong pipeline from Japan to the West, with many best-selling games coming from Japanese developers. But if Western players wanted to play games that were not yet sold in the West, they had to modify their consoles, which was more complicated than seeking out VHS tapes. Therefore, anime viewers were more able to see a wider selection of materials, although game players had a good range of titles available for them to play.

What draws people to Japanese videogames, particularly those who acknowledge and appreciate their Japanese origins? Some similar themes emerge, although there are differences due to the qualitative difference—namely, interactivity—between games and other media. For many players, though, story is a central component that drives their interests.[20] For

Omnistrife, Japanese games simply have superior stories: "I just kind of expect stories to be better than with American games. … Japan has this, like, higher status in my mind. It's just, like, they have more creative people who can come up with better stories." In explaining what she means, she elaborates that "the characters fascinate me, the loopholes in the story fascinate me, I love trying to fill in the missing information … like … how long was Vincent Valentine [a character in *Final Fantasy VII*] really sleeping in his coffin and who is Sephiroth's real father."

Other players also have high expectations for the stories in Japanese games, the characters, and other elements such as visual or musical style, even if they do not actually enjoy playing games with deep stories. Jean relates that she prefers games that are short, often comical, or fun. She does not play role-playing games, even though she acknowledges that "I love the stories": "the gameplay, I guess, bores me." That sense of admiration for story carries into the games that she actually plays, such as the Silent Hill series of horror games. She explains that she finds it fascinating that in the second game of the series, "you find out that he [James Sunderland, the main character] killed her [Mary, his wife, whose death he is investigating]; the whole thing is just whether he's tried to block it from his memory, or it's, like, the town pulling that out of him and making him live the horror that he visited upon her."

Although Western videogames also can have good stories, which some players did acknowledge, certain elements of Japanese games seem to qualify as different or notable in some way. Kelly talks of the "interesting worlds and people who do amazing things" that comprise many stories in Japanese games. Such components serve more as a backdrop for something like fighting or music/rhythm games than as the central elements of a role-playing game. Moti explains that with the Nintendo DS game *The World Ends with You*, for example, "I did like the story, I thought it was engrossing and it was fun; … the moral of the world itself got unlocked. … It felt more like the real world possibly because it was really just sort of a little variation on the real world." Similarly for Doris, *Final Fantasy VI* is different from other games where "the princess always gets the prince at the end of the story": "it wasn't lying to me about life or anything like that. … It wasn't a Hollywood ending. My favorite character dies at the end, and … that was beautiful to me." For Ohako, the difference can lie in how Japanese myths and legends find their way into games, such as the Phoenix Wright series of law

and adventure games, where even though the localizers placed the story in America, "the game is full of Shinto priests and possession and magatamas and all kinds of that imagery."

Another notable element that made Japanese games different or special was their particular sense of style, which varied based on the genre or type of game that was being discussed. Two games mentioned by various players as particularly Japanese in their style and execution were *Okami* and *Katamary Damacy*. *Okami* is the story of the Japanese sun goddess Amaterasu, who appears in white wolf form and returns to the world to save it from darkness. The game was hailed for its art style, which draws from *sumi-e* (black ink brush) and cel-shading techniques for its particular look. It also features as a central game mechanic, drawing with a calligraphy brush, which changes the world in various ways. That mechanic was remarked on by players as being distinctive, innovative, and very Japanese in its design. Thus, gameplay itself could be expressive of Japanese culture, albeit normally not in such an obvious manner.

Katamari Damacy was developed by the artist Keita Takahashi and centers on the son of the King of All Cosmos, who must "roll up" collections of various items to form stars and send them into the sky. The game is heavily stylized and nonrealistic, featuring people, cows, buildings, and more as material suitable for the construction of a *katamari*. Jones theorizes that the central activity of this game—collecting things—is a commentary on the somewhat obsessive collecting activities of *otaku* in Japan (and likely elsewhere), thus drawing from Japanese culture again for a central gameplay mechanic.[21]

Overall, players felt that such games were special and that style—particularly visual style—was a central element that drove their interest in playing such games. Ohako repeatedly referred to "style" when asked to discuss his favorite games and the reasons that they were chosen. Each game, he explained, had a unique visual style, whether it related to two-dimensional sprite graphics for a fighter game or the woodblock print style employed in *Okami.*

Most players identified unique graphical elements, sometimes also pointing to the musical scores and soundtracks to their favorite games as things that were different from other games they had played. Ohako noted that the game *Visions of Mana* had an "arresting" visual style, with "colors everywhere" and "detail in everything." Miranda jokingly recalled how the

design of the creatures in *Patapon* were "so freaking adorable" at the same time that they were "these killing machines."

Doris recalled how the artwork in *Final Fantasy VI* was compelling to her, with a style by artist Yoshitaka Amano that was "very very free flowing, very wispy. And the characters, … his style is very similar across the way; he's very much into, like, little details and a lot of, um, … he puts a lot of pretty things in there; like, they're wearing scarves and tassels and there's all these little symbols all over them and it's all very, very pretty."

Overall, players believed that style was a central element in their enjoyment of Japanese games. It was something that they found unique or special in particular games, although they associated no unifying stylistic theme with Japanese games in general, except perhaps for graphical realism—something that was notably absent in the Japanese games but quite prevalent in Western games. Aside from being colorful (whether in bright or muted tones), style usually meant visual imagery that departed in some way from typical (Western) videogame conventions, which they found compelling or simply satisfying.

The Japaneseness of Story and the Difficulties of Generalization

I was particularly interested in how players saw Japanese games in relation to the games' origins—that is, their Japaneseness. Brian Ruh has argued that with anime, for example, its "markedness" as Japanese is due to its role in popular culture: anime is always already Japanese, and its stories therefore represent the Japanese condition.[22] Discussion of this element of games (as well as some anime and manga) proved to be difficult for some respondents. Many respondents were unwilling to assign broader cultural meanings to the themes that they found in videogames, but many could identify themes or approaches that seemed distinctly different from those in Western videogames. For some players, their early game choices were about playing "good" games or games that were recommended to them by friends and family, and it was only through gameplay that they discovered that those games were Japanese or that a common thread linking their interest in particular games was their Japaneseness. This was not the case for all players, and many do play and enjoy Western games. But most early gameplay experiences were situated as games generically, although as game player Ohako explains, the days of "the cultureless cover of Japanese

game development [are] gone for good," and we can expect to see more games with highly sophisticated localization and with "a more distinctly Japanese flavor."

For some players, cultural expressions relative to Japan could be found in a game's inclusion of utilitarian knowledge about Japanese daily life or culture. For example, several players who had played *The World Ends with You* noted that the game drew on life in Tokyo and its various neighborhoods and cultures, which helped them to learn more about the geographic layout of the city. Miranda remarked that playing the game helped her "get around Shibuya when I lived there." More than one player mentioned that the Persona games offered insights into daily life for teenagers in school in Japan. Although the plot of the game involves high school students who must kill demons, players remarked that the games also taught them about the school system in Japan, the importance of exams, and the ways that those structures differed in key ways from Western systems. Similarly, while playing games in the Pokémon series, Miranda always found it challenging that the main store where players could buy particular items had different floors and that the players' avatar had to visit different floors to purchase different items. After visiting Japan, she learned that "if you go to a department store in Japan, it's the same thing." Thus, even seemingly minor gameplay elements such as the geographic location of mapped elements such as store layouts can offer players keys to thinking about cultural differences.

Players also noted that characterization in Japanese games could be different, particularly in the ways that characters express certain worldviews. Miranda related that she found that values were expressed differently in Japanese videogames, such as in the Pokémon games, when "it always talks about how you have to believe in your heart and … if you talked about them in American games, it'd be, like, 'What are you talking about? Like, no, you didn't win because you believe in your Pokémon more than the other person. No, you won because you were stronger.' You know, that's the American take on that." Likewise, Omnistrife relates that the lifestream depicted in *Final Fantasy VII* "makes you think that [it's], like, their religion. And I think that a Western culture, which is traditionally Christian or sometimes pagan or whatever—I don't think they would think of something like that."

Some players identified larger themes that appeared to be Japanese in origin. Ohako explained that he found a "strong sense of hope and fantasy"

in Japanese popular culture (inclusive of games, anime, and manga): "in the U.S., it feels to me like the main lynchpin for drama is fear (hostage situations, serial killers, evil mothers, etc.), while the main drive for drama in IJPC [imported Japanese popular culture] is hope (wielding pendants/robots/hot cyborg ladies/large swords to win against the bad guys)." Talking about the contradictions in Japanese culture, Moti argued that "the more popular figures in Japanese history are often the people who lost. You know, they lost nobly." Kelly believed that Japanese games also draw from more universal themes about the hero's journey, conflict between countries, and loyalty to family and hometown. She also argued that Japanese games "tend to emphasize being part of a team or a group a bit more than most Western games do." As an example, she explained the differences between playing *World of Warcraft* (a U.S.-developed MMOG) and *Final Fantasy XI Online* (a Japanese-developed MMOG) and noted that *FFXI* is a much more group-oriented game than *WoW*.

Doris went beyond the level of games to argue that different console systems might reflect difference cultures or values. For her, the Japanese Wii is "very private and you don't really get to talk to a lot of your friends unless you know their code: you have *their* code. There are codes to get there. And you pretty much need to know the person *in person* in order to play online with them." In contrast, the more Western Xbox assumes that "you're pretty much using the Internet to play with other players. So I think that that kind of speaks for the type of videogames that they're interested in. Like, [the Wii and Japanese culture are] less about really playing with strangers and more about playing by yourself" or only with players that you know.

In addition to seeing themes or values that might be expressed differently or stories or characters that they felt were unique, players often were interested in and took pleasure in playing a game that originated in a culture that was not their own. Anna summed it up by stating, "I really enjoy games when they are unabashedly Japanese." Similarly, Omnistrife felt that "*Persona*'s a very, *very* Japanese game" and that was part of what she enjoyed about it. Miranda believed that many Japanese games embodied a certain silliness—a sense of not taking themselves too seriously—even as they tried to impart a message at the end, which was something she enjoyed about them. (This is something that Western game developers discuss in more detail in chapter 7.) Other players echoed that sentiment

and saw certain Japanese games as "goofy" or "comical" in ways that made them endearing.

Such beliefs mirror or build on Napier's findings concerning Western fans of Japanese anime: they recognize something different or foreign in their object of interest, and this difference is often the element that is most compelling.[23] Rather than shed the "cultural odor" that Iwabuchi argues that Japanese products traditionally have tried to eliminate in their global travels,[24] Japanese games often end up keeping many of those elements (much as Anne Allison describes other contemporary toys doing), as Japanese popular culture continues to be popular outside its home region.[25]

For some, an interest in and enjoyment of the stories offered by Japanese games such as *Silent Hill*, *The World Ends with You,* and *Persona 3* and *4* are ends in themselves. These players enjoy the complexity of the characters and mature storylines that do not always deliver happy endings. Players also point to the unique or special styles that are invoked by Japanese games, both visually and aurally. Players mention the soundtracks of various games as a particular draw, and nearly all of the players I talked with greatly appreciated the different aesthetic styles offered by various Japanese games. Thus, the woodblock print style of *Okami*, the fanciful, delicate aesthetic of *Final Fantasy*, and the flashy colors of *Kingdom Hearts* drew individuals to those games and captivated them. For most Western players, this is the terminus of their interest in Japan or its culture.

But the players I talked with found that their interests widened at this point as they sought more games, more popular culture artifacts, and more exposure to Japan as a society with a distinct language, culture, and way of life. These individuals have moved beyond banal cosmopolitanism to embrace a deep interest in Japanese culture. Players began to express interest in games because of their Japanese origins or were interested in finding Japanese games that were not released in the West. Some players studied the language to access those products more successfully. At this point, some players found that there is a discourse of virtual travel at play as they seek the mobility of exploration through games and through virtual exposure to another culture. For others, there is the mobility not simply of virtual travel via media but of physical travel. Many players that I spoke with have spent time in Japan, either through formal study abroad programs via their universities and colleges or through their own independent travel.

Import Games, Mods, and Modding

The virtual travel that some players found enjoyable when initially play-
ing Japanese videogames sometimes deepened into an interest in Japanese
games that had not yet been (or never would be) released outside Japan or
in games that they might have already played but wanted to experience in
Japanese. To play such games, some ingenuity was necessary. Most game
consoles are region-encoded, meaning that when games are released, they
are designed to run only on systems in a particular region—Japan, North
America, Europe, or International. A few hardware systems, such as Nin-
tendo's Game Boy and DS series, have historically been region-free, but that
is the exception rather than the rule. Players who wished to play Japanese
region-locked games on other systems needed to modify their own console
(which usually meant having some technical skill and voiding the war-
ranty) or purchase a Japanese version of that same console.[26]

    Not many players that I talked with went this far. Most expressed satis-
faction with the games that they could play on their own systems in Eng-
lish. A few considered their options and decided against doing so, either
because of the high costs of buying another system or a fear of "messing
up" the hardware that they or a friend currently owned. A few more tried
intermediate techniques. Kelly bought an adaptor for her Super Nintendo
Entertainment System (SNES) to play an imported copy of *Final Fantasy V*,
which had not yet been released in the United States. Doris used an R4 car-
tridge with her Nintendo DS (dual-screen handheld system) to play "home
brew" games. Ohako bought Japanese-language games for his Nintendo DS,
such as the *Ouendan* music game, because it came with a "better selection
of songs" than the North American version.

    Some console game players admitted to modding their console or buy-
ing a modded console to play particular games. A few purchased Japanese
consoles. Dan bought a PS2 when he was in Japan in 2003 to play some
games, and Moti modded a Super Nintendo system, bought a modded
Playstation, and purchased a Japanese PS2. He did so to play games that
were not available outside Japan, such as the *King of Fighters 2002 Unlimited
Match* and the *Nana* game based on the manga of the same name. Such
gameplay in Japanese also helped him to keep up his language skills. For
this group, however, this high level of activity was the exception rather
than the rule.

Although it is difficult to say how many Western players play Japanese-language games (other than to say that very few do so), the individuals I spoke with often mentioned the challenge of doing so, whether or not they actually played them. Even for those who study Japanese (discussed next), text-heavy games presented a huge barrier to entry for most players because the games rely on the complex *kanji* system of writing. Only the most dedicated (and fluent) gave more than a passing attempt at doing so. Instead, they either stuck to games that had easily accessible commands and rules or played only localized games. Although there are communities of Western players who do translate such games for a wider audience (discussed in the next chapter), most of those I talked with seemed satisfied with the games they found—either localized versions, Japanese versions that were playable on their North American consoles, or occasionally Japanese-language games that they found particularly compelling. As with any level of playing or fandom, as practices become more specialized and demand more investment from the individual in terms of the skill or expertise required, the number of individuals who are willing or able to engage in those practices understandably shrinks. The willingness or eagerness to explore additional facets of Japanese culture was met with the limits of language fluency and technological barriers—challenges that some embraced but many more did not. Although most Japanese-language games were too daunting for these players, that did not stop players from learning at least some Japanese, either formally or informally, from very beginning levels to full fluency.

Learning Japanese

With one exception, all the individuals I talked with were currently studying or had studied Japanese in the past, with different levels of dedication and formality. A few were learning on their own. Ohako had purchased the DS title *My Japanese Tutor* to learn, and Anna bought CDs and books on how to converse in Japanese and on *kanji* and *hiragana* practice. Most had taken classes in college, either a one-semester class, four years of classes, or a study abroad period in Japan. Time spent in coursework reflected varying levels of dedication. Doris took two years of Japanese mainly because of her interest in the culture and the writing system. Anna's self-instruction was driven by her interest in Japanese popular media and her interest in languages generally. Omnistrife, who was the only one not interested in learning the

language, enrolled in a Japanese culture class to learn more about daily life in Japan.

For those who considered themselves particularly dedicated, goals included becoming proficient enough to achieve certain levels in the standardized Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), to study abroad and converse with Japanese individuals, to work in Japan, and to base a career on their interest. Moti, for example, achieved top-level certification for his Japanese and at the time of our interview was a graduate student working toward a degree in linguistics. His undergraduate major was Japanese, and he had lived in Japan for more than two years. Similarly, Dan started learning Japanese via manga and anime and formalized his study through taking college-level courses, studying abroad, and living in Japan for two years. Miranda self-taught herself some *hiragana* in high school and in college took formal classes and studied in Japan for six months. Although her study of *kanji* has since "dropped off," she was applying for an internship program to work in Japan for a summer when I interviewed her.

For most of the individuals I spoke with, their interest in studying Japanese was driven at least in part by their enjoyment of Japanese videogames and other media. Some mentioned that linkage—either as a spur to learn more Japanese or as a way to keep fluent or practice the language. It also helped some of them with other interests, such as creating stories, fan fiction, or fan art related to Japanese media. Such study has been noted by others as a recent phenomenon, with a surge of interest in college (and high school) Japanese-language classes by students who initially encounter the language in their pop culture consumption and wish to learn more about the culture and perhaps gain access to cultural products not yet (or ever to be) translated or localized for Western audiences. One professor of East Asian studies had a student who took her Japanese history class because he had become fascinated with the subject after playing videogames such as the 2005 *Genji: Dawn of the Samurai*, which was loosely based on the life story of the twelfth-century Japanese general Minamoto Yoshitsune.[27] For most of this group, an interest in the language led to (or conversely was inspired by) the desire to visit Japan and explore it in person.

Visiting Japan

Most players I talked with had either already been to Japan or planned to visit it in the future. About half had been there for a vacation trip or as part

of a study abroad or work program. Only one person—Omnistrife—had no plans to go because she disliked travel and felt uneasy about being in a place where she could not speak the language. For most, however, their interest in Japanese videogames had extended to wanting to see the culture and geography of Japan. Those who did visit the country talked about visiting tourist venues such as Tokyo, Kyoto, and Nara and touring shrines, temples, and museums. Popular-culture venues such as the Studio Ghibli museum were visited, as were places off the beaten path, including the countryside and everyday areas in Japan.

For some, a central part of the experience was interacting with Japanese people, something that paradoxically could be difficult if one was part of a study abroad group. As Jean explained, "It was hard to get away from the other Americans because we all wanted to stick together," but slowly she pushed herself to spend time with Japanese people, and she noticed her Japanese language skills improving as a result. More important, perhaps, was the overall experience. Jean explained that as a white woman in Japan, "this was one of the best experiences of my life, being a minority."

All players may not have had such a transformative experience, but many were particularly interested in seeing what daily life in Japan was like, especially outside of major cities. They also investigated other aspects of the culture they found interesting, including kabuki, food, seasonal festivals, music, and dramas. Moti has spent significant time in Japan, both for study and work, and has taken classes there in *ikebana* and calligraphy and attended theater performances of noh and *bunraku*, listened to *shamisen* performances, and learned kendo.

One interesting travel story arose from Miranda's interest in the Phoenix Wright videogame series, which is very popular in Japan. Before visiting Japan, she learned that an all-women theater group in Tokyo had created a musical theater version of the game, and she was determined to see it. So she traveled by herself to Tokyo from Nagoya for the event, where she was "the only foreigner there" in a crowd that was also "85 to 90 percent female." Describing the show as alternately bizarre, weird, and hilarious, she later mentioned to me that she might provide a translation of the musical for her friends because the show had just been released on DVD. Thus, player interests in Japan span a range from the traditionally tourist to deeper investigations of daily life, events, and artifacts that arose from the interest that initially spawned their visit—videogames.

Conclusions

Darius, one of the last players I talked with about his interest in Japanese videogames, was from Europe, and he had decided to become a game programmer based on his love of videogames, particularly games developed or published by Konami. He had done many things in pursuit of his passions—modded two consoles to play Japanese games, translated a book, subbed an anime movie, and taught himself Japanese well enough to achieve the first level of JLPT proficiency. He continues to study the language and hopes to some day visit Japan. Darius is perhaps the perfect example of a cosmopolitan citizen—someone who demonstrates elements of cosmopolitanism as it is constituted in contemporary culture.[28]

Darius, Omnistrife, Doris, and the other people I interviewed are not a randomly selected group of individuals or videogame players. They make up a special group. I sought out players who were passionate about Japanese videogames and whose hobby led them to investigate other aspects of Japanese culture. They are not comparable to a focus group of everyday citizens who are questioned on their views of global images or news, nor are they consumers being questioned about their openness to buying foreign brands.[29] Yet even though they share a passionate interest in Japanese videogames, differences emerged in their perspectives, both across the group and individually, as they explained their interests over time.

As I mentioned earlier, we can see some elements of mundane or banal cosmopolitanism in the early playing experiences of many players as they chose (or were given) "good games" to play. In part due to the structure of the videogame industry, they were open to a product that they either did not realize was foreign or saw nothing remarkable in its foreign origin. They were more excited by interesting stories, novel graphics, and innovative gameplay mechanics. For most, that interest grew, and they became more aware of the origins of those games, began to seek out similar games, and looked to the culture that created them as something to be investigated.

Although they were exhibiting the "pop cosmopolitanism" advocated by Jenkins, I believe that their interests go beyond the binary of consumption and nonconsumption. The meaning of that term is restricted to consumption, a concept that does not fully describe how these players behave. Here Urry can help again, through his formulation of the concept

of "cosmopolitan predisposition." He believes that someone with such a predisposition can display the following practices and beliefs:

extensive mobility in which people have the right to "travel" corporeally, imaginatively and virtually; the capacity to consume many places and environments en route; a curiosity about many places, peoples and cultures and at least a rudimentary ability to locate such places and cultures historically, geographically and anthropologically; a willingness to take risks by virtue of encountering the "other"; an ability to map one's own society and its culture in terms of a historical and geographical knowledge, to have some ability to reflect upon and judge aesthetically between different natures, places and societies; semiotic skills to be able to interpret images of various others, to see what they are meant to represent and to know when they are ironic; an openness to other peoples and cultures and a willingess/ability to appreciate some elements of the language/culture of the "other."[30]

Urry's list echoes the stories of the players who are described here as they talked of their varying experiences. Their game playing resulted in an openness to other peoples and cultures and led them to learn more about the culture behind the games. Most also took up the challenge of investigating the language of that culture and obtained greater to lesser degrees of fluency. Many also traveled "virtually" to Japan or to an imaginary Japan through their gameplay—particularly players who were interested in games that they felt exhibited a high degree of Japaneseness. Games like *The World Ends with You* and those in the Persona series gave players insights into Japanese geography, school culture, and the daily lives of teenagers in Japan. Others did more, taking risks by attempting to encounter the "other"— Japanese individuals—either through studying abroad, traveling, or talking with Japanese exchange students at their home location. For many, this involved more than sharing stories of favorite games or language practice. They went on to investigate daily life practices and perceived or real differences between the cultures. Some players also investigated the history of Japan to learn more about its geography, past, and societal structures.

The players I talked with exhibited many facets of a cosmopolitan predisposition, much of which was born in their initial game-playing activities. They went beyond consumption of foreign media to active exploration and construction of their own creations (which I discuss in the following chapter on ROM hacking). Not all game players behave this way, but this one form of media—videogames—can serve as not simply a point of contact with "otherness" but also as a catalyst for further exploration. This catalyst was not accidental. The game industry in the 1990s relied heavily

on Japanese games and systems, so it might be considered inevitable that this "cosmopolitan predisposition" happened. But this deep exploration contradicts Halsall's assertion of an "immunization" to what is foreign. It instead points to Regev's suggestion that cultures mix when they come into contact—as early Japanese games have influenced the designers of today, both in Japan and in the West. Some players will eagerly seize on those elements and innovations, transforming themselves in the process.

This chapter has investigated what cosmopolitanism has to offer to a study of game players, but it also is important to determine what such work says about current theorizations of cosmopolitanism. This work indicates that there are different levels of adherence to the model or ideal and that a person's position can change over time. In seeking out players who liked Japanese videogames, I valued positive exposure to "foreign" media, so it might be natural to see openness emerge in what they told me. The structural forces of the early videogame industry offered players a wide range of Japanese games to play. Moreover, these findings argue for the importance of conducting empirical work and digging deeply into pockets of media or culture that may not be considered mainstream. Such components may be a vanguard for coming changes, or they may simply point to key events that may go no further than a particular target audience. But the drive to understand cosmopolitanism must start with actual individuals, explore their particular areas of interest, and examine how they have developed in relation to "foreign" media—rather than begin with broadly generalized images of globes or news. It is in these interesting spaces—where Western players learn about how to "believe in your heart" to win—that some of the most interesting components of a cosmopolitan predisposition may be found.

2   Unintended Travel: ROM Hackers and Fan Translations of Japanese Videogames

In North America, early computer games were developed by individuals and small teams and often distributed for free or sold at hobbyist stores on floppy disks in plastic baggies. In that sense, the market might have been considered intensely local and small. With the growth of arcades and home consoles, companies emerged to create and mass-produce games across North America, Europe, and Japan, and games started to circulate more widely. After the global economic recession of the early 1980s, U.S. sales plunged. Nintendo responded by creating a tightly controlled system of technological and licensing constraints to channel the flow of new games. The company dictated who could make games that were licensed to play on its system, how many copies would be produced and when, and even what the content could be.[1]

Such practices were not always welcome, but for those chosen, high sales were practically guaranteed. Since then, Nintendo and similar corporations have played an important role in shaping the flow of console videogames from Japan to the West and vice versa. Even as companies widened the market, however, they did not sell all games in all places. Games might or might not travel across countries or cultures, depending on a company's business strategies and the perceived interests of players.

Because of the constraints built into proprietary consoles and cartridge-based games and later compact discs (CDs) and digital versatile discs (DVDs), players were at the mercy of such decisions—waiting for the next release to appear and able to influence design or production only through the basic act of purchase. Even when players demonstrated their eagerness to purchase and play particular games, series, franchises, or genres, game publishers retained the final authority over which games were created, when they were released, and in which markets they would be sold.

Although it is easy to imagine that all (or almost all) early videogames could and did travel easily from one region to another due to their relatively simple gameplay and story elements, the reality was more complex. Some games met with few or no barriers as they traveled from market to market. Taito's *Space Invaders* had a title that worked in both Japan and North America, featuring gameplay with no dialogue apart from "high score" and "game over," which were "understandable to all" players.[2] Similarly, *Donkey Kong* designer Shigeru Miyamoto "had designed the game for America to begin with, [and so] it didn't need" any translation or modification.[3] Yet games such as those in the Zelda series and Dragon Quest series, for example, did require modification for release outside Japan. When a game requires more than minimal changes, developers and publishers must consider how much money and time they are willing to spend on translating or localizing a game and to what extent it will be altered, relative to its potential profits in diverse markets.

Most players have remained spectators as such decisions unfolded. But this chapter profiles and explores a small constituency of Western players who were (and still are) not content to watch and wait for Japanese publishers to make their games more broadly available. They may share traits and interests similar to those of the players of Japanese games that I described in the previous chapter, but here my focus is on how their activities as ROM hackers (who modify read-only memory images) and fan translators have reimagined what "the global flow" of videogames means as it facilitates unintended travel for certain Japanese videogames. It also explores how the activities of ROM hackers and fan translators can form a type of play—ludic hacking—that has changed how some Western players approach Japanese videogames.

In chapter 1, I show how a group of Western videogame players was influenced by Japanese videogames. The games inspired them to learn more about Japan, its culture, and its citizens. And those players invested time to learn the language, study Japan's history and culture, travel to Japan to study, work, or explore, and occasionally develop their interest into a potential career. Such individuals represent a form of cosmopolitanism that falls along a spectrum based on their level of engagement, from superficial to deeply engaged. Their investment in these aspects of Japanese culture shows that Japanese videogames can mean a great deal to certain players and can play a role in personalizing the processes of

globalization—making real the histories, experiences, and practices of another nation or culture.

This chapter examines another group of players—those who know and love Japanese videogames but have developed and refined the complicated task of translation ROM hacking. Translation ROM hacking involves taking older Japanese games that never were released in the West (or outside Japan), breaking them open, translating them into another language, and then releasing the resulting software patch for a wider audience to enjoy. Those patches modify the ROMs of classic Japanese games that now run on emulators but began life as content for legacy systems that never was intended to extend beyond Japan.

This chapter is not a history but instead investigates ROM hacking and fan translation practices with an eye toward identifying the larger logics at work—how such activities reshape player expectations for what playing a game means and also who is supposed to control the flow of games. It also adds to our knowledge of participatory cultures and their functioning—what happens when such practices evolve into their own mini-industries. Fan translations bring more evidence to the claims of researchers such as Tanja Sihvonen[4] and Olli Sotamaa,[5] who have critiqued the limits of the binary developer-player model for understanding the production and consumption of games. Going further, John Banks argues for seeing the work of game and mod (modification) development as "cocreation" between developers and players/modders, a practice that produces many tensions but recognizes and acknowledges the activities of players and fans.[6] Although I do not engage with the deeper debates of those writing about "playbour" practices,[7] I highlight how various instances of ROM hacking can offer new ways of understanding those activities.

ROM hackers and fan translators-turned-professionals are also engaging in some key or novel practices. Although their creations may never interest a broad audience, their efforts have resulted in a dedicated scene for specialists where none previously existed, largely due to the affordances of digital and online media.

To explore such claims, this chapter covers quite a bit of ground. Rather than recount the entire history of ROM hacking, it focuses on a few key instances, individuals, and projects that helped solidify and advance the scene and bring it greater visibility.[8] I explore the formation of the ROM hacking community, including early major milestones that created enough

interest to develop a persistent "scene." As an example, I give a history of the eagerly awaited *Final Fantasy V* fan translation patch, which convinced many potential hackers to try their hand at the activity, leading to the need for tools, best practices, and a way to enlist the help of likeminded players. Those demands led to the creation of various activity hubs that have formed, thrived, died, and been resurrected in a different form on another site. I also delve into the contemporary activities of the Aeon Genesis Translation Project, which center on lesser-known titles such as J-Wing's 1996 SNES game *The Adventures of Hourai High*. Such games (unlike *Final Fantasy V*) would never have been considered for localization by the professional game industry, making them even more critical to circulate. Finally, I discuss the genesis and execution of the well-known *Mother 3* patch (which was created by a group called the Starmen, led in part by Clyde "Tomato" Mandelin, a ROM hacker who also holds a job as a professional localization expert) and the ways that such efforts are increasingly professionalized. First, I explain the genesis of ROMs and the reasons that hacking them arose as a practice.

ROM Hacking: A Primer

The early home videogame systems that were created by companies like Atari and Nintendo used game cartridges that contained all of the source code needed to play a game. Cartridge copies were manufactured and licensed under strict conditions and by design were difficult to copy. Over time, however, players who wished to play games for these older systems developed an alternative—the emulator. Emulators are a software version of a particular console and are programs that can run on a home computer. Emulators cannot run game cartridges. Instead, they run read-only memory images (ROMs), the source code that was originally encoded and burned onto the game cartridges and now is available as computer files. With the widespread growth of high-speed Internet access as well as devices that make "dumping" ROMs simple, the production and circulation of ROMs became popular, particularly as older consoles and physical game cartridges started disappearing from general circulation.

Emulators and ROMs have a delicate history in the videogame industry. Most emulators are distributed online as freeware or shareware. With only a cursory search, I can locate emulators for a Mac or PC to run virtual versions

of more than two dozen systems, including the NES, SNES, Gameboy, Sega's Saturn and Genesis, and many arcade formats. Emulators also have evolved that run disc-based games for systems such as Sony's PlayStation 1 and 2, Sega's Dreamcast, and Microsoft's original Xbox. Although emulators are considered legal under U.S. and international law, ROMs are a different story. ROMs are file images of videogames that have been extracted from cartridges or disks. In most cases, copying them constitutes copyright infringement. Some games now qualify as public-domain ROMs and are legal to distribute and play, but most popular games are not.

Such legalities, however, are no match for Internet pirates, and ROMs can be found with a simple keyword search. Although many ROMs for English-language games exist, my focus is on ROMs for games that originally were distributed only in Japan. Such games are now technically available globally (after they are dumped, copied, and posted online) and are free of region lockout chips and software. Yet they maintain another barrier: they employ the Japanese language.

Even a dedicated game player who can locate and install the correct emulator and find a (probably pirated) copy of a Japanese game such as *Mother 3* must make a choice: learn Japanese, try to play without that knowledge, or search for a patch to translate the game into English. Those patches, found freely online, embody a questionably legal practice but one that was deemed acceptable by early English-speaking fans of Japanese videogames.

Final Fantasy Gets Patched

The Final Fantasy series is a good example of how and why fan translation and ROM hacking developed. Created in 1987 as a single-player role-playing game by designer Hironobu Sakaguchi, *Final Fantasy* sold better than the company expected, and a franchise was born. Although the Final Fantasy series continues to produce new games, they are not technically sequels to one another, a circumstance that helped the series travel globally in its early years because players did not need to rely on prior knowledge from past games to enjoy later releases. The games were considered innovative for their time, which may have contributed to their global popularity. Sakaguchi reportedly wanted the series to have "a serious, adult, *sabishii* (lonely) look"[9] and likewise desired "supporting characters, plot twists, and many individual story threads that tied together into one epic storyline."[10]

The games in the series were designed with cinematic elements to evoke a more mature feel compared to other games of the time, such as *Dragon Quest* and *Super Mario*. The games also drew inspiration from various Western sources. Sakaguchi had played and enjoyed the Wizardry series and drew from J.R.R. Tolkien for races such as elves and dwarves and mythical materials such as mithril.[11]

The original *Final Fantasy* game was released in Japan on the Famicom system and three years later came to the West in 1990 on the NES. Chris Kohler explains that the original release in the United States was heavily promoted via *Nintendo Power* magazine, whose subscribers received a free strategy guide for the game and which announced that "four winners would be invited to play a 'real life' game of *Final Fantasy*."[12] The game sold approximately 400,000 copies, and Square was determined to keep the franchise global.[13] Yet there were multiple difficulties to doing so. During the time lag between *Final Fantasy*'s Japanese and U.S. releases, Square published two additional Final Fantasy titles in Japan, and Nintendo was on the verge of launching a new console with advanced graphics and computer power, the SNES. Square executives felt that Western players would be reluctant to purchase games for a soon-to-be outmoded console and also thought that the complex storylines and lengthy play times would be additional roadblocks to sales. Additionally, localizing such early games was challenging because of how game files and code were configured at that time. For example, early titles did not neatly separate text files from other game assets. Often they mixed text, executable code, and images together in compressed and noncompressed formats. In some games, text was stored as an image file, requiring translations to fit within a predetermined space. In recounting their job duties, early translators have explained that they were often required to cut 50 percent or more of a game's original text, including dialogue, narration, and backstory—but still leave enough to preserve the game's original intent and meaning.[14]

Due to such challenges, Square decided to skip releasing *Final Fantasy II* and *III* outside Japan and rename *Final Fantasy IV* as the second in the series for Western markets. *Final Fantasy V* (released in 1992 in Japan) was slated for translation and release in the West, with Square announcing a 1995 release, but for various reasons, it was delayed until 1999. Although most Western game players knew or cared little about such delays, ROM hackers decided to undertake the project themselves. At that point, ROM

hacking and fan translations were considered novel activities, and few if any tools were available. According to various sources, the first known fan translation was done by Dennis Lardenoye and Ron Bouwland in 1993. Their group—Oasis—produced the translation for the Japanese MSX title *SD Snatcher*. Three years later, a group called Kowasu Ku announced that it would attempt the first console game translation of *Final Fantasy V*.[15] That effort was not completed, but in 1997, a team known as RPGe finally accomplished the task, creating a translation of the game two years before Square released its own official version in 1999.

Such groups arguably had a task that was more difficult than that of the official translators at Square. They had to reverse-engineer the game code and work without documentation or support from the developer. Such support was financial, technical, and conceptual. Fan translators worked on their own to determine which game elements to keep and how to translate thousands of lines of story and dialogue. They also developed their own tools for undertaking such projects, often writing these from scratch.

A Scene Develops

Many translators and hackers responded by forming teams to work on projects and create forums, sites, chat, and Internet relay chat (IRC) channels to exchange ideas and information and to socialize. Looking back on that history and activity, there is not one consistent "official" version to draw on but multiple stories with some overlaps and often highly subjective views or interpretations of that past.[16] Although the early events such as the MSX patch in 1993 and the 1997 release by RPGe of the *Final Fantasy V* patch are consistent across hacking histories, other events are harder to confirm or substantiate. In drawing out some of the most common threads to create at least a partial history, we can discover how Japan's games spurred the development of this scene and how the Internet gave it room to grow, flourish, and at some points die.

Although much early ROM hacking activity centered on IRC channels and bulletin boards, websites were also an important repository for and evidence of the growth of this scene. One of the earliest Web forums was "The ROM Hack Board," which was started in 1996 by Demi (an early hacker who worked on the translation for *Final Fantasy II*) and served as "a central hub" for translators, fostering "growth for the scene in both size and

complexity."[17] In 2000, Spinner 8 launched "The Whirlpool" as a destination site for hackers that would contain translation patches, reviews, screenshots, and reflections from hackers and translators about their experiences. Described as "the largest and most popular translation archive and news site for several years to come,"[18] the site slowly changed staff, declined, and shut down in 2005. At that point, a new site, Romhacking.net (shortened to RHDN for ROM Hacking Dot Net by its regulars) was launched by Nightcrawler, in part to address the decline of The Whirlpool and the shutdown of Romhacking.com (which launched in 2000, was renamed The Repository in 2004, and closed in 2004). RHDN remains one of the premiere sites for those who are engaged in ROM hacking, although other sites still support the scene.

Taking a look at the site as it currently exists offers a valuable glimpse into both the history and current practices of ROM hacking. Visitors can find news of various releases and forums for discussing items of interest. The site features an archive of more than six hundred free patches and hacks that are searchable by game genre, platform, original game, and type of modification. The most common types of mods alter graphics, sound, levels, text, and gameplay, with translation patches well represented. RHDN lets hackers and players find patches for various games that never were released in a particular region or that have been altered in some way, such as one titled *Chocobo's Dungeon World!*, described by its creator as "a small hack that modifies Bomberman to have a Chocobo-like wrapper around various graphics and sprites, with some text modified for the end. It's really just a fun little hack ^^" (figure 2.1).

Such hacks and news of them appeal to a wider audience of players than simply those within the hacking scene. As with most user-generated content or fan activities (such as those that might be considered components of participatory cultures), a small group generally invests time and skill to generate content for a large group of users. For the small group, RHDN plays a far different role in offering distinct and specialized types of resources. Of more interest to hackers and would-be translators are the documents, utilities, and forums that participants have labored to produce and used to create, support, and enhance their work (figure 2.2).

Hackers can find specialized tools such as an editor specifically for the game *Harvest Moon*, which allows the user to manipulate "most levels, text, palettes, statistics, and can export/import compressed graphics to be

Figure 2.1
A ROM hack for Chocobo's Dungeon World!
Source: Celice, "Chocobo's Dungeon World!," *Romhacking.net*, April 29, 2009, accessed July 4, 2014, http://www.romhacking.net/hacks/549.

edited in an external tile editor." Similarly, documentation includes tutorials for beginners, a "list of RAM addresses used by SMRPG and their function,"[19] "in depth detail on actual cartridge layout,"[20] and for translators, various versions of the Shift-JIS encoding scheme, which was the method of character encoding that was used for the Japanese language in early videogames.[21]

Title ▼	Author	Description	Category	Platform	Game	OS	Ver	Level
1942 Level Editor	Guyver (X.B.M.)	This is a level editor for the 1942_(JU)_[!] ROM on the NES. SHORT FEATURES: • Edit all 32 levels in the game. • Edit the amount of rolls. • Edit the amount of lives. • Edit the palette.	Level Editors	NES	1942	Win	1.0	Beg
1964 Tracer	g8z et al	A custom build of the emulator 1964 featuring a tracer, a memory logger, and the ability to dump RDRAM and SPRAM. This uses a "hook" system which is similar to a breakpoint, except it logs where the hook occurs to a text file instead of sna....	Debuggers / Special Emulators	N64	N/A	Win	0.8.3	Int
24=15	FinS	This converts colors between 24 bit RGB format and 15 bit BGR format. This is for use with SNES palettes but could probably be used for other systems. The original software which was intended to convert between RGB and CMYK can be found here: http....	Miscellaneous Graphics Tools	SNES	N/A	Win	1.0	Beg
A Simple Pointer Table Recalculator	Prez	Just as the name of the program would indicate, this is a simple pointer table recalculator. No fuss, no muss.	Pointers	Multiple	N/A	DOS	1.0	Beg
A.G.E. Arcade Games Editor	Ivan Mackintosh	AGE allows the graphics inside certain arcade games to be edited, allowing you to modify or add completely new graphics to the game. There is support for editing text strings, maps, and attributes of some games as well. This editor supports over 200+....	Graphics Editors	ARC	N/A	DOS	0.7b	Beg
A22I	Martin Korth	The assembler included in no$gmb. This is compatible with both the Z80 instruction set as well as the Gameboy specific instructions.	Assembly Tools	GB	N/A	Win	1.0	Int
AcidPhire NES Header Checker	AcidPhire	A simple program that is able to edit iNES headers. If your ROM is not creating SRAM for some mysterious reason it could be that it's header isn't set for SRAM. This program can fix that.	Miscellaneous	NES	N/A	Win	1.0	Beg
Addams's Family Pugsley Scavenger Hunt Password Generator	sleepy	This program encodes the passwords for the NES game The Addams Family - Pugsley's Scavenger Hunt. Requires .Net Framework	Game Specific	NES	The Addams Family - Pugsley's Scavenger Hunt	Win	1.0	Beg
Advance Palette Editor [APE]	HackMew	A program to edit palettes in GBA ROMs. Handle LZ77 compressed palettes. Allows you to both enter manual address and search for palette as well.	Palettes	GBA	N/A	Win	1.3.3	Int
Advance Wars: Dark Conflict - CO Editor	RadioShadow	This tool allows you to edit the stats for the twelve playable Commanding officers in the Nintendo NDS game "Advance Wars: Dark Conflict".	Game Specific	NDS	Advance Wars: Dark Conflict	Win	1.0	Beg
Advance Wars: Days of Ruin - CO Editor	RadioShadow	This tool allows you to edit the stats for the twelve playable Commanding officers in the Nintendo NDS game "Advance Wars: Days of Ruin".	Game Specific	NDS	Advance Wars: Days of Ruin	Win	1.0	Beg

(1 to 20) of 730 Results

Figure 2.2
A partial list of utilities and tools found at RHDN.

Such artifacts range from outdated and incomplete to new, intricately detailed guides. They explain technical challenges such as how to perform hexadecimal editing, how to find and replace text that exists in image files, and how to deal with spacing issues. Some offer walkthrough examples, pictorial guides, and detailed explanations of the processes involved. Although the guides might seem to provide definitive answers to every ROM hacking and translation challenge, they remain guides rather than definitive recipes. As the creators themselves admit, even games that run on the same consoles and come from a specific developer may still have different encoding formats, compression techniques, and file management systems.

In answer to the challenges that continually arise, the forums provide real-time strategy and troubleshooting for those engaged in hacking and translation projects. Discussions there are largely technical and therefore are of limited interest. They are not active to the extent that a site such as Blizzard's or Turbine's MMOG forums are. But they feature regular posts and discussions on a variety of issues. RHDN gives hackers a forum to discuss

recent patch releases and news of various game releases and also a space to troubleshoot ongoing projects. The forums have specific areas for technical hacking issues, translation help, newbie questions, and general discussion. On a typical day, the boards feature questions about how to translate a particular phrase from a game undergoing a translation hack, how to uncompress a certain file, and which project has recently shut down (and the resulting drama and fallout in the hacking community).

This all amounts to activity that is greater than the sum of its parts and that serves as a hub for people who are working on ROM hacks and translations. For those interested in bringing Japanese games to a wider audience, it offers a support system for double-checking one's work, highly specialized technical advice, and potential future collaborators for new projects. RHDN and sites like it also participate in a system of exchange that is more a gift economy than an exchange economy. Tool creators and technical experts give away their expertise and creations for free, in part perhaps to demonstrate some gaming capital but also to acknowledge that others in those spaces have helped them in the past. That system could be critiqued as one "generating compliant and flexible neo-liberal working subjects, well suited to the demands and requirements of a post-industrial, informational and networked global capitalism."[22] At the same time, capitalistic concepts may not be helpful where "co-creative media production practice is perhaps a disruptive agent of change that sits uncomfortably with our current understandings and theories of work and labour."[23]

Although Japanese games have been important for Western fans as a source of playful leisure, here the focus of play shifts. The act of hacking or translation becomes a way to play the game—but here play happens with the source code and original meaning. In prior research,[24] I found that cheaters use cheats in different ways, instrumentally (to get unstuck) as well as ludically (to get desired content immediately), both of which change the meaning of how one plays a game. Cheaters reconfigure play, perhaps bending the experience in ways that developers did not intend or would not approve of. So, too, hackers and translators have reconfigured the meaning of playing a Japanese game: they have cracked the games open to play with the code, also engaging in practices that developers might not intend or approve. As Ryan Milner points out about fans of the Fallout videogame series, "Fans, in general, embrace … their labor. After all, it was all they had in a system that marginalized their influence."[25]

Over the years, the numbers of teams working on various translation and hacking projects has varied, but numbers have been impossible to track for certain because these activities were (and remain) volunteer (and borderline illegal) activities that occur across the globe. Some of the earliest teams made names for themselves as part of the scene, contributing what are now considered essential, classic hacks or translations that are pivotal in the history of ROM hacking. One of the first teams to attempt (unsuccessfully) a translation hack of *Final Fantasy V* was Multiple Demiforce, which formed in 1996 to undertake the task. The team shifted gears, however, and worked on *Final Fantasy II* instead, which was considered a less complex project to undertake. The following year, RPGe gained notoriety for releasing a playable patch for *Final Fantasy V*. That achievement cemented their role in hacking history and brought attention to the ROM hacking scene, demonstrating what was possible through volunteer efforts.

Other notable groups and individuals include Translation Corporation (launched in 1997), which became Nightcrawler's Translation Corporation in 2001, and King Mike's Translation, which has produced more than two dozen translation hacks and continues to work on projects. In 1999, Ghideon Zhi started the Aeon Genesis Translation Project, which has completed over seventy translation hacks and has more than thirty additional projects ongoing. Many involved in the scene acknowledge that "fan translation was booming" in the late 1990s (compared to more recent activity) as teams demonstrated they could do what Japanese videogame companies could or would not—create playable, understandable versions of Japanese games in English.[26]

Producing a hack or translation requires multiple skill sets that often do not mirror more professional translation efforts. I have mentioned the technical and language skills that are required to undertake such jobs, but additional challenges are confronted by teams. For example, the unpaid nature of this labor creates particular stressors. Many individuals and teams take on translation projects as a hobby, doing so either after school (whether high school or college), during off hours from work, and on weekends. Team members can have variable amounts of time to commit and different commitment levels. One member may see the work as a top priority, and another may see it as an enjoyable hobby that should not get in the way of time with friends and family. Most teams have little idea how long projects will take, and as time stretches on, stressors based on varying commitment levels occur.

Because there are few repercussions for doing so and even fewer rewards, some team members will leave a team before a hack is completed, further slowing down efforts, potentially killing a project (or team) entirely, or creating problems about how to credit various team members for their efforts. For example, in 1997, toma (Spoony Bard) released an uncompleted translation of *Final Fantasy II* that took much of the work from an earlier game patch created by Demi (operator of "The ROM Hack Board"). Demi allegedly asked to have his work removed from the translation, but toma did not comply, "causing some animosity between the two of them."[27] More recently, the translation team Crimson Nocturnal announced that it was disbanding, in part because of displeasure with "having to continually read comments about how you haven't updated enough, or released anything in X amount of time. Having to deal with people whine and complain about something that costs them nothing at all wears on you."[28] Although readers at RHDN forums expressed sympathy and sadness at the group's demise, others were not so forgiving, with Metal Knuckles writing that "even as an avid supporter of the scene who has not once complained or demanded updates, their message carried nothing but a huge 'SCREW YOU' throughout the entire thing."[29]

Aeon Genesis and *The Adventures of Hourai High*

The Aeon Genesis Translation Project (AGTP) led by Ghideon Zhi is one of the most prolific translation hacking groups still operating. The AGTP has completed more than seventy translation hacks and has thirty new or ongoing projects listed on its site. On April 19, 2011, the group released the translation patch for *The Adventures of Hourai High: Transfer Student Dramabomb*, previously titled *Hourai Gakuen no Bouken! Tenkousei Scramble*. The little-known 1996 SNES game was created by the Japanese developer Dynamite and published by J-Wing and never was released outside Japan. Fan translation efforts started in 1999 with a different team, and the project stuttered along as members came and went. But the translator who started the project kept it in mind as he worked on various other projects, went to college, and studied in Japan, before turning his full attention back to this effort and asking Aeon Genesis to help complete the project.[30]

The work of Aeon Genesis on this title illustrates the value of fan translators, particularly as they begin working on projects that take as their sources

small, obscure games that stand little to no chance of seeing an official release outside Japan. *Hourai High* qualifies as such a title due to its special-ized content and its history as part of a larger Japanese transmedia product. As elaborated on in the game's development notes, "the SNES game is a spin-off of *Hourai High*, the play-by-mail role-playing game. Based on the PBM game were novels, table RPGs, magazines, a card game, mobile phone games and at least one CD."[31] Thus, the game already had a history and fic-tion, which encouraged Aeon Genesis to "tread carefully" in transforming the game experience.

Playing the patched version of the game reveals why an official local-ization was never undertaken (and probably never considered) and why fan translators took great care in their localization efforts. The game con-tains typical JRPG features—turn-based combat, random encounters, vari-ous party members to manage, and specialized classes and job/skill systems for leveling up. Yet the fiction is quite different from what many Western players would expect of a typical fantasy-themed RPG. The player starts as a transfer student who is flying to Hourai High, which is home to a mil-lion students on an island in Japan. Because the pilots of the plane fall asleep and overshoot their destination, the student complains to the flight attendant about being late. She solves the problem by giving your char-acter a parachute and pushing "you" out the airplane door. "You" crash into the school and land on another student during the opening ceremony. After that inauspicious beginning, gameplay continues as the player learns how to join clubs, engages in combat with a paramilitary guard unit called the Security Patrol, and uncovers secret plots while working for the school newspaper.

In taking on such a job, Aeon Genesis chose a project that remained decidedly Japanese even after translation. Some language was localized to make more sense to the player, such as satsu's use of the term *dramabomb* in the title: "'Dramabomb,' of course, is not a word used anywhere in the original game, but I needed a word of that many characters to fit in with the title screen animation. I think it sets the tone for the game quite nicely."[32] Overall, the game remains distinctly Japanese in its design and fiction. The setting—a high school in Japan—is local, and some items remain stereo-typically Japanese. For example, to regain health, the player uses food items that can be purchased at various shops on Side Street, a zone on the island (figure 2.3). Most shops sell variations on Japanese foods.
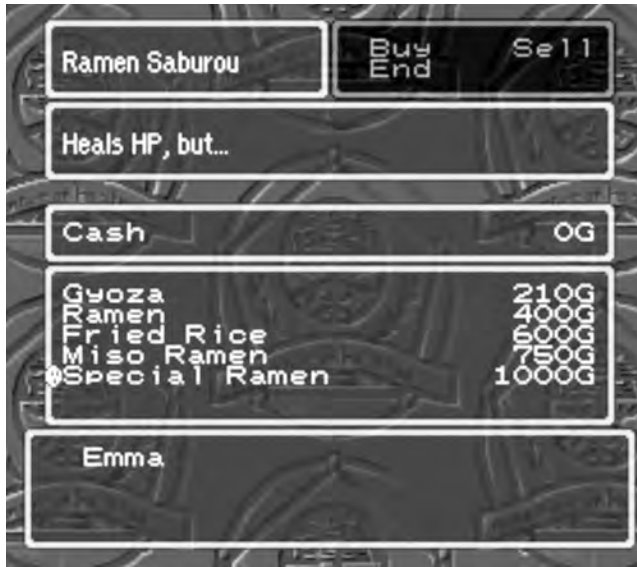
Figure 2.3
Items for sale in a food shop in *Hourai High*.

The game's fiction is more playful than many other mainstream RPGs and allows for a greater diversity of actions, statuses, and items than a typical fantasy-style game. Therefore, the player can be afflicted with status ailments such as Meh, Rage, Pheromone, and Sick and can employ an Eye Mask to restore health and a Tough Love Whip to cure a Selfish status.

Hourai High gives players choices for personalizing their character, but some are unique to Japanese interests and remain unchanged in the fan translation. When creating a character, the player chooses a gender, birth month, and blood type, reflecting Japanese interests in that piece of information. The school clubs that a player joins to learn abilities and skills include baseball, karate, kendo, anime, drama, surgery, modern physics, and mad scientists. Each club specializes in a particular skill and offers the player a whimsical description, such as the football club, which is "inspired by 70s youth soaps. Big fans of running into the sunset and other charming tropes." Likewise, the games club perhaps echoes the game's actual developers, who "became independent in 1980, then went on to create 'Hourai High' and many other games."

With elements such as these, *Hourai High* was destined to remain in Japan, at least according to the mainstream game industry. Even if Dynamite or J-Wing had taken a risk and localized it for wider release, it probably would not have sold well compared to more mainstream JRPG titles. Yet the work of AGTP created a hybrid form of the game—one that was available to Western players and yet kept decidedly Japanese content. The patch and game have received limited circulation, yet the value of the effort lies in different arenas. First, the game is now playable by a wider audience, and rather than having many elements stripped out because they seem too foreign, it maintains many elements that likely made it desirable to its original audience. Simply to be added to the cultural lexicon for players outside Japan is an important achievement. Second, knowledge of the scope and diversity of JRPGs is widened through such efforts, which can remind Western players that there is more to RPGs and videogames than *Final Fantasy*. Such efforts enrich the culture and history of videogames and continue the process of jumbling or mixing efforts to maintain borders between games and players. Fan translators and ROM hackers play an important role in pushing the bounds of our knowledge about videogames, their content, and their history. In so doing, players gain access to new content and complicate the notion of what a global game industry entails. In addition to the official offerings of large developers and publishers, hacked and multiply localized fan versions also are inserted into what counts as global products and culture.

The Mother Series, *EarthBound*, and the Starmen

Hourai High showcases a game that was likely far too niche to be officially released outside Japan, but other fan translation projects draw from more popular material, and some demonstrate the increasing professionalization of fan translation groups and their related efforts to create an official market for such games. For example, the Mother series provides another interesting counterpoint to more commercially popular Japanese RPG series such as Square's Final Fantasy line and Enix's Dragon Quest line. Fans of each series eagerly await forthcoming titles, with Western fans particularly frustrated with long waits, missing games, and reworked content. Yet those omissions and gaps in time also have provided opportunities for fan translators. Fans of the Mother series are a key audience to consider, particularly those who

have taken the next step into the world of fan translations. Documenting their actions and passion is important to get a sense of the series and its unique qualities and investigate what such fans have done, helping to contribute not just to knowledge about fan translation but also to a reenvisioning of a global economy of games, adding more depth to the conversation about what Japaneseness might mean in a videogame, and how that can be faithfully expressed as well as carefully elided, to create artistic works that can travel globally.

In 1989, Nintendo released *Mother*, an RPG created by Shigesato Itoi for its Famicom (NES) system in Japan. The game was set in the fictional town of Mother's Day in America and featured a boy named Ninten who had psychic powers. After a paranormal attack on his house, he sets off with friends to solve the mystery of what happened. In *Mother 2 (Earth-Bound* in the West), Itoi created another unique fantasy world, this time featuring the young boy Ness and his pals, who had to defeat Giygas, an alien from the future who was determined to destroy the earth. Psychic powers return, with the game alleged to draw in part from the personal history of creator Itoi. In the last game in the series, *Mother 3*, the player controls various characters, including Flint and Claus, in a quest to rid the world of aliens who are mutating the world's animals into evil cyborglike chimeras. The game is again unusual in its details, gameplay, and approach. One interesting change from RPGs of the time is its lack of random encounters: players are able to see enemy creatures and either engage or avoid them (this feature also is found in *Mother 2*). The attack system also has a musical component that grants bonuses and special attacks when the player correctly manipulates the game controller in time to in-game battle sounds.

The series is unusual even by JPRG standards and had sales that reflected its eclecticism. The first game, *Mother*, sold approximately 400,000 copies in Japan[33] and was mentioned in *Nintendo Power* as a future release in North America. A fully localized English language version of the game was completed, along with an eighty-page manual and maps, but then was quietly canceled. Various reasons were given for the cancellation, including the high cost of cartridge production, a game system that had already been supplanted by the newer SNES, and the low popularity of RPGs in North America.[34] Regardless of the actual circumstances, the series did not reach a broad audience until the second game.

In 1994, *Mother 2* was released in Japan for the SNES console, and a year later the localized version, renamed *EarthBound*, appeared in North America.[35] The game sold approximately 300,000 copies in Japan, achieved number one on *Weekly Famitsu*'s top thirty chart, and was well reviewed in various publications.[36] Sales were modest in North America, with about 140,000 copies sold, although in later years the game became something of a cult hit, and "*EarthBound* was revealed to be the #1 'Readers most wanted' virtual console title" (with *Mother* being the number two title).[37]

Development of the third title, *Mother 3*, was much more time consuming than either of the prior games, was canceled at one point, and then was reinstated. The game's platform shifted among several console systems—first the 64DD, next the Nintendo 64, and finally the Game Boy Advance. The title was released in Japan in 2006 for the GBA, selling approximately 400,000 copies. Nintendo has never announced plans to release a localized version for sale outside Japan, and no further Mother games have (yet) been planned.

Frustrated and angered that the sequel to *EarthBound* would not be localized, fan translators mobilized. Led by the collective "Starmen" (named after the villain Giygas's army in *Mother 2*), a team was formed to bring *Mother 3* to players in the West. Two years later, in 2008, a patch was released allowing players to experience *Mother 3* in English, with projects ongoing for patches in Spanish, French, German, Malay, Portuguese, and several other languages. Only a week after its release, the patch had more than 100,000 downloads recorded.[38]

Although this patch is one of the most famous in fan translation history, the team's sophistication stands out in its localization efforts, its work to document the actions of team members, and the supplementary materials that it made available for players, fans, and other potential fan translators. The Starmen did a masterful job in employing the Internet to draw attention to their project and in discussing the localization process. Such activities have shaped how fans of Japanese games now think about access to games and what they have come to expect from Japanese developers and other players.

A player looking for a *Mother 3* patch will encounter a site much more elaborate than those found on RHDN or AGTP. Rather than bring together a wide group of individuals who were interested in the intricacies

of translation hacking or those who were looking for a greater variety of patches, the Starmen sites build a community for players of a particular JRPG series (as well as hackers and would-be hackers/translators of those games) to draw attention to their project and their wish to see more Japanese games released outside Japan.

Calling it the "Do-It-Yourself Devotion Project," a team of well-known hackers and translators set to work on *Mother 3*, which included overcoming technical challenges and publicizing the project and their reasons for initiating it. The project team made it clear that the act of translating the game was born of necessity: "ever since Itoi announced that he was finished with the game, we've waited pensively, hoping for any scrap of an announcement from Nintendo. 6 months after the release of the game in Japan, we had pretty much gotten the picture—NoA [Nintendo of America] had no plans to bring the game to us."[39] But rather than take an oppositional stance with Nintendo, the Starmen hoped that their actions would "get a dialogue going about the legitimacy of fan translations and the way Nintendo interacts (or doesn't) with its fans."[40] We can see in those words a strong desire to be recognized as a legitimate actor or set of actors and at minimum to be listened to by a game's developers. As Milner reminds us, many fans engage in labor related to games mainly to make the games better, not to turn a profit. For those interested in the development of *Fallout 3*, "the injustice was that their ideas would *not* be used, not that their ideas would be used without compensation."[41] The Starmen likewise claim not to want a profit from their work: they want developers to hear their requests for more localized games.

Part of the efforts of the Starmen included showing Nintendo and Itoi the depths that Western fan loyalties reached regarding this franchise. As part of its website, the team highlighted practical steps that members of the group had taken to demonstrate their fandom and the potential market that such a group embodied. They wrote that "on the day that *Mother 3* was released, Starmen.net registered over a quarter million pageviews" and included a hyperlink with data showing site statistics for the month in question.[42] The image details the maximum number of pageviews per day at 262,106, providing evidence to back their claims.[43] Likewise, a column titled "*EarthBound* Fans' Many Accomplishments" highlights selected actions and publicity surrounding the Starmen's cause, including a mention of the group in a sidebar in *Nintendo Power*, news of "a complete World

of *Mother 3* English Translation courtesy of Starmen.net," and links to three petitions for *Mother 3*'s release with more than thirty thousand signatures.

Part of the discourse of the site is dedicated to showing the legitimacy of *Mother 3/EarthBound* fans. These individuals are not simply looking for a free ROM or pirated copy of the game and its related translation. The site points out in numerous locations that it helps players acquire legitimate copies of the various games and states that it opposes piracy and profiting from other fans for illegal copies of the games: "we don't distribute ROMs; in fact, we don't even allow our users to ask where they can find them."[44] Such efforts echo similar discourses by anime fans, who, as Milner writes, "viewed their illegal copying as a promotional service for anime producers and a way to increase visibility and availability in the USA. The piracy was not viewed as a permanent and financially lucrative endeavor. To these fans, the success of the text was the paramount goal."[45]

Finally, the site itself shows a level of sophistication and polish that rivals that of professional game or localization studios. In addition to the efforts just detailed, the site features detailed translation notes, a handbook that is a fully illustrated walkthrough guide to the game, a quiz for ultra-fans, official merchandise, and many other goodies. The site's main attractions for interested players are a large download link to the game patch, an equally prominent readme file, a list of steps to follow to ensure the patch can be run, "A Note from Tomato" situating the project, and a video showing highlights from the game set to a triumphal score (figure 2.4).

Mandelin and the Starmen have drawn a fine line, however, because they do profit from some of the items listed on the site. Overall, however, the site and its component parts exist as fan activities or creations, albeit highly polished and professional ones. The players—who may have started out by consuming more popular culture from Japan, learned Japanese, perhaps translated certain artifacts, and created amateur productions of their own—have here reached perhaps the zenith of what is possible. The Starmen provide a translation patch (actually several), details on how to best use it, a community dedicated to a game series, and a culture surrounding it. In doing so, they have given worldwide exposure to certain Japanese games that were in limited circulation in Japan. Although the extent of the fandom may seem impressive, it is still fairly small in terms of overall videogame sales numbers for major titles. The actions of such groups point to an intriguing new direction for fans—one that is slightly different from the more familiar path of becoming a fan, taking on such projects, and then
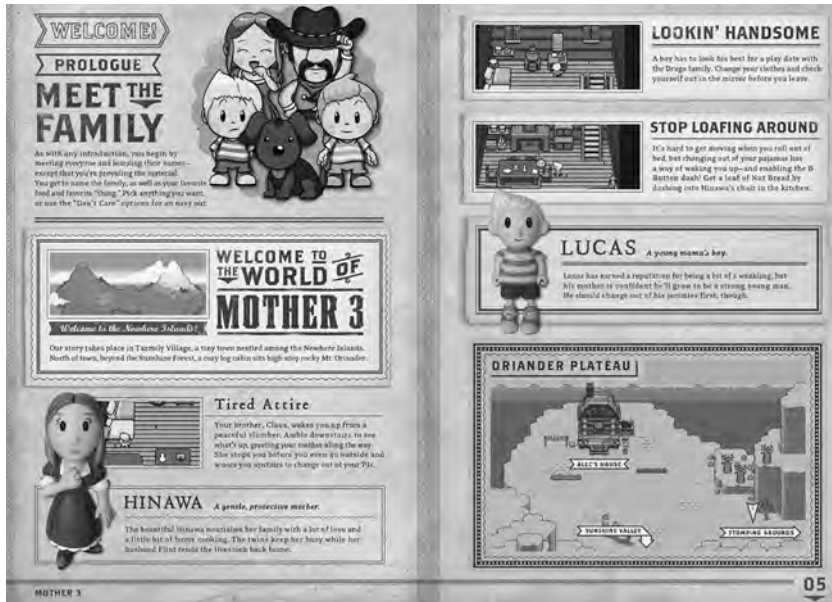
Figure 2.4
Screenshot of *Mother 3* handbook.
Source: "*Mother 3* Handbook," accessed July 4, 2014, http://handbook.fangamer
.com/page3.html.

working for a large localization team for a Japanese game company. Such
individuals and teams are starting to incorporate, and rather than release
patches for illegal ROMs, they are working with Japanese developers—usu-
ally independent or small studios—to create official localized versions (for
more on this practice, see chapter 5). In doing so, they push cosmopolitan-
ism and fan labor to ever newer heights and relevance. Indie localization
teams can develop cosmopolitan dispositions that are deep and sustained,
layering onto their interests in culture and language an appreciation and
knowledge of the complexities of global business flows, markets, and trade.
That knowledge is then used to bring additional cultural products to new
markets with greater ease.

Conclusions

Translation hackers would seem to be a magnitude past regular players
in terms of their commitment to Japanese videogames, given the large

amounts of time that their hobby demands. For the players discussed in chapter 1, Japanese games led to something beyond games—an interest in culture, language, media, society, and other games in their original Japanese. For some, it led to translation hacking. But the activities and focus of dedicated translation hackers remain centered on the games in two key ways—as a hacking challenge and as translation (or localization) artistry. The technical demands of the activity cannot be underestimated. Even simple games with small amounts of text to translate demand knowledge of hex editing, tile maps, debugging, and myriad other concerns. Those who gain proficiency can go on to create their own software to aid in the process, particularly as operating systems are updated and as new ROMs, new systems, and new games become available. Translation hackers quickly learn that there is no standardized recipe for hacking games and getting them translated and into a playable state.

Further, the act of translation is often more art than science. Straight translation is always challenging, particularly when games make references to fantasy or arcane lore. Language is also difficult to translate when puns, jokes, and popular culture references are present. Translation hackers are faced with numerous questions—how much to translate literally, how much to omit, and how much to transform artfully. Although space constraints may no longer be an issue, shifting from kanji's multiple meanings to more literal romance languages requires translators to make choices, and individuals often feel pressured to defend those choices or at least consult with others for feedback before finalizing their productions.

Such groups are not paid for their labor, but they could be said to engage in playbor practices nonetheless. Given their marginal status relative to professional localizers and the contemporary games industry and their focus on increasingly older Japanese games, these groups do not seem to be making ROM hacking into a market. Yet the practices of such hackers exist alongside other fan activities that do engage in monetization practices. For example, Hector Postigo has studied YouTube gamers with large subscriber bases that do not merely "play" games but instead talk of "making gameplay" via sophisticated systems and routines.[46] In his view, those individuals have become "a management class" that harnesses subscribers (that is, regular players as viewers) via retention and channel growth to make money. They also are forced to balance the competing demands of a normative environment where "sharing and community must be prioritized" while at

the same time "capital accumulation is important."[47] ROM hackers do not have to contend with all those pressures, but they complicate the player-developer dichotomy and offer another puzzle related to how individuals engage in complex forms of play—which now can encompass playing with the code of a game alongside playing online for profit and attention.

Beyond their level of dedication and professionalism, what can we learn from studying the activities of ROM hackers? Players of Japanese games have shown us how a cosmopolitan disposition can be differentially expressed and how popular media such as games can serve as a potential gateway for individuals and groups to learn more about cultures and societies beyond their own. Such knowledge may be shallow and incomplete or deep, sustained, and meaningful. Yet games are an entrance point for a significant number of individuals. Translation hackers, in contrast, may not necessarily be moved to learn more about another culture or society (they might, but it was not my intent to investigate those interests here), but instead they might wish to learn more about the architecture of videogames and to engage in a creative process. Translation hackers see their goal to be playing with games in different ways—playing with the machine code of the game and the language (Japanese) that players must use to understand that deeper level of code. Their form of gameplay creates new artifacts and experiences—localized games, hacked games, transformed games—that previously did not exist.

It might be a mistake to say that they have substantially expanded a market because the games they hack usually reach a limited number of players. Yet such sustained activity has shown developers and publishers that there remains interest among certain Western players for particular types of Japanese videogames. Games like *Catherine* and *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron* continue to be released in the West, to modest sales. Fan sites like *Silicon Era* and indie localization companies such as Carpe Fulgur and Rockin' Android thrive, encouraging and sustaining those markets and fan groups. Fan translators therefore fit into a small but vital ecosystem, a microgenre of Western players of niche Japanese videogames. Such games will never rival the Call of Duty or Halo franchises, but they make important contributions to global game culture and must be recognized alongside the blockbusters.

Likewise, hacker and fan translator actions have opened a new or different possibility space for games. Similar to the hacks and level editors

that are released for games such as *Doom*, translation hackers transform particular Japanese games into hybrids—somewhat Western and somewhat Eastern in their expression.[48] Although never commercially released, these hybrids contribute to the growth of videogame diversity and the expansion of the industry, even if outside official channels. They also fiddle with the actual gameplay, such as the Starmen's creation of an "easy ring" mod for *Mother 1 + 2* to make gameplay less frustrating for contemporary players to experience.

That this activity persists, despite the continuous release of newer systems and more sophisticated games, suggests that these practices hold great meaning for those who engage in them. The games themselves serve as interesting raw material to be tinkered with and transformed, and groups and individuals take pleasure from manipulating technology and language. That so many Japanese games continue to be hacked and translated demonstrates their enduring value. Even games not officially released outside Japan have been taken beyond those borders, reverse engineered, rebuilt, redesigned, and redone. Japanese games provided source code for translation hackers to play with, and they have decoded those games in ways far different from how most of us understand or think about games, much to the benefit of all of us.

What might have started as an interest in playing a particular game can become much more. After experiencing translation hacking, some individuals become fascinated by the process, and games become a catalyst for their own learning and experimentation. Various hacking sites repeatedly admonish visitors that the good or successful hacker is patient and interested in the process rather than simply the goal. Even if the completed patch is touted and feted after final release, for most individuals and groups, hacking is long, hard work that often fails. Tediousness, rather than glory, is the expected result. Yet many continue to hack and create masterful patches. It is important to document these events and artifacts not to capture a lost history or fill in gaps left out of an "official" history but instead to identify equal contributions to the history of videogames and Japanese videogames in particular. Translation hacks show us how players can go beyond the dynamic act of gameplay to higher levels of interactivity with games—beyond cheating and beyond level editing. They expand the world of games, rewrite histories, and transform cultures and expectations.

3   Playing Japan's Games

The prior two chapters have examined how players of Japanese videogames have derived pleasure from them—either by enjoying their game stories, characters, and gameplay or by reconfiguring and reassembling the code of a game for a new audience. In telling those stories, I have talked around various games, describing how others react to them or why they were chosen for discussion. Yet what about the games themselves? The initial premise of this chapter was to study the Japanese games that have meant a lot to players, but that is complicated. Thousands of games have been produced over the last several decades, making it impossible (or at least improbable) for one person to play them all, let alone analyze or build useful theorization about them. Even bracketing the potential scope of such a task, there are other considerations, such as determining the conceptual origins of games and deciding how something counts as Japanese.

What does it mean to call something a Japanese game? Countries with cultural import quotas have always struggled with this notion—asking, for example, whether a film counts as Canadian if it is shot in Toronto, made to look like New York, and financed via Hollywood. Similarly, one could ask if the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot from a California studio called Crystal Dynamics counts as a Japanese game, given that it was published by franchise owner Square-Enix. The game has British origins, coming from Toby Gard and the now defunct UK studio Core Design. We probably can agree that *Tomb Raider* is not a Japanese game, given its deep roots in the West. Conversely, the action-adventure title *Lost Planet 3* was developed by a California studio called Spark Unlimited (now closed), yet the franchise was originally created and developed in Japan by Capcom. We could ask if one game is more Japanese than another and in what ways. The game *999* was made by the Tokyo-based ChunSoft but localized into English by

the California-based Aksys Games. Chunsoft is a studio that creates games that are more in line with Japanese tastes than the global market and creates many role-playing games and visual novels. Yet *999* has been globally successful, due to quality design and expert localization. At anything other than very broad levels, it becomes tricky to say what counts as a Japanese game in different situations, and those situations are increasing in number and complexity.

Faced with those debates and the enormity of the choices to make, I almost abandoned my original idea for this chapter. But I played onward to see what there was to say about a selection of Japanese games—something that would not reduce them to ahistorical enactments of Japaneseness or simply review their innovative or tired features. Like Thomas Lamarre—who gives priority to the materiality of anime, to "technologies of the moving image"[1] rather than anime's representations of culture or history—I wanted this chapter to be about Japanese videogames as games first and foremost. That meant analyzing them for their procedural rhetorics, their integration of rules and fictions, and the ways that understanding them could push game studies scholars in new directions in theorizing games. In doing that, I also asked how the games might embody or embrace (or reject) potential Japaneseness. Some games seemingly signal their Japanese origin more than others or perhaps leave traces behind that indicate their origins, depending on how the games are being marketed to global audiences, which is something worth exploring.[2]

To begin the selection process, I chose games or game intellectual properties (game IPs) that originally were created or developed within Japan, although sometimes localized or published elsewhere.[3] I considered whether to focus on best-selling games, the most critically acclaimed, or perhaps small, quirky titles with cult followings. I also gave thought to choosing games that developers agree are innovative in some way that deserved mention. Platform was another consideration, in that I wanted to ensure that games were chosen from a variety of systems. I briefly thought about examining games created by amateurs that sell at (or begin their life at) places like the Comic Market in Tokyo. There are fascinating failed games like *Segagaga* that potentially say something important about the Japanese game industry at a certain point in time. I also wanted to try games that came from a diversity of genres and that seemed to travel well transnationally in their sales and critical recognition. In the end, I chose games that

appealed to me in some way and felt diverse in their genres, platforms, and scope. I chose games that I heard about and read were good, interesting, or important in some way and that seemed to offer a range of approaches to what a Japanese game might look or play like, apart from something like a Final Fantasy or Zelda game.

This chapter makes no claims to representativeness in the games being discussed. I did play and analyze a wider variety of games than my personal preferences would normally dictate, and I played more games than I have space to discuss here. The chapter examines only games that have been localized into English and that can be played on Western systems. Perhaps controversially, I do not include any Mario or Zelda games. Those games have received much attention already, and I have little to add to what has been written about them.[4]

The goal of the chapter is to explore the variety of what Japanese developers have offered players outside Japan. The contemporary market provides a huge range of games, even as the wider industry bemoans the imminent collapse of all Japanese studios and the creative bankruptcy of every contemporary Japanese developer. This chapter is an experiment in locating recently released Japanese games (defined as the last several years) for a variety of platforms—consoles (including the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360), mobile phones, handhelds (such as the Nintendo DS and 3DS), and the PC/Mac platform. It includes games that are large and small and span a variety of genres.

I played and discuss *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch*, which is a Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) and was made by the successful Japanese game studio Level-5 and the famed animation production house Studio Ghibli. This collaboration seemed to be an appropriate choice for examining how contemporary JRPGs have evolved. It was also a AAA game that was released as a PS3 exclusive and given extensive attention and care as a global production.

As an example of a small game, I chose the iPhone game *Game Dev Story* by Kairosoft, which created the game for the PC but later ported it to mobile devices. *Game Dev Story* is a simulation game that places the player in the role of a game studio president who is tasked with hiring workers, purchasing development licenses, and making games that sell millions of copies. The game has been well received critically and is well known among Western game developers because of its ironic take on game development.

I felt that *Game Dev Story* could demonstrate what a small game might look like and also reveal what the developers themselves thought of the game industry and the ways that games get made.

Although both *Ni No Kuni* and *Game Dev Story* were games I would normally play based on my own interests, I also wanted to ensure I did not overlook genres or titles that might reveal important insights, despite having mechanics or rules that were unfamiliar to me because of my own past gameplay. Turning to the supernatural, I tried the latest game in Capcom's Devil May Cry franchise, *DmC*, created by Ninja Theory in the United Kingdom. Featuring a radically redefined Dante in the lead, it presented me with plenty of button mashing and combo attacks as I tried to defeat multiple demons. It was also the other console AAA title that I chose for study. It offered a highly discussed reboot of the series and a Western studio's takeover of the series from a Japanese publisher.

Moving to the Nintendo DS, I played through what I thought of as a puzzle game—*999: 9 Hours 9 Persons 9 Doors* from Chunsoft. Featuring escape-the-room mechanics layered onto a visual novel structure, the game offered a story that demanded multiple playthroughs and gave me a chance to consider how a genre not normally popular outside Japan would fare with Western players. Lastly, I wanted to experience the soap opera drama of *Fire Emblem: Awakening* for the 3DS, a tactical RPG from Intelligent Systems that offers players permadeath, characters to match up and wed, and a kingdom to save. The game was a critical success, and it caught my eye due to the (to me) weird mixture of strategy-RPG elements with a dating game or simulation. I easily spent more than a hundred hours playing those games, writing notes about them, and pondering their meanings.[5]

In playing and writing about these games, I consider whether the game creators draw on specific aspects of culture, language, and society for creative inspiration. But more often, I explore what I found special about the games—perhaps how the games comment on other games or other media and culture, how game studies theories can help us understand those experiences, and how that will advance the field. The goal is to understand the games as sociocultural systems or simulations and to explore the ways they are situated in contemporary game culture.

Handheld Games

999: 9 Hours 9 Persons 9 Doors

In *999* or *Zero's Last Reward*, I play as Junpei, a Japanese college student who is abducted from his apartment by a masked man. Waking up in a locked ship's cabin, Junpei must escape the room after a porthole-sized window breaks and water begins rushing in. After solving various puzzles to spring open the locked door, Junpei exits and encounters eight other individuals who also are trapped with him on this ship. They all have nonremovable bracelets on their wrists with number one through nine displayed (Junpei's is number five). A loudspeaker comes on to announce that "we" (Junpei and the other eight characters) must play the "Nonary game" to escape because the ship we are trapped on will sink in exactly nine hours.

Gameplay centers around grouping different sets of nonplayer characters together with Junpei to unlock differently numbered doors. After the player enters a new space, she needs to solve a variety of puzzles and interact with the other characters to learn about their histories, which inevitably leads back to mysterious connections to the Nonary game. Playing the game once will allow the player access to only a limited set of areas and non-player characters and thus a very incomplete sense of the larger mystery. To understand the story or mythology driving the Nonary game (including who is the mysterious Zero who has abducted everyone and why), players must play the game multiple times.

Part visual novel and part puzzle/adventure game, *9 hours 9 persons 9 doors* was created by Kotaro Uchikoshi at Chunsoft, released for the DS in Japan in 2009, and released in North America a year later.[6] The game was critically well received and sold well enough in North America for its local-izer/publisher Aksys to do a second printing. The game is well suited for a portable system because it is easy to save a game and play in short bursts or for longer periods of time—taking advantage of the mobile nature of play. The game's overall structure also contributes to a feeling of portability or swiftness because playing one iteration of *999* takes less than ten hours. Additional playthroughs take even less time to complete because the player can fast-forward through dialogue already witnessed. The game is a mystery, but its puzzles can be solved in various ways. The game encourages players to play through multiple times, and it includes a feature on the Save

screen after initial completion, showing which of the six endings the player has unlocked and demonstrating how many remain to uncover.

Another way that *999* capitalizes on its portable system is through exploiting the DS's limited visual field. The setting is a ship's interior that is turned into a labyrinth that must be escaped. Many of the rooms are small or feel cramped, and there are no windows apart from an initial porthole. The player is meant to feel visually trapped or cramped, which is reinforced by the game's use of escape-the-room mechanics (figure 3.1). Further, the relatively small screens of the DS (compared to laptops, computer monitors, and television screens) keep the player focused on small details rather than exploring wider vistas or panoramic shots. Attention to detail and small differences is key to solving puzzles and unlocking doors. The touch mechanics kinesthetically move the story and action along as the player progresses by searching for clues and inputting codes and answers. Puzzles are usually creative and engaging, although because they often are math-based and do not require graphical solutions, they exploit the touch-screen capabilities far less than other popular DS titles do.

One element of *999* that was difficult for me to enjoy was its visual novel component, a genre with which I have little experience. The genre is one of the least exported game types coming from Japan, despite "comprising around 25 percent of software that is bought and sold at video game stores across Japan."[7] Visual novels (or "novel games," as Hiroki Azuma calls them) are derived from "girl games," which were first created in 1982. Girl games were created as largely adult-only titles, playable originally only via personal computers rather than on console systems. Azuma explains their format as being simple: "the player tries to 'win over' female characters of their choice through various game systems, and, if successful, they can view pornographic illustrations as a reward."[8] John Wheeler argues that the visual novel is actually "a hybridized genre of video game that draws on the tradition of text-based adventure games. The player interacts with the game by clicking to scroll text and progress the narrative."[9] As visual novels began to proliferate, they relied less on pornography and began to take multiple perspectives, with some games featuring female protagonists who are trying to date boys (*otome* games) and others hybridizing with other game genres to produce different kinds of experiences.

I had heard that *999* was associated with visual novels, but I had little idea what that entailed. Dense on text and light on interactivity, the
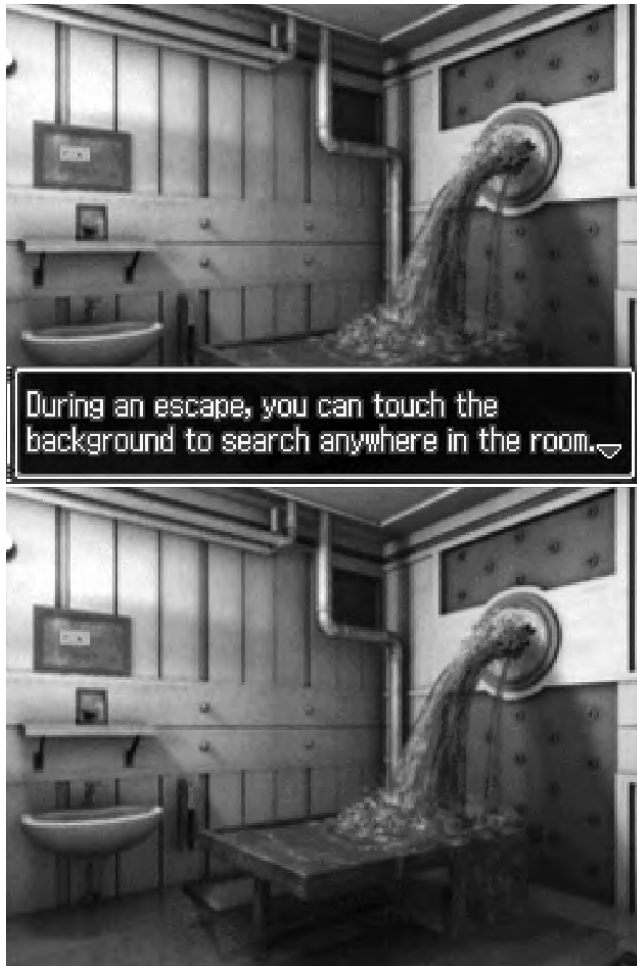
During an escape, you can touch the background to search anywhere in the room.

Figure 3.1
Setting up an escape-the-room puzzle in *999*.

opening of *999* (as reflected in my notes) was more a chore to endure than a pleasure to experience. That "overflow" of text is common. Emily Taylor explains that players can often "play" visual novels "for an hour or more before the first option appears."[10] And the role that the player inhabits—Junpei, the college student—is another visual novel trope where "the protagonist is typically in high school or college" and serves as an "essentially empty shell" for the player to inhabit.[11]

Yet *999* is not just a visual novel: it also blends elements of adventure or escape-the-room mechanics to its gameplay. Because of that hybridization, the game brought in elements that were familiar to me and slowly balanced those competing elements out, moving between exposition and interactivity fairly well. What made *999* stand out while playing was not its adventure elements but rather its deployment of multiple playthroughs as the only real way to play the game successfully. One could play the game once and claim to have finished it, but that is not what the developers intended. *999* demanded multiple playthroughs to discover what was behind doors not initially chosen, to gain full knowledge of the story's mystery, and to achieve the one "good" ending that was hinted at in walkthroughs and other paratexts and expected by fans of this genre of game.

Taylor writes that a key component of visual novels is that they offer players multiple endings and that players should expect to play the game as many times as possible to reach all of those conclusions. She argues that "the only way to 'beat' the game is to play it numerous times, experiencing *all* the endings. … Essentially, the only way to 'lose' when playing a dating-sim game is not to get a bad ending but to get the same ending twice, since doing so prevents players from making any progress toward game completion."[12] For Hiroki Azuma, the game player needs to experience not only the "single story at hand but also the sum of different versions of *possible stories*."[13]

Many games that are not visual novels now offer multiple playthroughs to players to entice them to try a game again to see different endings or choose different paths. Bioware, for example, suggests that players should play its Mass Effect games multiple times to "fully experience" both the Renegade and Paragon storylines offered. And games like Bethesda Software's *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* feature very different player experiences based on factional loyalties chosen, alignments followed, and the ways that players wish to position themselves morally within the games.

But *999* is different due to its generic origins. Other types of games may suggest that there is additional content in need of discovery via multiple playthroughs, but in those games a playthrough is still discrete: one can play, finish, and feel satisfied that the core experience has been achieved. In *999*, however, one playthrough is more like a quickly skimmed draft of the larger game, emphasizing some points and locations and completely missing others. In my first playthrough, I had no idea that one nonplayer

character (NPC)—Seven—was a former police officer who previously had been trapped on the same ship due to a case involving another character. And I did not know that Lotus's near-nude appearance belied her abilities as a computer hacker and cybersecurity expert. But the second playthrough also brought me no closer to understanding a prior running of the Nonary game that another character mentioned to me, nor did it lead to further discussions of magnetic fields—which had seemed important in the first playthrough. And so the game set me up for a third (or more likely fourth or fifth) playthrough if I wanted to learn still more (figure 3.2).

Although *999* offers players the multiple endings of a visual novel, it also demands that they follow paths that are not as linear as dating sims would suggest. Because the game centers on solving a mystery and puzzles, the mechanics of play are much more integrated with the story than if this were a simple dating, choose-your-own-adventure game. But when playing the game multiple times, it becomes less about solving puzzles and more about trying to find new paths and new information, gradually filling the
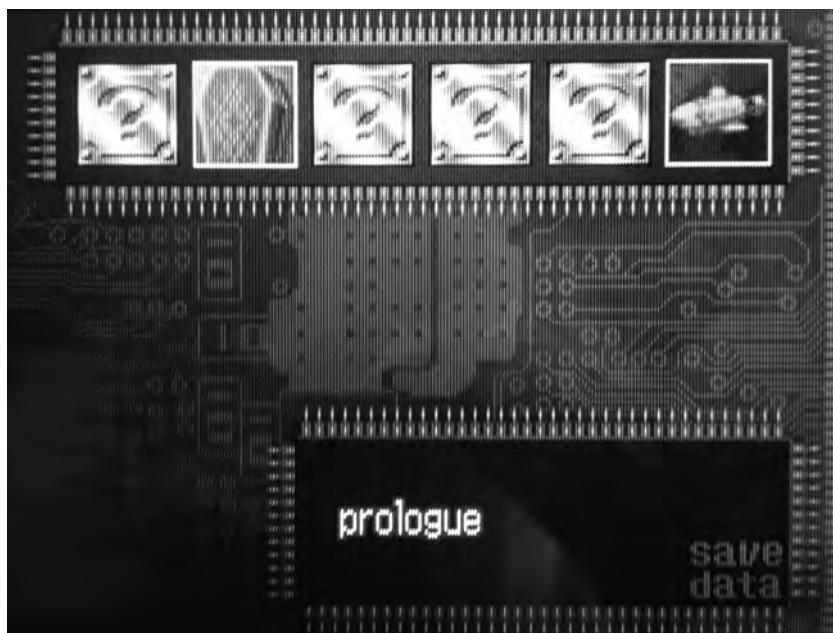
Figure 3.2
Save screen for *999* indicating the different endings that have been completed.

gaps and fitting all the story elements together. Because *999* has reconfig-
ured "endings" as forays in a labyrinth, no one effort completely reveals the
fullness of the experience. Even after completing the game once or twice,
the game has not yet really ended: the story's full details have not been
exposed, and a happy conclusion probably has not been reached. Playing,
like in a Phoenix Wright game, becomes about persistence over time. But
unlike the ace attorney, in *999* there is no risky performance to undertake
and no virtuoso courtroom behavior to enact, except perhaps to avoid an
ending that one has reached before. The game rewards a close and deep
reading with more details and more backstory on various characters, shed-
ding light on an interconnected past with deep implications for the current
condition.

Visual novels are gradually becoming more popular outside Japan, yet
they remain one of the most "Japanese" genres of videogames. It would be
tempting to argue that dating sims reveal essentialist elements of Japanese
culture or tell us something about the personalities of those who play them
(namely, *otaku*). Why, for example, do so many Japanese men enjoy this
genre, which is heavy on very stereotypical views of women? Likewise, why
is such a text-heavy type of game that is also light on choice continually so
popular? According to Azuma,

until only a few years ago, it was difficult for personal computers to process voices
and animation because they are data-sensitive, so the novel games could not use
them even if their creators had wanted to. Due to this restriction, the development
of novel games almost necessarily concentrated on the pursuit of texts that could
effectively trigger emotion (ones over which one can cry) and illustrations for which
one can feel a strong empathy (or feel *moe*). … Developed with a low budget and for
rudimentary hardware, novel games were adult-only games stripped of unnecessary
literary or artistic flair.[14]

Visual novel roots in adult-only fare meant that such games could not
be made for Nintendo's NES or SNES system because Nintendo was highly
restrictive about the kinds of games it would publish. This demonstrates
that the Japaneseness of visual novels and *999* is as much a product of the
contexts of their production as it is their use of Japanese tropes, themes, or
settings.

Fire Emblem: Awakening

Fire Emblem: Awakening is another single-player handheld game. It was cre-
ated by Intelligent Systems (IS) for the Nintendo 3DS. As a strategy RPG

made by the same team that worked on the Advance Wars series, the game is the latest in a successful franchise. It was new to me as a series, and I have limited experience with tactical RPGs. Accompanied by the traditional trappings (including a mysterious hero, a need to save the kingdom, and a band of fellow adventurers), a tactical or strategy RPG asks players to move combat units around a grid to engage the enemy. Players must make choices about who to bring into a battle, how best to deploy them, where resources should be concentrated, and how to plan and then enact the flow of battle—all while keeping in mind dynamic responses by the enemy. When victorious, a player usually is rewarded by the unlocking and advancing of the story (via a cutscene or extended narrative sequence) and the addition of a new unit or character to one's team (figure 3.3).

Two elements of the Fire Emblem series are key to this discussion. The first is the game's adjustable difficulty system—which features Normal, Difficult, Lunatic, and an unlockable Lunatic+. The game also lets players choose between Casual and Classic modes. In Classic mode, when a unit dies in battle, it is gone forever. The player cannot access it again. So if the

Figure 3.3
Character banter in *Fire Emblem: Awakening*.

healing mage Lissa takes too many hits in Classic, she is gone for good. In Casual mode, when a unit dies, it is knocked out for that battle but is available and ready to fight in the next battle and remains with the player for the duration of the game. Casual mode is new to the Fire Emblem series. Classic mode has been the traditional design, and Intelligent Systems has considered it a signature feature. The team's developers debated about whether to create Casual mode for the latest game. Some thought that Casual would be more appealing to new players and would bring in a wider audience, but detractors feared that it would water down the experience, diminishing it for experienced fans.

Casual mode also allows players to see more character development over time, both in individual characters and in the relationships that can develop among them. That argument from developers in favor of Casual was both affective and practical. It built off expectations (or hopes) that players would develop attachments to characters and would want to see those stories continue. But it was also pragmatic: developers spent valuable resources building content, so why make some of it instantly inaccessible? As director Yokota explains, permadeath is still a meaningful concept that has not been discarded as a possibility in future games or at least in particular scenarios:

Let's say we wanted to depict a really big and serious war scene. In a situation like that, having permadeath would help lend weight to everything; it'd be much more tense and meaningful to players if their characters' lives were truly on the line, just like in a real war.[15]

My own gameplay lends some evidence to Yokota's argument. Playing in Casual mode, battles and microstrategies play out differently than when permadeath is present. For example, in some battles, certain units might be sacrificed to consolidate a particular position or to save other units from taking damage. Because I knew that they would not be lost forever, my strategies sometimes involved temporary losses as well as victories. I tried riskier moves, experimenting without fearing permanent failure and loss of allies. If permadeath were the only option available, my gameplay probably would have been much more conservative, if I attempted to play at all. In that mode, I would have feared the loss of interesting characters and their potential storylines and also the shrinking of a carefully constructed team and its valuable elements.

When asked about their actual gameplay practices and dedication to Classic mode, many developers admitted that if they play in Classic mode (many now play exclusively in Casual), then "I reset if I lose someone."[16] Such statements can be read as more than just the developers' own fondness for a particular mode of play. They actually reframe Casual and Classic from a binary choice into another degree alongside the Normal-Difficult-Lunatic settings. Just as many fans report doing, the developers admit that they replay entire battles to retain a unit that they lost in a first playthrough. In such instances, permadeath is not really permadeath at all. It simply becomes another difficulty level that is layered onto the game—one that distinguishes hardcore from casual or newer players of the game. In such gameplay, a death (supposedly permanent) means starting over to keep one's units intact. Another level of grind has been added to the game (unless the player is so tired or impatient that the loss is deemed acceptable). Permadeath reframes when battles begin and end, much like *999* reframes game endings into game chapters. In both games, the developers give players the choice to stop or die as they wish but also signal that more is available for those who are willing to put in the effort (figures 3.4 and 3.5).

Figure 3.4
Characters that fight together can talk together afterward.

Figure 3.5
Characters can engage in conversation after being Paired Up in battle.

If players choose to keep characters alive and well in *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, they are treated to another layer of dramatic events that unfold over time. Players are encouraged to Pair Up characters in battles, which lets them occupy the same space, provide support to one another, and attack abilities. In addition to the strategic elements, characters that are paired up often see an improvement in their relationship status, so that over time they can marry (if they are of the opposite gender), have children, and see those children take on various characteristics of their parents and be available for battle themselves. When characters react positively to one another in battle (such as after a successful attack), hearts will appear above them. After enough such triggering events, in between battles players can access Conversations as well as witness events in the Barracks between such characters. Events look like a crossover between reality television (watching scenes that appear impromptu and not designed for an audience) and scripted soap opera. Much as in RPGs such as *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, improving the relationship between the player's main character and the others can increase their power in battle and unlock new history and storylines. In *Fire Emblem*, such elements can be unlocked between multiple sets of characters in seemingly endless combinations. What results is a freeform

drama like *The Sims* but with armor and actual dialogue. It could easily stand on its own as a form of gameplay (trying to match certain characters and develop their relationships), but the link to battle makes another fiction gameplay coupling stand out in a meaningful way.

Console Games

DmC: Devil May Cry

Handheld games are taking many interesting design-based risks, but *DmC: Devil May Cry* is one of the industry's more straightforward AAA products. A hack and slash action game featuring a hero with a bad attitude and big sword, the game bears the weight of its franchise history, which includes four prior titles. With *DmC*, Capcom ordered a series reboot to appeal to an elusive younger and Western audience. To do so, they hired British studio Ninja Theory to redesign Dante and his universe.

Of all the games that I played for this chapter, *DmC* was the most difficult in terms of my comfort zone and the most foreign in its gameplay style and expectations. Long chains of real-time attacks, platformlike sequences, and multiple boss fights are not things that I generally look for in games. I say this to situate this analysis as being from an outsider player of this game (and several older titles in the Devil May Cry series for context) and not as a fan or someone with great experience in the related genre.

Yet playing *DmC* was more of a pleasure than I expected because I found the experience of chaining attacks and the visual style of the game to be compelling and satisfying. This was despite some initial sexist imagery and crass language that seemed to position the game as more sophomoric than edgy. Putting aside those elements, the actual gameplay and storyline were decidedly different from other games I have discussed here.

The iconic character of Dante carries a huge sword, guns, and a whip and uses fisticuffs for multipurpose brawling. He faces down otherworldly creatures that want him dead, yet does so in a contemporary setting rather than a fantasy world of the past or a science fiction setting in outer space. The plot features an alternate universe (Limbo) that builds onto (or off of) the larger Devil May Cry mythology (itself an offshoot of the Resident Evil series) and gives us Dante's brother Vergil, a witch named Kat, and the demon Mundus. Dante, being the product of a demon (his father) and an angel (his mother), is uniquely qualified to be able to kill this demon.

Figure 3.6
Mission report cards, complete with grades.

The key part of the game that survives over the life of the series (and that probably is the most important factor in its success) is the style meter. In *DmC* (as in all prior Devil May Cry games), it is not enough to complete a mission, kill bosses, and advance the plot. The game grades players on their abilities and offers what is essentially a report card at the end of each mission or level, spelling out how well or poorly the player has performed. This report card covers various skills, including speed, thoroughness, improvisation, and excellence (figure 3.6). It examines the time that is taken to finish a level (faster is better), the thoroughness of level completion (how many secret objects were found), the number of items that were used (the fewer the better), the number of deaths that were endured (again, fewer is better), and style. Each element is graded on the scale D, C, B, A, S, SS, and SSS (SSS is best), and each yields a numerical value that is added together to form the final mission score, which can be compared to those on global or friends' leaderboards. Of all these elements, the style points make the game distinctive.

Style points are awarded for performance in combat. Each fighting sequence features a running score on the top right of the screen, letting players know how they are doing. The style grade goes up as the player strings together combos, avoids repetitive use of any one move, and avoids

damage from enemies. Allowing damage to Dante can reduce or reset the style meter, and using certain moves repeatedly will stall out a score. The player can see this real-time scoring enacted live as a battle plays out, as Dante leaps, swoops, tumbles, and shoots his way across the screen. Combat is enhanced through the addition of thumping technostyle music and eye candy animations—such as seeing victims being thrown up into the air, Dante spinning a weapon that becomes a swirling blur, and final finishing moves that often end in closeups of Dante as he looks slyly toward the player in seeming approval of what just occurred.

It would be easy to dismiss these combat acrobatics as simply glorifying violence, but that would miss the real pleasure of the play experience. Dante's performances are not really about the violence: they are about the skill of chaining moves together and avoiding the damage that ends those chains. Although button mashing will get players reasonably far along in killing sprees, to do well requires attention to detail, practice, and improvement over time. Players must vary attacks, avoid taking damage, and remember which particular moves or weapons work well (or poorly) against certain enemies as opposed to others. Similar to games like *Dance Dance Revolution* or *Rock Band*, which feature a profusion of visual feedback effects for playing well, in *DmC* the player is performing, albeit through an avatar rather than a physical body. That avatar—Dante—is engaged in a dancelike performance that is visually as well as ludically engaging (figure 3.7). Surprisingly to me, the game does not feature a replay function to let one reminisce over a particularly well-executed attack that resulted in an SSS grade.

Gameplay actions that rely on or build from our expectations about dance and performance are neither new nor unique to the Devil May Cry series. Such performances also evoke Brenda Laurel's 1991 discussions of computers and theater, where she argues that dramatic action and agents are the best way to think about how we interact with computers, where even early computer games "have involved the visual auditory, and kinesthetic senses (you need only watch a game player with a joystick to see the extent to which movement is involved, both as a cause and effect of the representation."[17]

Despite an overall focus on games that tell stories, Janet Murray also wrote in the 1990s that in computer games "the interactor is the dancer and the game designer is the choreographer."[18] That statement meshes

Figure 3.7
Dante in combat.

perfectly with my experience of *DmC*—how it pushed me in certain directions, taught me skills, and allowed me to interpret gameplay on my own. Despite the insights of Laurel and Murray, we continue to see more focus on narrative in games rather than drama, on stories as compared to agents and actions. Murray herself continues to refocus her interest on the potential of "more advanced" narratives for games, arguing that "the violence and simplistic story structure of computer skill games are therefore a good place to examine the possibilities for building upon the intrinsic symbolic content of gaming to make more expressive narrative forms."[19]

But instead of the narrative form, games like *DmC* best express agency through the performance or dance of violent actions. The game's developers have built up a skill set of moves for players to enact, and they likewise loosely choreograph a larger structure (such as defeating a wave of strategically placed monsters) that players are asked to react to or "dance through" on their own. That involves building or stringing a series of moves together that are effective in a pragmatic sense and also are stylistically variable and dynamic. Much like creating a dance or choreographing a series of moves for an actor, players are also able to appreciate their virtuosity via the visual performance enacted by their controller skills.

Although *DmC* offers the player (as Dante) many moves to use to accomplish different goals, the game also demands that players exhibit deep knowledge of those moves if they wish to excel at *DmC*. This act is not necessarily tied to identity or becoming-self as Judith Butler might envision performativity.[20] What instead takes primacy is the purely ludic, via theatrical aspects of leaping, shooting, slashing, and dispatching enemies.[21] Laurel makes the case that drama as a metaphor for thinking about how we interact with computer games can "incorporate notions about character and action, suspense and empathy, and other aspects of dramatic representation."[22] Yet many game studies continue to privilege narrative as an entry point for understanding games rather than explore this underutilized approach.[23]

Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

Level-5's *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* was originally released in Japan in 2010 for the Nintendo DS under a different name, rereleased in 2011 for the PS3, and then localized for North America and Europe (appearing in early 2013 as a PS3 exclusive). A key element of the game is Level-5's collaboration with the animation house Studio Ghibli, which influenced the game aesthetically and thematically.

Although some game studies scholars have insisted on demarcating the differences between game and film experiences, games and films sometimes attempt to convey similar messages or experiences, albeit via different systems. Those convergences are particularly clear in this case, where *Ni No Kuni* and the Ghibli film *Spirited Away* (to take one example) share a common theme while also creating fantasy spaces that are a pastiche of the alien and familiar. In both film and game, Japanese cultural elements are deployed, although interpretations of what they mean are bound by individual cultural backgrounds, histories, and contexts.

On a surface or aesthetic level, *Ni No Kuni* is probably the most obviously Japanese game that I played (figures 3.8 and 3.9). *Ni No Kuni*'s musical score should sound familiar to Studio Ghibli fans because it was performed by the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra and composed by Joe Hisaishi, composer of studio films including *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Spirited Away*. The game's visual design also is evocative of Studio Ghibli's style—including the characteristic wide and simple eyes of many of the creatures found in *Ni No Kuni*. For example, familiars that join Oliver's party—like

Figure 3.8
*Ni No Kuni'*s Motorville setting.

Figure 3.9
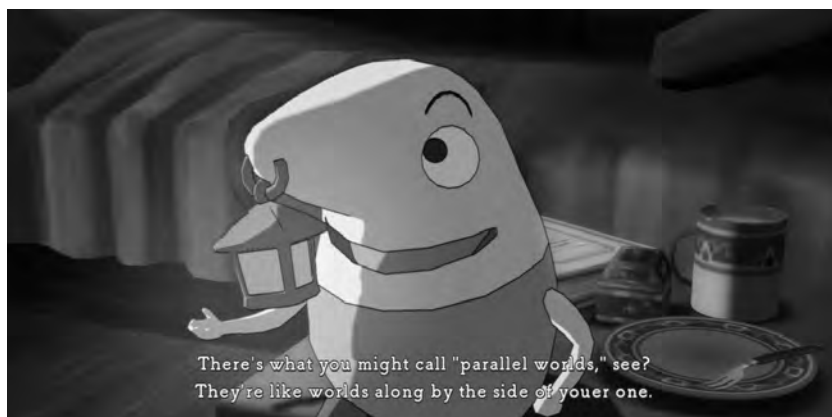The visual style of *Ni No Kuni*.

Figure 3.10
Mr. Drippy in *Ni No Kuni.*

Sprites, Bongly-Boos, and Drongos (which are rotund penguins)—could easily be found in the *Spirited Away* world, where magical sootballs with huge eyes and a bird that is transformed into a fly make their home. In both spaces, the world of humanity is rather mundane, and the magical world is more interesting, vital, and dangerous.

Another element that *Ni No Kuni* and *Spirited Away* share is their use of iconographic Japanese cultural elements to establish the character of certain places. For example, the home island of Drippy—Teeheeti—features a "Fairytown" that sports red lanterns, ramen stands, and signs with untranslated neon *kanji* (figure 3.10). To compare, *Spirited Away* features a seemingly abandoned town that comes alive only at night when Shinto spirits appear, the red lanterns are lit, and food stalls open to serve the spirits on their way to the bathhouse for a relaxing soak, attended to by other magical creatures. Such traditional Japanese imagery played in a Western context feels both exotic and otherworldly, particularly when tied to elements like spirits or fairies. Japanese players (and film viewers) will have different reactions to the same content based on their own histories and associations with those artifacts. The distinct atmosphere that is created in *Ni No Kuni* and *Spirited Away* is associated with Studio Ghibli and in a larger sense with a Japanese animation house as opposed to companies like Pixar or Disney, which rely on their own particular tropes and legacies.

Visual and acoustic aesthetics are not the only elements that *Ni No Kuni* and *Spirited Away* share. Both focus on stories of young people who are forced to mature, attempt to save lost parents, and move beyond their own selfish interests. *Ni No Kuni* begins in a 1950s-era "Motorville" that features an American-looking Oliver and friends running errands at stores like Leila's Milk Bar. The game quickly introduces tragedy into the narrative when Oliver's mother dies after saving her son from nearly drowning in a river, where he landed after crashing his friend Philip's new racecar. Now parentless,[24] Oliver isolates himself, crying constantly with only his doll Mr. Drippy for company. When Mr. Drippy becomes soaked with tears, he is magically transformed (back) into his true self—a fairy with a lantern hung from his nose and a side job in stand-up comedy. Drippy convinces Oliver to accompany him into the alternate universe of *Ni No Kuni* to help save that world and the Sage Alicia, who looks very much like Oliver's own mother. The starting point of a child on his own and searching for a way to save his mother is mirrored in *Spirited Away*, where the young girl Chihiro must enter the spirit world and figure out how to save her parents, who have been tricked into eating cursed food and have been transformed into pigs.

Ni No Kuni is a videogame and draws from the traditions of other games in its genre to make it recognizable as a game and not simply a story. The unfolding plot of Oliver and Drippy is not very different from the plots of most other RPGs, either Japanese or Western. *Ni No Kuni* employs many familiar tropes: a reluctant hero is accompanied by a helpful guide, adventurers help the hero advance, power and ability grow slowly and steadily, a history of the world and its dilemma unfolds, increasingly difficult trials prepare the hero for a final confrontation and resolution, and ultimately the hero is transformed. *Ni No Kuni* checks all of these boxes and subscribes to a ludic instantiation—that hard work will be rewarded.

Prior analysis of the concept of hard work and its reward in videogames has focused on massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs)—games that demand persistent grinding and that allow players to rely less on skill and more on sheer tenacity to advance. Yet the foundational roots of MMOGs and RPGs are similar in featuring the grind as an expected part of gameplay and character advancement through the slow and steady accumulation of abilities and power. Here we see how *Ni No Kuni* as a game parts company with a film like *Spirited Away*.[25]

That early argument about MMOGs demonstrated a key way that video-games differed from other media forms—through the definition and analysis of a particular "unit operation" as conceived by Ian Bogost.[26] Although film or television might show a hero's evolution over time as a slickly edited montage, that condensation of time and effort fails when ported to video-games because the grind that is associated with games like *World of Warcraft* or *Final Fantasy XI* is tied to individuals who move through the elements that other media must cut short. Games are about achievement and reward, and so most players demand to experience the journey that brings them that reward. In MMOGs, players will endure long sessions of play, boring or repetitive content, and tedious situations to gain the level of success that is promised to them by developers.

Such elements are also at work in RPGs. Here *Ni No Kuni* diverges from the filmic narratives of Studio Ghibli and instead draws on Level-5's roots as a creator of Dragon Quest games among other RPGs. In both *Ni No Kuni* and *Dragon Quest 8*, the player has access to towns and villages where the plot generally progresses and resources can be managed. Similarly, there are wilder areas to explore, including open areas and dungeon locations. In outside locations, enemies lurk, and the player is expected to play through multiple random encounters as a way to learn skills and techniques and to gain power for inevitable boss encounters. In *Ni No Kuni*, narrative progression comes to a halt when the player is navigating Oliver and company via the open world map (figure 3.11). One can expect only battles or the discovery of loot. Nothing of note will happen in the story until the characters enter a town or other similar location. Grinding to level up, gain items, or kill foes to complete quests are the central reasons for engaging with the open world.

In this manner, *Ni No Kuni* is a good example of a traditional JRPG like Level-5's *Dragon Quest 8*: putting in time and grinding through the many battles that the game throws at you will increase the power and strength of your party members and all the creatures you have collected through those same battles. That power and strength are necessary to survive later encounters, and no shortcuts can take the place of that tedious work. Although a few in-game puzzles (such as the Trial of Wit) rely on being clever early in the game, most are largely about being strong enough to withstand attacks and deal damage. An element of skill is involved in battles—learning which strategies and tactics to employ, which creatures to utilize, and how to use

Figure 3.11
Exploring the world of *Ni No Kuni*.

one's limited resources. That, too, must be learned through the repetitive battles that the open world presents, or one will learn the hard way in the more serious, unavoidable conflicts to come.

Many games (such as *DmC*) teach players a variety of skills, allow them to practice on regular enemies, and then demand a deep display of that knowledge at the end of a level.[27] In other games, a player may quickly become skillful or take a while to become so, even if the game presents numerous opportunities. In RPGs like *Ni No Kuni* and *Dragon Quest 8*, much success can be had simply by leveling up enough to power through difficult situations. This treadmill to success is different from film narratives, where a montage will show the viewer the hard work that is too tedious to watch in real time.

Even here, Ghibli films deny the viewer the ease of a montage sequence to show the progression of time or character development. In *Spirited Away*, there are no music video scenes of Chihiro slowly learning the ropes of the bathhouse and becoming more confident. Instead, the film's story stresses that Chihiro must work hard and that it will be physically tough and dirty work if she wishes to survive and save her parents. We witness at least some of that work and her resulting transformation. The scope of film and game are quite different—two hours versus over forty hours of gameplay—but

the message remains the same. And although the systems are different for showing the unit—representation versus enactment—the Ghibli film does not fully shortcut the process or seek to glamorize it. In a game, it is expected that we will have to put in the work ourselves, and a JRPG would expect nothing less. But the pairing of the Ghibli themes with the themes of more traditional JRPGs overlaps with other films and games that do not. In that way, we can see how Ghibli influences become more than just stylistic in *Ni No Kuni* or perhaps how the structures of a JRPG complement the path taken by stories like *Spirited Away*. It reminds us that films and videogames can be differently experienced but can sometimes merge together in interesting ways.

Mobile

Game Dev Story

Within the world of *Game Dev Story*, some developers got together early in 2013 and started a business. Cream Puff Company is a small game design studio with only eight employees, and yet it has been successful for twenty years. It has created more than fifty games for a variety of consoles and also created its own console system: more than 12 million units of the 32-bit MixBox have shipped thus far. It most recently developed (and published) the spy simulator *Black Mask 3*, which achieved Hall of Fame status and sold more than 2 million copies in its first week of release. The company's prior offering, *Dance Now*, set a record of more than 17 million copies sold, even though it was an exclusive title for the MixBox, which has an installed base somewhat smaller than that. Cream Puff's employees are gender diverse and include designers, directors, writers, a hardware engineer, and a producer. The company sponsors a booth at the annual GameDev Days conference to market their products, and apart from a year of console development, it now regularly wins awards at the annual awards show. Cream Puff has kept up with each new hardware advance and makes well-reviewed, popular games. It advertises regularly to keep its fan base healthy and receives positive press coverage and fan mail. In its early days, it had little money and could develop for only the cheaper, smaller base of the PC market. Employees did not have extensive skills, and the studio existed from one release to another. But the studio appears to be dominating the current videogame marketplace.

The Japanese studio Kairosoft released *Game Dev Story* in the United States in 2010, although the company has been around since 1996.[28] The small studio began by making games for both the PC and mobile phones for Japanese audiences and has been porting many of those titles to the West following the success of *Game Dev Story*. Most of its games follow a similar formula of mixing strategy and simulation with varied fictions, including building towns, expanding shopping malls, and developing distant planets.[29]

There is a wonderful irony in playing *Game Dev Story* that almost perfectly embodies the procedurality that was espoused by Bogost and that links the rules that a game employs to contemporary ideologies (figure 3.12). As he argues about *GTA: San Andreas*, for example, the player must direct Carl "CJ" Johnson to eat to keep up his strength, and fast-food joints are the cheapest and most convenient options available in his neighborhood.[30] Such food also makes the character fat and out of shape unless he is specifically directed to exercise more frequently. Bogost argues that in making these procedures apparent—fast food is the cheap and convenient option but comes at a price to one's health—the game makes a statement about the prevalence of fast food and poor nutritional choices in certain neighborhoods that is embodied in the rules of the game. *Game Dev Story* has similar properties at work, albeit with a different fiction. Although there is no ending in the game and goals are loosely defined, the structure of the system encourages the player to create games that have highly quantified levels of Fun, Creativity, Graphics, and Sound for handheld or console systems that reach varying segments of the market, much like the contemporary AAA games industry.

The game encourages players to track market forces by periodically introducing new consoles and handhelds onto the market and discontinuing older models. There is a large licensing fee for each system and another fee for each title produced. Cream Puff had to strategize continually about whether to invest its money widely across several systems or to concentrate on a few that might continue to capture a decent market share. Likewise, Cream Puff had to make hard decisions—when to abandon an older console and when to try a new, unproven system that might gain greater market share. In its early days, the company struggled to make games that would sell well and appeal to the critics (they mostly did neither). Those early failures encouraged Cream Puff to invest in A-level genres and types

Figure 3.12
Game Dev Story.

of games in hopes of achieving popularity. It also led the studio to fire some underperforming workers and hire more skilled designers and producers.

Ultimately, *Game Dev Story* rewarded Cream Puff for seeing its employees as sets of discrete, disembodied skillsets that occasionally walked and talked. Employees could be pushed to work harder and longer hours to complete a game and occasionally given energy drinks to keep going. The game did not glorify the "crunch" conditions that are endemic to the mainstream game industry, but neither did it disavow that practice. The gender, personality, and motivations of individual developers also did not really matter unless those features somehow could be quantified into a good "scenario" score rating. The game pushed Cream Puff to make sequels to generate more revenue and to try and please critics that never seemed satisfied. Eventually, the option of developing a console was dangled in front of Cream Puff, and it could not resist. Despite taking many months of game time and resulting in a lack of revenue for that period, the MixBox emerged, which would be sold in perpetuity. Cream Puff was told that to help generate continued sales for the system, it should develop games for that console. As a good first-party developer, the studio complied and has not made games for another system since then.

The game's rules and its fictions mesh together perfectly, offering "not-so-subtle jabs at the real-world game industry" via a genre—simulation games— that created little to no ludonarrative dissonance for players. The game can easily be understood as satire, spoofing a real system of game design, which the game pushes players to reproduce. Not all players seek to emulate a studio and its string of number one releases. One can choose to create bizarre games and hire odd mixes of employees. In doing so, the player can resist the dominant fiction, which is the usual logic of the game industry. In a period when the indie studio is gaining more attention both in Japan and in the West, the game resolutely punishes PC game development and the mixing of genres into ostensibly odd combinations, perhaps a throwback to its late 1990s' roots.

What is perhaps more intriguing is how divorced the game is from the context of game development in Japan itself. In Japan, many games are part of a "media mix" that encompasses multiple cultural forms, with strategies and practices for how best to tie those elements together that evolve over the years. One recent practice, started at Kadokawa books, involved "a four-element system … moving from manga to video game to anime

to novelization."[31] Likewise, smaller game developers in Japan have tra-
ditionally been associated with *dojinshi* and the Comiket system, where
small circles of fans gather to sell the games they have crafted, which can
offer homages to a favorite manga, anime, or game series or might be new
or innovative versions of popular genres, such as the "bullet hell" shooter
genre. Including that wider system would suggest a different game, and
Game Dev Story excels at what it sets out to do—simulate the logic of the
console game industry and model how and why studios will make the deci-
sions they do, because of (or despite) their early hopes and dreams.

Conclusions

This chapter has illuminated some of the depth and breadth of the vid-
eogames that are being developed in Japan. Games such as *Ni No Kuni*
continue to offer traditional game narratives, encouraging players to put
in time and effort to vanquish beautifully rendered enemies. At the same
time, one can play a game multiple times to learn the secrets of a game's
storylines, fight with style, be rewarded for an artful performance, marry
off comrades in a tactical RPG, or create a game company to produce one's
own fantasy games. Variety is not a problem for Japanese developers. Nei-
ther is quality or imagination. Although many of the games discussed here
are small, major publishers have made major efforts to build on estab-
lished successes that players still find enjoyable. Not everything needs to
be fixed, and not everything is broken. But as smaller Japanese developers
take risks, try new things, and make games that explore elements such as
multiplayer versus single player, the links between fiction and gameplay or
genre become mashed up in exciting ways.

The games discussed here also bring new challenges to game studies as a
field because they offer new experiences for analysis and critique. Despite
the popularity of mobile and other portable games, we still understand
very little about how players integrate such games into their daily lives and
how differently structured games affect those experiences. Devices such as
the 3DS can be taken almost anywhere for play, but they also are used
in living rooms and bedrooms where consoles and PCs are available but
ignored. How much pull does a series like Devil May Cry or Fire Emblem
exert on players to try new games? Popular reaction to the new *DmC* game
was extremely critical of the reboot, and despite positive reviews, the game

has not sold to Capcom's expectations. Such changes give weight to the concerns of developers at studios like Intelligent Systems, who worry over the inclusion of Casual mode in their game series, even if it is presented as an optional element. Players have passionate views and will react strongly to changes they dislike. Balancing those fears against the interests of drawing in new players is a perennial concern.

Likewise, studies of violence in games need to be explored in a much greater variety of ways than basic questions of effects. The stylized violence of the Devil May Cry series has little to do with actual violence and much more to do with virtuoso performances—more like the "beautiful play" of sports games than the shooting of a FPS. Just as with more traditional fighting videogames, titles like *DmC* demand deep knowledge, mastery, and skillful execution that are designed to be theatrical.

Finally, visual novel games like *999* allow us to question the playthrough as the basic unit of experience for understanding a videogame. Although many games now offer different endings and choicepoints that supposedly affect gameplay, most still offer players a discrete bounded experience and feeling of closure when finishing the game. Not so with *999*. The game instead revels in showing players how much they do not know even after seemingly completing the game. The player is prodded to replay, to backtrack, and to try different combinations of actions. Persistence is rewarded by a slow reveal of all of the game's mysteries and (perhaps) the happy ending. Such experiences make us question what it means to play a game and reminds us of the different experiences that players may have while doing so. And it questions the assumption that finishing a game is equivalent to completing it.

The games discussed here can also be thought of as portable in various ways, relative to their Japanese origins. Some are literally made available on handheld systems designed for movement through space, but all of them function as ports, being the localized versions of games that originally were created in Japanese (aside from *DmC*, although the original Devil May Cry series is Japanese in origin). They all vary in "how Japanese" they appear to be—either aesthetically, stylistically, or even thematically. *999* brings the visual novel genre to the West, and *Ni No Kuni* carefully blends the Japanese style of Studio Ghibli and JRPG mechanics with European accents and a Detroit-like Motorville location. Traces of Japanese culture may remain, either by accident or intention. Japanese games may suffer the

same problem as Japanese anime: the Japaneseness has become so much a descriptor for certain games that we end up seeing or creating the Japaneseness that we look for simply through looking. *It's from Japan, therefore it's Japanese*.

Another way to consider the Japaneseness of these games is through Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of the family resemblance.[32] Writing about language, the philosopher argues that certain words share commonalities of meaning even if they are not identical, and he uses games as a way to explain his metaphor. For example, "in ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis," and he concludes that for games as a whole, "we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities."[33] He argues that despite containing different elements, different games may have similar structures or elements that tie them together in a familial sense—such as families that share resemblances such as strong foreheads, large noses, or similarly shaped eyes. Jonas Linderoth has used the concept of family resemblance to argue that sports activities, board games, and videogames that center on sports should be considered sports or games of a sort—due to their family resemblances.[34] But how does this concept help us to understand or classify Japanese games?

It is useful to ask what resemblances Japanese games might share. An obvious one is that they were made in Japan or their intellectual property was initially created there. Beyond that, we could argue that certain genres (such as visual novels and the Japanese role-playing game) are strongly associated with Japan, and certain themes, aesthetics, and mechanics were developed in Japan or are distinctive of the language or culture in some way. If such games move outside Japan to the West, they are localized, suggesting that what Westerners are playing is perhaps a dubbed or modified version of an original.

What does that conceptualization offer us? It can explain some of the similarities or commonalities that games coming from Japan share. But we could just as easily decide that there are stronger family resemblances between games that are RPGs and that cross national and cultural boundaries in their creation. Perhaps a better question to ask is what a family resemblance for Japanese games might reveal about their history. As with

real families, sharing certain physical features may indicate our affiliations and bonds, but those are not the elements that truly matter: ties to a past and a history that families offer are what matter. Families give us a lineage and heritage that shapes our sense of self and identity. In the same way, suggesting that Japanese games share a certain family resemblance contextualizes them as from Japan—as tied to a particular history of game design and production that is distinct from North American or European game design and production. Certain features and elements live on, although perhaps they become less distinct with each decade. In that way, we can say that Japanese games like *Ni No Kuni* draw from a history of JRPGs such as the Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy titles, which give the game a foundation from which players can either draw connections or depart from to feel either familiar or different. Likewise, *Fire Emblem* is about battles but in this case wants to keep its commitment to "classic" styles, which means permadeath for some characters, even as the game also (grudgingly) caters to newer players with casual mode and the ability to keep all characters available. There need be no common line connecting *Ni No Kuni* and *Fire Emblem* via a specific element of Japaneseness, but their shared history of Japanese videogames means they draw from a common pool of resources— with different results—for their individual experiences. History matters for families and for Japanese games, too.

4 Much Ado about JRPGs: Square Enix and Corporate Creation of Videogames

On April 24, 2014, PBS's *Game/Show* with Jamin Warren published a video short that was titled "Are JRPGs Dead?"[1] The next day, gaming site Kotaku responded with an editorial by Jason Schreier titled "Please Stop Asking If JRPGs Are Making a Comeback."[2] And on April 29, Ubisoft released its JRPG-like *Child of Light*, which was created in its Montreal studio. This confluence of events is not notable apart from their simultaneous occurrence. On *Game/Show*, Warren asked provocative questions about the genre but concluded that Japanese role-playing games were not dead and that the category now included games made outside Japan, albeit in a "JRPG-like" style. Schreier's piece noted that such questions about the death and rebirth of JRPGs have been asked many times and linked to seven examples going back to 2011. In addition, *Child of Light*'s developers have strongly pushed the resemblance between the game and JRPGs, in one instance hiring famed *Final Fantasy* artist Yoshitaka Amano to create *Child of Light*–inspired art that was available with deluxe versions of the game and via online download.[3]

But this chapter is not focused on proving whether JRPGs are dead or alive or even whether they must originate in Japan to be a JRPG. Instead, I am curious about authorship, origins, and the establishment of particular designs, work routines, and approaches to distribution. No matter where JRPGs are now or where they might be going, they came from a particular place, and certain groups took an active role in shaping them in the above-mentioned fashion. When we ask if developers outside Japan can make a JRPG, we really are asking about their authority to do so. We are implying that there is something intrinsic to an authentic JRPG that can originate only in a specific place or from a specific maker. Such questions also presup-

pose the development of a fairly stable genre or body of games that can be pointed to as being what JRPGs are, have been, or even should be.

Without venturing into the politics of who created the first JRPG or which company was most influential in creating the genre, we can say that both Square and Enix played significant roles in defining and creating such games.[4] But does it make sense to talk about such companies as authors when many people were involved in their creations, including such (now) well-known individuals as Amano, Hironobu Sakaguchi (the lead designer), and Nobuo Uematsu (the series' main composer)? Designers can come and go, technologies change, and game designs evolve, yet some series endure. Various games series have evolved over the years, but large companies still do significant work in keeping their creations on track, have helped to define what a JRPG is, and have created a genre that now travels and is made globally.

Most videogames that are now being created are the products of many hands—from dozens to hundreds. Major releases such as BioWare's *Dragon Age: Inquisition* rely on enormous teams that work to build a game engine; create art assets, animations, and full motion video; write dialogue and craft stories; develop battle systems; and design a visual look and feel for the game world. Such resource-intensive projects make it challenging if not impossible to identify a singular creative force guiding that work. It is perhaps easier to cast independent developers like Suda51[5] or Anna Anthropy as auteurs with vision and to consign large games to the impersonalized corporate production model of most contemporary media creation.

It is too simplistic to say that large games have no real creative force behind or within them, however. Film theorists, for example, have rethought concepts such as author and authorship. As John Caughie explains, part of that shift was to reject notions of authors simply as individuals who tell stories and are free from larger constraints and instead to consider issues such as "the place of the author within institutions (industrial, cultural, academic) or … the way in which the author is constructed by and for commerce."[6]

A similar critique can be applied to discussions of game creation. We can focus on the studios and corporations that build games and the specific industrial and cultural contexts with which they must contend as they also attempt to exercise agency and control over a complicated process. In that sense, companies work to encode games with particular meanings

and conceptual form, and via the same process they also create a company brand with a particular identity, history, and context.[7]

Square Enix

Square Enix is a multinational corporation that creates and publishes diverse products and has extended itself in many creative directions, but in the West it probably is best known for its Final Fantasy series of role-playing games, which began in 1987 and continue to be released. Now numbering in the double digits, the company continues to produce regular iterations of the game series and revisits older titles for rerelease on platforms such as Apple's iOS or via Japanese networks such as DeNA.[8] The company also is invested in continuing development of its Dragon Quest series, which began in 1986 and was released in the West as *Dragon Warrior*. The series has also spawned double-digit releases yet has not reached the global popularity of the Final Fantasy series. Whatever their sales in global markets, in Japan, Daijii Fujii writes, "according to a CESA report, the top 30 titles in terms of the total shipment between 1983 and 2002 included 13 RPG titles released by both Square and Enix, second to Nintendo's 14 titles in various genres."[9]

The goal of this chapter is to critique the strategies and decisions that Square Enix has made as it has sought to stay competitive in a global marketplace and further its JRPG brands alongside other titles and franchises. My approach focuses on the company's historical and contemporary business strategies—both its marketing and development decisions—rather than on an exploration of the games themselves. Although a videogame company may appear to focus solely on the creation of products—games themselves—companies must consider players, societies, groups, and cultures to publish transnationally. This is something that many companies struggle with, and Square Enix is no exception. The company has been actively developing strategies that have both succeeded and failed, and analyzing that history helps us to understand how both individuals and large companies can create videogames and make key contributions to contemporary culture.

This chapter uses several key concepts to focus the analysis. First, the concept of cosmopolitanism (already introduced in the first chapter in relation to Western players of Japanese games) can be a useful way to think

about the actions of companies and individuals, particularly if we consider
how a business such as Square Enix must form (and then perform) itself as
a cosmopolitan entity that is intent on making and selling globally success-
ful products. To engage in that analysis, I employ John Urry's model of the
cosmopolitan disposition and Peterson's figure of the transnational "cul-
ture broker" to demonstrate how Square Enix has developed its tactics and
approaches over time, with particular strengths in localization.[10] Second,
to engage global markets and sell transnational products like JRPGs, Square
Enix (and companies like it) had to overcome the noise[11] that is inherent in
cultural products that employ specific languages and cultural, political, and
social contexts that may not easily cross borders. Finally, part of the work
of creative control—of Square Enix's act of authorship—becomes about
managing and (to some degree) eliminating that noise through the act of
dubbing.[12] Dubbing makes the strange familiar, calls into question notions
of authenticity and authentic origins, and ensures that each game and act
of corporate communication and branding works to further a particular
identity for Square Enix.

Corporations, Globalization, Cosmopolitanism

Relevant theories of industrial corporations often build on the concept of
globalization. Early globalization scholars identified transnational forces
that appeared to homogenize broader cultural choices in particular ways.
As Polly Toynee explains ironically:

"cultural globalisation" is often just a synonym for Americanisation. Created in the
coke-crazed brains of Hollywood producers, US movies have become the universal
story-boards of global dreams—sugary and sentimental, violent and pornographic,
all beautiful people and happy endings where the good guy always wins and so
does the USA. This milkshake of the mind is spilling across frontiers, cultures and
languages, Disneyfying everything in its path. It seems to take the Taliban to hold
it back.[13]

John Tomlinson writes that the fear many feel about the rise of imported
cultural goods is because they directly "transmit the values they contain
and the social vision they offer."[14] So far, empirical research proves no such
connection.[15] In response to underwhelming findings of effects, discourses
about Western media traveling around the world have been supplanted by
considerations of how globalization operates in relation to media industries

and how audiences negotiate those products in relation to their own cultures, values, and beliefs.[16]

Even as resulting discourses of globalization have become more sophisticated, globalization as a production-oriented concept still implies some form of homogenization of artifacts or cultures. The success of certain companies or products can help to fuel such shorthand. For example, during the period of Nintendo's dominance in the West with the NES, the name *Nintendo* became synonymous with videogame consoles generally, so that many people referred to any game system as a Nintendo and any games played on it as Nintendo games.

Globalization as a keyword ultimately does little in helping us understand the global games industry, beyond a general understanding of global distribution and sales. Although global sales figures are available for games such as *Castlevania* and *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*, such data cannot tell us how many players enjoyed those games or played through to their endings or how localization efforts enhanced or detracted from their experiences.

From Globalization to Glocalization

Newer theories have recognized the increasing complexities of global trade—acknowledging that global products do not simply appear in markets around the world in their original form, sell widely, and (via a hypodermic needlelike process derived from old mass communication theories) conquer local minds and imaginations.[17] In their analysis of global games developer and publisher Electronic Arts, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter point to the sophisticated ways that such processes have played out:

EA therefore pursues transnationalization through the careful management of locational differences—differences of cultural tradition, of economic development, and also of ludic skill. It terms of cultural traditions, EA's use of regional sport cultures to build a world games market is an example of the cultural complexities of Empire. … Although EA certainly is a U.S. company, its business strategy has to go beyond the imposition of U.S. thematics: it has to work across a field of difference while at the same time making the localized themes material for the "wash, rinse, and repeat" cycle. In this way, the approach of EA Sports is a classic exercise in "glocalization," with the globalization working *through* localization, homogenizing *as* it differentiates.[18]

In creating games and series that they hope will appeal to millions, multinational game companies must adapt products to regions or locales in a

variety of ways. There are no set formulas to follow, and different series and titles with the potential to reach across multiple markets and languages call for a plethora of approaches, including different levels of localization (such as translating only the "box and docs,"[19] doing a full language translation of text, and translating voiced dialogue) and changes to a game's design, graphics, or gameplay.[20] It also might involve platform shifts based on local use (PC versus console, for example) or different advertising and marketing strategies. Although glocalization as a concept is more useful than the broader brush of globalization, it does not allow us to distinguish between totalizing forces, selective approaches by varying companies, or the reasons that particular decisions were made, other than simply to gain greater profit.

Although Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter are correct in their reading of EA's tendencies to take potentially diverse material and brand it with a recognizable EA stamp (not just a title or label but also a way of presenting sports), it is unclear if the homogenizing tendencies that they document extend beyond workforce production or similarities in packaging. Profits go to the same source, but how do players and cultural groups conceptualize EA and its games? Just as Coca-Cola entered global markets and slowly became a local product with varying associations, so too might game companies and their products.

Glocalization therefore can help us see the growing intricacies of global business but gives us no analytical lens with which to compare the approaches of different companies or to assess the reasons for their choices. We can say, for example, that Square Enix and Level-5 differ greatly in their approaches to glocalizing JRPGs or in their business philosophies, but we have no way to differentiate those distinctions theoretically. We need a greater level of granularity that lets us map the choices that each firm makes or fails to make. Such tools give us the means to identify different levels and types of control of agency. We then can map the extent to which each company engages in localization practices, in how many locales, and over what period of time. That ability would help us to distinguish how Square Enix and Level-5 differentially author their works for a global audience—or fail to do so.

From Glocalization to Cosmopolitanism: Multiple Stances

A more fruitful way to start analyzing Square Enix's practices is through the lens of cosmopolitanism. The concept of cosmopolitanism has traditionally been used to describe the beliefs, activities, and practices of individuals and groups of people. It often refers to a state of being: people are cosmopolitans because they are world travelers or live (voluntarily or not) outside of their home country and have adapted to seeing the world as a multilingual, multicultural space.[21] Often such descriptions fall into binaries (one is or is not cosmopolitan), and the term is often normative (locals evolve into the sophisticated world citizen who advocates human rights for all). Work has been done on how corporations can be thought about through the lens of cosmopolitanism, with potential usefulness for this project and in conceptualizing how Square Enix's strategies have evolved over time.

Corporate Cosmopolitanism

An accounting of who does the work of making corporations cosmopolitan comes from Mark Peterson.[22] He explains that successful global organizations must employ culture brokers or "people who position themselves as able to recognize cultural differences, interpret between these differences, appropriate or create symbols that will travel across differences, and render these as implementable practices, whether in production, management, or marketing."[23] In some ways, such brokers attempt to take the "noise" that is created by misdirected or misunderstood communication (via products and services) and "dub" it across countries, cultures, and regions.[24] We can understand noise as problems with communication—particularly when, for example, games employ languages, cultures, and contexts that do not immediately make sense to all potential players. As a potential workaround, Tom Boellstorff's concept of dubbing results in products where "there is no 'real' version underneath, where everything fits. … Where translation is haunted by its inevitable failure, dubbing rejoices in the good-enough and the forever incomplete."[25] Companies like Square Enix must walk this line continually—keeping enough of a game's original content to preserve creator intent and yet at the same time making it accessible to many players. We can see the work of game localizers as constitutive of this dubbing process, exposing "the apparent seamlessness of the predubbed 'original,' showing that it too is a dub, that its 'traditions' are the product of social contexts with their own assumptions and inequalities."[26]

Localizers who advocate for the practice recognize its complexities, arguing that it is more than a simple translation of written or spoken dialogue or game text and that it involves cultural knowledge as well as an understanding of how culturally specific elements such as humor or pop culture can best be translated, cut, or left intact. This process is replete with judgment calls that demand significant creative practice and the continual work of remaining familiar with the target language that is being localized (which is not static, either).

For example, the work of localizing *Final Fantasy X* demanded more than basic fluency in Japanese and English. For localizer Alexander O. Smith, such projects are "more of a writing job than a translation job because you have to internalize the characters and … let them do their own thing."[27] One of the best-known changes from the Japanese to the English version of the game was the shift at the very end when Yuna's line of dialogue changes from "Thank you" (*arigatou*) to "I love you." As Smith has explained,

"Arigatou" and "I love you" can play very similar roles in their respective languages. … They're both great scene closers … and the Western audience expects an outward declaration of love, as un-Japanese as that might be. … Knowing this would be somewhat controversial, being the first time anyone in a Final Fantasy had said "I love you," I checked with [head writer] Nojima … and he signed off on it, happy to give people something to talk about.[28]

Even seemingly straightforward language can be reenvisioned as it travels to audiences with different expectations for how characters "should" behave and what a story "must" include or look like. If translations are followed too literally, noise can be the result. Players then can recognize the literal meanings of game dialogue or text but fail to appreciate its broader meaning, retransforming it back into confusing noise.

The "noise" that is encountered by localizers and culturalization experts can range from the simple to the complex. Language differences comprise the most basic form of noise, which is far from simple to deal with in practice. As localization has become an industry in its own right, it has evolved from game translation to a fully integrated part of multinational and multilingual development and operation. Potential noise can originate from written dialogue, voiceovers, cinematic dialogue, vocals in background music, text integrated into graphic images and environments, slang, humor, specific cultural references, the size of files and the time available for voiced dialogue, political and legal constraints, and concerns about

religion, ethnicity, and gameplay and visual style. The work of localizers in minimizing that noise contributes to the (re)authoring of games, calling into question the idea that any one version is the true or correct one. Such processes laid bare help us see how the videogame industry has adapted over time to the global flow of business.

The Cosmopolitan Disposition

Urry's development of the concept of the cosmopolitan disposition is also useful in exploring corporations' authorial practices and intents because it identifies facets of identities and different actions and beliefs that individuals or groups might align with or fashion for themselves. It also helps us see how dispositions can shift over time—from lesser to greater identification with different cultures. It allows for greater empirical exploration of groups or organizations that might or might not embody such traits. Therefore, the cosmopolitan disposition framework can be helpful in allowing us to see the nuances and complexities of how individuals and companies make sense of their interests and of the world and how they fashion identities that incorporate such elements.

Urry's conceptual formulation has several components, with no particular ranking or valence among them. His framework encompasses attitudes toward the self and toward others. First, it is important to know one's self and context, including the historical and geopolitical place of one's home country or culture in the world and the skill to interpret the images and histories of others so that one can make comparisons.

Next, it is important to be able to travel—virtually, imaginatively—and have the means to do so. With that travel come several additional components—being curious about those spaces, taking risky encounters, being open about what one sees (including language and culture), and being able to appreciate elements of the other culture. Finally, one must be able to interpret what one sees in light of one's own context and be able to reflect on and make judgments about different cultures and places.[29]

Although Urry lists such elements separately, I condense them into the following:

1. Self-knowledge and critical capacities for exploring other societies and cultures,
2. Travel and consumption of experiences with the "other," and

3. (Re)interpreting new experiences and situations and reintegrating them into the self.

These elements can help us determine how a corporation might develop a cosmopolitan disposition and how that plays out in terms of business strategies and genre considerations.

A Developer's Self-Development: Square Enix

Square Enix has a long and influential history in game development and game publishing both within and outside Japan. As most fans of Japanese role-playing games can recount, Square Enix began as two separate firms—Square and Enix—that competed for many years with their respective RPG series Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest. As Fujii explains, "the creators of both DQ and FF were both keen computer enthusiasts and had known RPGs well. They believed that RPGs would appeal to a much larger population in the future. They had also known that RPG game systems were complex and required skilled creators and careful project management."[30] Even as the two companies vied for sales with somewhat similar products, they took quite different approaches to making, marketing, and selling their games. This variability suggests that there was no one monolithic path to game development, and high levels of success were achieved via both approaches.

Enix was founded as the Eidansha Boshu Service Center in 1975, which published tabloid magazines until founder Yasuhiro Fukushima renamed the company Enix in 1982 and began to produce videogames.[31] Its first iteration of *Dragon Quest,* released in 1983, was planned to

introduce players to the concept of *becoming* the main character, to gain experience and gold through fighting monsters and acquire new powers, greater strength, and better weapons. … This stood in contrast to games like *Super Mario Bros.*, because Mario was always the same Mario throughout the game.[32]

Although the game's sales were extremely low on its initial release in 1986, careful promotion and tie-ins with the popular Japanese manga *Shonen Jump* boosted interest, and the game went on to sell over 2 million copies.[33] The next iteration in the series, *Dragon Quest II*, was released in 1987, sold out immediately, and went on to sell 2.4 million copies. Successive games in the series showed that RPGs (or JRPGs) had a market that was sustainable: *Dragon Quest III* sold 3.8 million copies a year later,[34] and

Dragon Quest IV sold more than 3.1 million units at its original release and continued to sell impressive numbers of additional units as it was rereleased for newer systems.[35] The Dragon Quest series grew so popular that the Japanese Parliament "decreed that henceforth *Dragon Quest* games were to be released on Sundays or national holidays only" to avoid having children skip school to purchase and play the game on release.[36] As Fujii notes, historically, "Enix's biggest contribution was porting this mode of playing onto a child-friendly platform with a simple interface and dynamic graphic processors," and in doing so it made the game more widely accessible, albeit not just for children.[37]

Influenced by the Western computer RPG *Wizardry*, the series has remained fairly stable over time, featuring elements including "cursed items, gauntlet dungeons that players must conserve resources to pass, difficult boss monsters, and a generally upbeat atmosphere."[38] Although it remains very popular in Japan, some Western players question the mechanics of the series, arguing that the game values nothing more than time investment because it rewards the player not for improving but merely for persevering (a trait similar to many MMOGs).[39] Despite criticisms, the games continue to sell strongly. In 2012, *Dragon Quest X* was released for the Wii and other platforms as a Japanese-only MMOG, a departure for the normally single-player series.[40] The game sold more than 1 million copies and has approximately 300,000 regular players.[41] *Dragon Quest XI* is still in development, but there have been hints that the game will be a global console release that is timed to come out with the series' thirtieth anniversary.[42]

Although Enix has controlled development and licensing of the Dragon Quest brand, the company does not develop the titles, instead preferring to hire outsourced development teams to create the games. For example, Yuji Horii, one of the creators of *Dragon Quest*, explained that "they do not have programming capabilities within their organization. They even outsource game concepts and scenarios." Thus, the company was more of a publisher than a developer like Square.[43] Enix's first title was created by Horii and his team Armor Project, and subsequent titles have been created by companies including Chunsoft, Heartbeat, Artepiazza, and most recently Level-5,[44] although Horii remains involved as scenario director for the series. In relation to Urry's typology, we can say that Enix preferred to spend less time learning about "the other" and more time following a strategy (outsourcing

development) that was designed to limit the risks associated with game creation.

Other differences in how the companies operate include differences in production processes and approaches to daily work routines. For example, "Enix was said to be cost sensitive" compared with Square,[45] and although the company had strict accounting principles toward project management, its executives "never modified their policy to allow [game] contractors to take their own time."[46] The company had a wider lineup of games, but its Dragon Quest series lagged in production and slowly was overtaken by Square and Final Fantasy in terms of numbers of releases. That did not diminish the popularity of the series but did lead to fewer Dragon Quest games and potentially less revenue. Even if Enix did not engage in creative production in house, its influence over the series led to a strong association with a particular game series and style of play. That association was strongest in Japan, and despite some efforts to localize the games and sell them more broadly, the Enix games were less engaged with a global outlook than one of its chief competitors—Square Company Limited.

Square and *Final Fantasy*

Almost a decade after Enix's initial founding, Square was founded by Masafumi Miyamoto as an outgrowth of a power company called Den-Yu-Sha that was owned by Miyamoto's father.[47] Miyamoto began developing computer games in a division of the company in 1983 and in the coming years "employed trained graphic designers, skilled programmers and professional story writers well before such expertise became the norm."[48] The company released various titles for Nintendo's Famicom system, and *Final Fantasy* was released in 1987, shipping 510,000 copies.[49]

In contrast to Enix, Square preferred to develop its games in-house by relying on internal talent such as the series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, music director Nobuo Uematsu, and artists such as Yoshitaka Amano. Sakaguchi created *Final Fantasy* in part as a statement against other role-playing games, saying that he wanted it to be darker and more adult and feature a grander storyline.[50]

As Chris Kohler details, the Final Fantasy games had design elements that no one had yet seen in console RPGs. For example, the game did not begin with its title screen but instead immediately involved the player in the game's unfolding story. Although the first game contained fewer story

elements compared to later games, the series evolved into a loosely related world where players typically encountered "talking creatures, magic spells, evil demons, haunted temples, and swordfighting."[51] Over the years, the elements of particular games changed, but the focus on storytelling grew stronger, and more attention was paid to each game's graphics capabilities, particularly the use of full-motion video (FMV) to draw the player into each game's world. That focus was also a way to differentiate Square's games from Enix's (as well as others on the market), and the pursuit of computer-generated (CG) technologies became a hallmark of Square's approach. It helped spur Square's break with Nintendo in the late 1990s to utilize the superior graphics and processing capabilities of Sony's PlayStation for its release of *Final Fantasy VII*.[52] In making that focus explicit, Square also helped associate the Final Fantasy series and all other JRPGs with high-quality graphics as an additional element of the genre.

A few years later, the company created the film studio Square Pictures, with the intent of bringing the Final Fantasy series to the large screen. Yet the 2001 release of the CG feature-length film *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* had disastrous effects on the company. Square had invested $137 million in the film, but the movie failed to make enough revenue to cover its costs, and the studio was disbanded shortly afterward.

In 2003, Square and Enix merged. Although the media portrayed the deal as a merger, Enix actually bought the majority of Square's stock offerings at an exchange ratio of one share of Square to 0.85 shares of Enix.[53] Square benefited from that infusion of capital from Enix, which reportedly was reluctant to invest because of Square's recent losses, but Square reassured Enix that its bottom line was solid. No more feature-length films have been released, although the corporation has ventured back into animation through less risky ventures, such as 2005's *Final Fantasy VII Advent Children*, an add-on to the world of the highly popular *Final Fantasy VII* universe.

Square Enix continues to release new iterations of Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy for the latest consoles, acknowledging the importance of its flagship brands in maintaining the identity and fiscal health of the company. Even as individual developments are important to document, such discrete events do little to help us see how the company has been envisioning (and reenvisioning) itself as a global corporation producing games (and other media) for far more than the traditional consoles that initially formed its central market.

Both companies started out by creating games in their respective series as well as other titles—Square focusing on Final Fantasy as well as other RPGs, and Enix casting its net much wider. Quite early, both companies began to consider audiences external to Japan for their games, although the details of how they engaged in global trade were again very different. Both Square's and Enix's early attention to global markets for their games also suggests that from inception, the games and series were designed with an eye toward multiple publics. Each company made different choices with various games in its roster as it considered the best places to sell games and the amount of work that would be needed to prepare them for different audiences. Such considerations also remind us that creating a work in a commercial industry is not simply about creative expression but also about considering audiences, which can differ in terms of their cultural background, demographics, platform preferences, and a host of other factors. Square and Enix both did valuable work in continuing to promote the JRPG genre as it began to travel outside Japan and became known as a distinctive kind of videogame.

Square Enix's Cosmopolitan Disposition

Square Enix probably would not describe itself as an instance of corporate cosmopolitanism, even if it is intensely interested in globalization and in appealing to multiple markets and audiences. The company envisions itself as having a "polymorphic vision" when creating its products, which it has described as "providing well known properties on several platforms, allowing exposure of the products to as wide an audience as possible." Examples of this include various games and titles supporting the *Final Fantasy VII* story world, as well as collaborations with other developers, such as the publication of an artbook and manga for Ignition Entertainment's console game *El Shaddai*.[54]

The idea of the cosmopolitan disposition can be applied quite well to Square Enix's actions over the years. To review, the central three components to cosmopolitanism include knowledge of the self and others with the capacity for critical thought, the ability to travel physically and virtually (taking risks and being open to new experiences while doing so), and the ability to reinterpret and integrate that knowledge back into the self. In the following sections, these three elements are discussed in relation to Square Enix's actions and strategies over the past decade.

Risky Business: Knowledge + Critical Thought Businesses such as Square Enix must take risks to stay profitable. At first, that meant success in its home market because, as Martin Picard explains, further success "could not have happened overseas without the establishment of a strong local industry."[55] But economies of scale dictate that such corporations also need global sales (and therefore global products) to succeed. Although both Square and Enix began by producing games for the Japanese market, Square (more quickly than Enix) recognized the value (and necessity) of moving beyond national borders, and it used large internal teams to create its games. In Square's early years, it limited itself to mostly creating RPGs. Enix outsourced its game development and diversified its output to a greater degree. Their strategies were different, but both companies acknowledged the importance of global trade—to differing degrees—as an element of a successful corporation.

To pursue their transnational interests (here defined as North America and then Europe), both registered stock for public trading—Enix in 1991 and Square in 1995. From that point onward, both companies quickly began to pursue the development and distribution of their respective games (and the further development of the JRPG genre) via global trade, although in varying ways. For example, Square created Square LA Inc. in 1995 and formed a partnership with EA in 1998 (Square EA LLC), but it was not until 1999 that Enix opened its own subsidiary, Enix America. By that time, Square had ventured into Europe with the opening of Square Europe Ltd. in 1998.

Opening branch offices was a relatively simple way to ensure the smoother distribution and sales of Japanese games in foreign markets, but such efforts had additional motivations guiding them. Most centrally, Japanese game makers were seeking insights into how best to market their products through dedicated advertising and marketing efforts and also through careful consideration of elements such as localization for specific audiences in nations or cultures that they perceived as very different from their home demographic. Along with localization efforts and different marketing strategies, Square and Enix sought to widen the scope of their product lineups, even within the Final Fantasy, Dragon Quest, and JPRG universes. This happened in part through deployment of a media mix—transmedia content as developed in Japanese popular culture that built on the Final Fantasy and Square and Enix brands. They were going beyond the confines of a singular

genre but also demonstrating what something like Final Fantasy might be like outside a specific form of gameplay. Their attempts, however, met with mixed success. It was helpful to have offices in other countries and agreements with other companies such as EA to license and sell their games, but the overall franchises and products remained the same.

Square also began to consider how to make deeper inroads into Western markets through the incorporation of Western brands into its products. In 2002, Square announced that it was collaborating with the Walt Disney Company to create the Kingdom Hearts franchise, which as of 2012 consisted of seven games and has sold more than 19 million copies worldwide.[56] Using characters from Disney and Final Fantasy, the first *Kingdom Hearts* game was an interesting fusion of West and East in a videogame, receiving mostly positive critical reception and strong sales in Japan and in the West. In creating such collaborations, Square (now Square Enix) accelerated its approach (learn more about the other) by working with the other directly, engaging its products, interests, and expertise via a new franchise. In doing so, it learned more about Western markets, Western players, and the best ways to reach them.

Virtual and Real Travel and Its (Dis)contents   Returning to John Urry's typology, another important element to a cosmopolitan disposition is the ability to travel, both literally and virtually. From almost its beginnings, Square Enix saw the desirability and necessity of going outside Japan as a component of its strategy. Over time, the company has opened and operated offices in North America, Europe, and more recently Asia. But simply opening offices is little guarantee of success: both Enix and Square opened foreign offices, yet the Dragon Quest franchise has never been as popular in the West as it was (and is) in Japan.

There is more at work than simply going to other parts of the world and opening a storefront or purchasing advertising from local firms. Urry suggests that part of travel is the ability to consume different places and environments. *To consume* is a provocative term with multiple meanings. It could imply unreflective consumption—the inhalation of the strange, the taking of what one wants to sustain oneself without considering the effects on others. It also implies some multiplicity—the power or ability to travel to or experience a diversity of locales. In the case of Square Enix, the company can employ labor in various markets to create and distribute

its products. They likewise sample local tastes and interests in their efforts to create, package, and sell something of the familiar back to individuals in multiple locations, such as the way multiple "world culture" contextual cues were integrated into the design of *Final Fantasy X*.[57] This maps well to having a curiosity about other people, places, and cultures. Companies like Square Enix have sought to understand the Western market in all its complexities.

The next component or step could be purchasing native (Western) companies. Square Enix's acquisition of Eidos was undertaken to gain access to games that appeal to those Western markets. In 2009, Square Enix purchased Eidos Ltd., maker of the Tomb Raider, Deus Ex, and Hitman series, for $123 million.[58] The addition of several key videogame series that appealed to Western markets was a huge draw for the company, allowing it to profit from a wider diversity of games than it had traditionally created and published. The purchase also gave Square Enix access to development studios in critical areas, including the United States, Denmark, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Such resources are key to its overall strategy—finding more efficient inroads into global markets. Although Final Fantasy will continue to appeal to particular demographics worldwide and new players may be added through iPhone or iPad app purchases, the company now can also draw revenue from releases that never before have been associated with a Japanese corporation—such as Eidos Montreal's 2011 hit *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, which shipped more than 2 million units less than a month after the game's initial release.[59] Following that success, the studio increased its workforce, and Square Enix announced the launch of another studio—Square Enix Montreal—to work on additional Western titles.[60] Such hits provide revenue that can finance more experimental or risky ventures and also encourage more collaboration between Square Enix's transnational studios and their respective teams. For example, in 2009 Julien Merceron, the chief technology officer of Eidos, was "named the worldwide technology director of the entire company" and began "studying Japanese … to ease in collaboration and communication."[61] What began as an acquisition of intellectual property and access to Western developers has led to greater discourses within the company, bringing Square Enix closer to its goal of better understanding the Western market.

Travel also can be virtual, which can be no less risky. In 2002, Square took the Japanese role-playing game into new virtual territory—a fusion

with the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) genre. When *Final Fantasy XI* was released in Japan and then North America and later Europe, the game created a different sort of East/West mixture. It featured game elements from the traditional Final Fantasy universe but mixed the players themselves by putting individuals from Japan, North America, and Europe on common servers rather than segregating them as most other MMOGs have traditionally done. In another stab at convergence, Square made the game platform nonexclusive: it could be played on a PC, then the PS2, and finally the Xbox 360. The game never achieved the level of success that its single-player titles did, but at its peak it claimed approximately 500,000 paid subscribers and continued to operate as of 2015, more than a decade after its release. Continuing its pursuit of virtual travel success, in 2004 Square Enix entered into an agreement with Sony Online Entertainment to publish *Everquest II* in Japan, bringing another MMOG to a market that was not overly familiar with the genre.[62] In 2005, Square Enix China Co. Ltd. in Beijing was established, in part to pave the way for future ventures such as *Final Fantasy XIV*, which was released in China in summer 2014 in partnership with local publisher Shanda Games, although on servers separate from Japan, North America, and Europe.[63]

In addition to MMOGs, Square Enix paid attention to the mobile gaming market, releasing fully ported versions of Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy for NTT DoCoMo's FOMA service in Japan in 2004.[64] Square Enix has continued to pursue profit in the area of mobile gaming by establishing Square Enix Mobile Studio Co. Ltd. to focus its content services, which included reissuing older games for mobile devices (both upgraded and original forms), developing new games and new intellectual property (IP), and experimenting with different revenue models.[65] In addition to the numerous Final Fantasy titles ported for mobile devices, the company released *Chaos Rings* in 2010, an RPG with an entirely new IP fiction. Despite its higher than average price tag for a mobile game ($12.99 USD), it became a best seller in Apple's iTunes storefront in fifteen countries and led to a prequel, *Chaos Rings Omega* (released in early 2011), *Chaos Rings II* (March 2012), and *Chaos Rings III* (May 2015).[66]

The company also has had to be flexible in determining the best uses for its subsidiaries, sometimes shifting focus from one potential market to another—taking risks in pursuit of different audiences, which are constantly in a state of flux. Such decisions let us see how Square Enix is

envisioning itself as a company and exercising control over what it chooses to create. In 2005, the company acquired Taito for $610 million to diversify its product range via Taito's arcade business.[67] That has led to large losses for Square Enix because arcades in Japan are seeing a decline in attendance, much as they did in the West more than two decades previously. Echoing the diversity of its parent company, Taito has diversified its own operations—moving into the mobile social game space via a partnership with a Western company, PopCap Games.[68] In 2011, the duo launched Pop Tower, "a dedicated mobile social game service" for the GREE social network in Japan, which will host modified versions of PopCap's hits, including *Bejeweled*, *Chuzzle*, and *Zuma*. The move to mobile games is not new for Taito because it already has released half a dozen successful mobile titles. The partnership, which includes PopCap's Tokyo office, will strengthen the position of both businesses in the Japanese mobile market and is part of wider Asian market plans for both corporations.[69] Such moves demonstrate how companies like Square Enix and its subsidiaries are choosing to author particular types of games and not others. These higher-level decisions and more granular decisions about localization and marketing further solidify Square Enix as a particular kind of game creator (or author) and a particular kind of company. That includes being transnational and multimodal but only in carefully considered complementary ways.

Found in Translation: Interpretations and Integration   When Urry writes of the cosmopolitan disposition, he seems to suggest that after a person has experienced and interacted with new cultures, places, and peoples, such a person is changed via the process if the experience is to be considered successful. Travel, curiosity, and risk taking can lead to new understandings—both of the world and of oneself. Can we say the same of a corporation and its potential cosmopolitan "self" if it has undertaken such actions? One measure would be to see how Square Enix's travel and risk taking have potentially changed its practices over time. We can see some elements at work. The company continues to purchase studios, open them in international locations, and experiment with new mixtures of intellectual property, new types of platforms, and new ways to reach players.

Square Enix's commitment to Eidos and its studios in Montreal, for example, speaks to its support of games far from its original lineup. Likewise, its pursuit of new venues (such as the iOS platform—via both Final

Fantasy ports and the creation of new titles for the platform) demonstrates its attempts to cater to a wider demographic of player, including original JRPG fans who may wish to replay a series on their phones and new players who own a smartphone and are curious about its potential for games as a (new to them) leisure activity. Square Enix also has been serious about seeking out new technical platforms for development. In late 2011, the company was reported to be developing an action RPG using the Unity 3D platform (indicating its "increasing preference for third-party development solutions") and that it is using the Western-created Unreal Engine 3 for multiple projects. One of those has been confirmed as *Kingdom Hearts III*, which uses the Unreal 4 engine developed by Epic Games.[70] Such news is surprising for a company renowned for its in-house development and for a general preference by Japanese companies not to use Western tools. Square Enix's embrace of such tools suggests that it has integrated knowledge of other systems and cultures into its corporate culture and determined that such experiments must continue for global success to follow.

One area where Square Enix continues to stand out in terms of reinterpreting and reintegrating knowledge of the other back into itself is its increasingly sophisticated use of localization across a universe of game titles. Localization has progressed far beyond giving one translator the game at the conclusion of a project and telling him or her to produce a translation within a few weeks. Those early efforts led to translations for games such as *Final Fantasy II* (US)/*IV* (Japan) that were considered "laughable" and "barely comprehensible."[71] The current process encompasses multiple languages, voice acting, and a consideration of the facial and body expressions of a game's characters and avatars. This is compounded by pressures to have simultaneous releases. In the past, "a Japanese version would lead, followed nine to 12 months later by the U.S. version, with a European edition coming as much as a year after that (if at all)."[72] To manage such complex projects, greater planning and dedicated tools are needed. Square Enix has relied on its dedicated software tool Moomle (named for the Moogles that inhabit all Final Fantasy games), which "allows the team to track changes to the script and audio of a large game."[73] A large game can mean "more than half a million characters of Japanese text—the equivalent of nearly 1.4 million English words, which doesn't even touch on the half-dozen other languages the game [*Final Fantasy XIII-2*] was translated into."[74] An additional challenge comes from the fact that game localizers are working

with an original version that is not yet complete. Because of pressures for simultaneous or near-simultaneous releases, localized versions must be created together with the original. This has led to situations where "dialogue and other in-game text is constantly changing; some lines are written out while others change placement and context without warning."[75]

Even with these constraints, localization cannot be a simple translation from one language to another. For example, with the release of the PSP game *Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together* in 2011, the localization was extensive, with "a lot of implicit trust" between the game's original developer and the game's localization team. That ensured that localized versions would be accurate and internally coherent, faithful to the original but with their own unique style. As localizer Alexander O. Smith explains, "to take a Japanese game and just slap English on top of it, without first trying to understand and interpret the world behind it, I think you're doing a disservice to the original. You end up with a Frankenstein: a Japanese world with English window dressing, lacking internal consistency."[76]

All of this suggests that localization now operates on many levels of sophistication and that a company's approach to it can indicate its level of commitment to reaching particular markets. Although Square Enix does not engage in such extensive efforts for all of its games or all of its markets, its efforts to create better localizations and see the process as integral to a game's release speaks to the company's wider efforts to be a fully transnational corporation.

A Spectrum of Dispositions

As with individuals, companies fall along a spectrum of cosmopolitan dispositions, reflective of their investment in and variety of approaches to staying competitive in a global industry. As a first step, companies must be successful in one market (usually a domestic one) to make inroads into any others, as Martin Picard reminds us. The game industry has particular advantages for Japanese companies that wish to pursue global competitiveness because their activities "took place in an already globalized economic context elaborated throughout the second half of the twentieth century by Japanese companies and multinationals."[77]

Based on such a position, companies can then seek to move outward or not and move along the spectrum in ways that suit their interests or needs. At the banal and unreflective end are firms that create products simply

to be shipped as-is to other parts of the world. If they sell, it benefits the corporation, but no particular effort is made to reshape the product or ease its reception into other locations. Further along the scale would be a somewhat active cosmopolitanism. Here companies will do some localization of their products for global distribution. It probably will be for larger markets and could be a surface treatment or perhaps more actual localization of games themselves, with text translations and some cultural elements.

Further still, more extensive localization processes might occur, which could include redoing voice acting in games, more careful culturalization, deeper penetration to other countries and languages, and more specific target marketing of products. Some cross-promotions might also occur. Companies might partner with foreign companies to help sell their products globally.

Close to the far end would be a more engaged corporate cosmopolitanism. Corporations will contract with development studios in other areas to help with content creation in hopes of building different cultural considerations into games. This has occurred mainly with Japanese studios that are hiring Western game developers to help create games with a more "Western" flavor to them. Also in this category are extensive localization and culturalization. Companies also have established global offices and studios from which decisions are made about which products to develop for particular locales. This might involve larger global brands or even original intellectual property, but both will target local populations through local genre preferences, hardware preferences, and socioeconomic status. Finally, perhaps cosmopolitical norms come into play when a company sees itself as not just as a corporation but as a global citizen. An example could be when Square Enix, aware of such responsibilities, announced that it was donating 100 million yen to earthquake relief funds after the March 2011 quake in the Tohoku region and also collected donations from players of their online games to aid relief efforts.[78]

Corporate cosmopolitanism put on a sliding scale can help to illustrate where various firms stand relative to one another. It also can show a path of evolution (or perhaps devolution) that firms follow over time. Just as individuals can inhabit different positions, so too can transnational videogame corporations. They can target one market, several, or many. Square Enix may have started by targeting North America and western Europe, but it has evolved to include eastern Europe, southeast Asia, and China.

Conclusions

Although Square Enix can be said to have developed a fairly sophisticated cosmopolitan disposition, how can that help us understand its authorship of its Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest videogame titles and its ever-expanding portfolio of other titles and products? How has it managed to exercise agency and control in a global production system fraught with multiple constraints and challenges? Companies like Square Enix, which take a committed approach to developing games, do so in numerous ways and have evolved and refined their practices over time. In addition to attempting to develop new games with interesting stories, compelling graphics, and expanding technological affordances, Square Enix also must consider platform, audiences, marketing, release schedules, tie-ins, and many other concerns. As Ian Condry writes in relation to the anime industry, creative industries must continually confront a "fundamental unpredictability [that] requires creators to take a leap of faith into projects where they are uncertain of the outcome."[79]

Square Enix needs to understand how excellent dialogue in one language might be frustrating noise in another—and be able to make adjustments accordingly. It also needs to know how far to culturalize or adapt a game and which players might find it appealing. There is no perfect way to engage in this process, but Square Enix's approach has been fairly successful so far. It has gone from hiring single individuals as localizers after a game's completion to having fully staffed teams engaged in simultaneous localization efforts in multiple languages and with dedicated technical tools. Such workers serve as culture brokers as they translate the language of games and help to refocus dialogue, story, and game context to make games familiar in multiple contexts. In the process, through the act of dubbing games from one version into another, they do not necessarily eliminate the noise of the foreign. But they push us to consider how original game versions ever are or can be as they slide along a chain of contextual signifiers that can be swapped, adapted, cut, and pasted to suit market as well as artistic needs. More on that process will be explored in the following chapter.

Square Enix has built a company that is well known in the global marketplace for its role-playing games. The company's activities are cosmopolitan in many ways: its aggressive entry into multiple markets, expanding use of localization, acquisition of Western studios, and ever-expanding portfolio

demonstrate its commitment to travel to multiple lands, learn about the other, take risks, and be transformed in the process. All of that has contributed to its role in authoring games, shaping through limits as well as affordances what it has done, tried to do, and failed at doing.

No one is successful forever, however. In 2013, after reports of financial losses to the company of nearly $175 million, long-time chief executive officer Yoichi Wada announced his resignation and was replaced by Yosuke Matsuda.[80] Likewise, the releases of *Final Fantasy XIV* as well as *Final Fantasy XIII-2* have caused many journalists, critics, and developers to wonder about the future strength of Square Enix. The games have been harshly critiqued in terms of their gameplay and use of tired tropes, and sales have not equaled sales of past titles. Some are asking if the Final Fantasy brand is still competitive or if its time has passed. In May 2013, the company announced that it planned to sell more than 5 million fewer videogames in the fiscal year ending March 31, 2014, than it did the prior year.[81]

The company has persisted in its efforts, and the redesign and launch of *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* have led to strong reviews and enough subscriptions to improve its most recent financial forecasts for revenues and profits.[82] The company has also acknowledged the strength of its JRPG roots as one potential route into the future due to the surprising global success of its JRPG *Bravely Default*. As CEO Matsuda explained in a published interview, developing games for everyone is not always the best way to sell games because "in the past, when we developed console games with a worldwide premise, we lost our focus, and not only did they end up being games that weren't for the Japanese, but they ended up being incomplete titles that weren't even fit for a global audience." He believes that going forward "for the new games we'll be developing from this point on, while this may sound a bit extreme, we've been talking about making them as heavy JRPGs. I believe that way, we can better focus on our target, which will also bring better results."[83] There is no way to know for certain if such an approach will work, and these are likely not the last challenges that Square Enix will face. But how it responds will help to determine when we will finally witness the "final" Final Fantasy and if the company's fates are tied to that ending.

5   Localization: Making the Strange Familiar

As we saw in the previous chapter's discussions of the videogame developer and publisher Square Enix, one of the keys to the global distribution of videogames is successful localization—translating and adapting a game to appeal to multiple players across different languages, cultures, and regional and national laws and political stances. Like the process of making and selling videogames, localization has evolved into a complex process undertaken by a variety of actors with different skill sets, materials, and approaches to carrying out the process. Localization is now done by global corporations like Square Enix, smaller companies like MangaGamer,[1] and individuals and player groups that undertake unofficial (and sometimes illegal) localizations of games that were never intended to be sold outside of their country of origin. As part of that history, Western players have played a key role in bringing Japanese games to a wider audience, which has helped to convince the industry of the demand for such products. Such players also have created a form of participatory culture that has (in some cases) become increasingly sophisticated, echoing the growing commercialization of user-generated content online more broadly.

The history of game localization is a mixture of official and unofficial efforts that sometimes have focused on the same games at the same time. This makes it tricky to document such histories, but it is important to understand both systems—the official and unofficial—because they have driven one another through the development of the global videogame industry.

Localization began almost with the advent of games themselves when game companies in Japan began selling their systems and games abroad.[2] Translators were needed to help players from varying backgrounds to make sense of these games (and others like them). Many early efforts made only basic changes to text-light games such as *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* or

employed last-minute translations (such as the translation of *Final Fantasy II* [US]/*IV* [Japan]) that later were mocked and denigrated by players.[3] In the early days of videogame development, many games never (officially) left Japan, but many of those that did were instant hits and affected the culture of the industry and popular consciousness in ways that we still do not fully understand.

Localization has become more critical over the past few decades. Japanese developers and publishers still control a majority of their domestic market, but global sales of Japanese games have been shrinking—from a 50 percent share of the market in 2002 to about a 10 percent share in 2009—as they encounter greater competition from Western developers.[4] In response, Japanese companies have become more aggressive and experimental in their strategies. For example, Square Enix purchased the Western developer Eidos and its library of game titles, and Capcom made the decision to have Vancouver-based Blue Castle Games create the second in its series of Dead Rising games to give the title more "Western appeal."[5] Companies around the world continue to decide which games deserve global releases, which are for domestic markets only, how to develop intellectual properties that might allow for the creation of different genres of games based on the same IP but are sold in different regions, and how to figure out which of these approaches is the best to take.

Such assessments are always subjective and are based on hunches and guesswork as much as past sales of a genre or designer or tie-ins to other media. Although Chandler explains that up to 50 percent of a game's revenue may come from foreign markets, it can be tricky to predict in advance just how that figure will translate.[6] Some companies inevitably err on the side of caution, choosing not to spend extra money on a game to translate or localize it, based on such judgments. But in the world of AAA game development, larger and larger markets are needed to cover the costs associated with making console games, and so remaining in the Japanese market is becoming an increasingly untenable position.

Just as game companies must balance the costs of development with the potential for global sales, news of game development anywhere does not exist in a vacuum. Players increasingly have access to information about who is developing what, where, and when it will be released, and they are not always content to take the word of Japanese game companies that certain games are not meant for them. Like anime and manga fans,

some players have hunted down such games and either played them in the original Japanese or figured out how to translate and localize them for themselves and other players, with varying approaches to the concept of professionalization.[7]

In doing so, all localizers are bridging a divide that is composed of various elements. At one level, the divide is a language and cultural barrier. Most Western players could not access the original version of *Final Fantasy V*, for example, because they did not speak or read Japanese and had to wait for the official localized version to be released in the West by Square. Additionally, Western players may not fully appreciate the influences of Japanese literature on Japanese role-playing games, where stories may be structured differently, featuring seemingly unrelated side stories that are interspersed with the telling of the main tale.[8] Japanese and Western players also might have different expectations about gameplay difficulty levels, character point of view, or other structures of gameplay that contribute to such a divide.[9] All such differences contribute to the potential challenges of changing games for different markets.

With official localizations, there also are the costs of setting up and then cultivating, maintaining, and possibly expanding networks for manufacturing, distribution, marketing, and retail sales of those localized titles. This means that a sizable divide or gap must be considered when taking a game out of its country of origin. Without any translation, a game in a foreign language is reduced to an expression of noise. Players are unable to understand or appreciate the game, perhaps even unable to load or start a new game. Localizers act as "culture brokers" and reinterpret or "dub" that noise into something not just comprehensible but also enjoyable for players in other countries who speak other languages. The point of this chapter is to demonstrate the intricacies of that process—to show how dubbing exposes the contingencies of language and culture and how rational business decisions are based not on what "real" players want or need but on how imagined players and player communities think about games and what "a game" or even "a Japanese game" should look and play like. It also documents the emergence of a complex landscape in the localization trade as digital distribution, economies of scale, and the emergence of independent and participatory cultures have arisen and flourished over the past decade.

To do that, this chapter examines two Japanese games and their localization for Western players. One comes from the corporate model that drives

much of the contemporary console industry and is the product of a multinational AAA game company with a long history. The second emerges from the Japanese comics market and two Western localizers who were trying to start their own localization company. Given the detailed discussion of Square Enix's practices in the previous chapter as well as the attention paid to the Japanese AAA industry in chapter 6, the structures of localization work discussed here for *Phoenix Wright* (the first example) are fairly well established. However, the rise of "indie localization" requires more explanation in terms of the structures, practices, and affordances that made such endeavors possible. Therefore, before beginning a discussion of the localization of *Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale*, the chapter looks at the rise of independent localization as a practice and the ways that it has flourished due to the development of high-speed Internet, dedicated online game marketplaces (such as Steam or GOG.com), and the rise of a specialized and fan-centric media and community, which support a wider diversity of game-related tastes than AAA has traditionally allowed. In their own ways, the two examples demonstrate the complexities of the process of localization, the widening of the game industry, and the ways that transnational flows operate. But first, we turn to a courtroom in Japan's fictional future and a lawyer who is tackling his first criminal cases.

Noisy Turnabout: Localizing *Phoenix Wright*

The year is 2016, and the player takes on the role of Phoenix Wright, a young defense attorney who works for famed lawyer Mia Fey. The justice system that "you" work in schedules trials immediately after suspects are apprehended and allows trials to run for only three days. If the defense attorney has not proven a client innocent within that time, there is an automatic conviction. To prove a client's innocence, the defense attorney must find the actual killer and prove his or her motive. The player can investigate crime scenes to look for evidence and interview witnesses to prepare for trial. During the trial, success demands skillful interrogation of individuals, using evidence and reasoning skills to find contradictions in their testimonies, wear them down, and find the truth. Text-heavy and featuring a limited two-dimensional, static world, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* is challenging and enjoyable. It offers players a game that rewards close readings, curiosity, persistence, and style.

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney began life as the 2001 Nintendo GBA visual novel game *Gyakuten Saiban*, which was released only in Japan. Four years later, Capcom ported the title to the DS platform and rereleased it with a new chapter to take advantage of the DS's touch screen. The newer version, known in Japan as *Gyakuten Saiban: Yomigaeru Gyakuten*, translates as "Turnabout Trial: Revived Turnabout." The game was released in North America in late 2005, Europe in 2006, and Australia in 2007. The game has origins as a visual novel and might be described as a combination murder mystery, adventure game, and courtroom drama. Its release in North America was met with unexpectedly high demand, selling more than 300,000 units, almost equaling its sales in Japan.[10] Two sequels featuring Phoenix Wright as the central character were released (*Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney—Justice for All* and *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney—Trials and Tribulations*), and the series continued with a new main character—Apollo Justice—in the 2008 release of *Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney*. A 2009 spinoff featured the game's popular prosecuting attorney Miles Edgeworth in *Ace Attorney Investigations: Miles Edgeworth*. Finally, responding to the series' continuing popularity, Capcom announced a cross-over game, *Professor Layton vs. Ace Attorney*, developed by Capcom in conjunction with the Professor Layton series developer Level-5. The game was released in Japan in 2011 and in North America only on August 29, 2014, despite prior releases in English in the United Kingdom and Australia.[11] In Japan, Phoenix Wright has become something of a transmedia cult hit, with additional Japanese-only games, the release of printed case files taken from the games, a musical theater version of the game by the all-female theater troupe Takarazuka, and a movie version released in 2012. Western fans have created an extensive corpus of related materials at the site Court-Records.net, which includes fan fiction, videos, games, and more. This chapter focuses on the first game in the series, but it helps to explain how the Phoenix Wright series has grown in importance and scope and how localizers must increasingly draw from a larger universe that remains consistent as the games have turned into a series and also a larger media universe.

The original *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* title consists of five chapters or cases, with the first four playing with the "turnabout" of the original title. Each of the five episodes—"The First Turnabout," "Turnabout Sisters," "Turnabout Samurai," "Turnabout Goodbyes," and "Rise from the Ashes"—presents a new case for Phoenix to solve and continues a narrative that

develops around the recurring characters of Phoenix, Mia Fey, her sister Maya, and a few others. The cases usually revolve around a murder, and the player must interview witnesses before the trial, search crime scenes, scrutinize evidence (both images and written descriptions), and question witnesses during the trial. By doing this, the successful player exposes inconsistencies, lies, and misinformation to prove that a client is innocent and to find the guilty party. In the legal world of Phoenix Wright, it is not enough to prove that a client is innocent. You also must find and gain a conviction for the actual murderer. Because language plays a key role in the game, localization becomes a vital component of any potential international success.

Localization as a practice involves a great deal more than simple language translation—taking a game from Japanese to English, French, or other languages.[12] Kate Edwards has coined the term *culturalization* to convey a sense of the many subjective nuances that localization projects can entail.[13] Culturalization certainly plays a critical role in the development of the English version of *Phoenix Wright* because the game relies on conversation, exposition, puns, name-based gags, pop culture references, and the like as a central part of its appeal (figure 5.1). Although the game's legal system is fiction, the game relies on wit and exacting uses of language in both dialogue and writing. The player must engage with the language of the game as a primary means of gameplay—through interviewing witnesses and defendants, in reading pertinent evidence, and in cross-examinations—and get the content right.

Localization is about altering or modifying cultural expressions that might interfere with a game player's understanding or enjoyment of a game. So if a joke in a game relies on knowledge of a popular television show, localization ensures that players in each targeted market or culture are provided with a reference that they can understand. However, localized content is never a true picture of another country or culture but is usually more a pastiche of symbols, icons, and broad references.[14] The job of the localizer is more akin to Peterson's culture broker, whose job is to create harmony from the noise or discordance of another language and another culture, complete with its accents, idioms, slang, and shortcuts.[15]

The game's localization team, led by Alexander O. Smith, has been candid about the process that it used to reframe a game that was deeply entrenched in Japanese popular culture as one that North American audiences would

Figure 5.1
Wordplay with the protagonist's name.

find amusing rather than confusing. The title of the game itself changed—
from a focus on reversing trials (*Turnabout Trial*) to the name of the central
character (*Phoenix Wright*). Wright's name is not translated but changed to
allow his colleagues and friends to play with the meaning of his name in
the English and Japanese versions.

In Japanese, Phoenix Wright starts out with the name Ryūichi Naruhodō
(成步堂 龍一). The name Naruhodō can be translated as "I see" and is a

phrase often inserted in conversation to signal attentiveness or agreement "hai … naruhodō" ("yes … I see"). The Japanese version of the game can thus use the character's name to play with the inexperience of the main character, who is a new defense attorney who may not see (or understand) what is going on. Other characters can point to Phoenix's inexperience ("Don't you see?"), echoing the player's potential confusion about how to proceed in a particular case. Naming the English version of the character "Mr. I See" would have been inappropriate if not ridiculous, and thus the localization team endeavored to give the character a name that would allow for different types of wordplay within the unfolding narrative, such as "Right, Wright?" or "I believe you may be wrong, Mr. Wright."

The team went a step further with Wright's first name, going "back and forth with the translator and the R&D team" before deciding on Phoenix, which was picked to signify the bird that eternally rises from the ashes. A character thus named would be expected to struggle, overcome defeat, and eventually triumph.[16] Head translator Smith recalls that "I would give them [Capcom] a list of names, and I would have to come up with these pun ideas for several different name combinations for each of the main characters."[17] That strategy allowed localizers more room to play with language than other types of names and is closer to the use of *kanji*, which can have multiple meanings and pronunciations depending on their contexts. Although the names chosen were not Smith's first choice, "I really love that kind of challenge that writing with restrictions places."[18] The name Phoenix Wright draws from ancient mythologies (including Egyptian, Phoenician, and Greek) and employs a homophone in the English language to create a name that is versatile for various kinds of wordplay. Apart from his more formal name, the character also has a nickname (Nick) that his close friends use and that is more casual and not overtly marked in terms of ethnicity or race.

The game is a constant play on language. This game is based on laws and courtrooms and is heavy on oral testimony, textual and visual evidence, and cross-examinations. For example, the third episode in the game, "Turnabout Samurai," involves the alleged murder of one television actor by another—both of whom star in a *tokusatsu* show, or a live-action television drama that employs special effects, a style that is reminiscent of such shows as *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*.[19] The case revolves around defending the Steel Samurai (the suggestively named Will Powers) against

a suspected frame-up by investigating the studio lot where the show is filmed for evidence and gathering crucial testimony from witnesses. Some evidence is found after talking with young fan-boy Cody Hackins, a name that is a play on code hacking. In the original Japanese version, his name is 滝九太 (Kyuuta Ootaki), with Ootaki most likely being a play on *otaku*—a hardcore fan of the show who is socially awkward, an avid collector, and deeply interested in anime and videogames.

Cody's style of talking relies heavily on localized slang, such as when he remarks to Phoenix, "Man, how can one person be so lame?! If you were a superhero you'd be Lame-o-man!" Other characters in the case also employ slang, such as Sal Manella, the director of the show. The writers even altered Sal's testimony by playing on the written form of leet-speak (a play on "elite speak," or informal language on the Internet) for his speech patterns (which appear as text-only, minus voiceover). Regarding his profession, he claims, "I make the Steel Samurai, n00b! ROFL!" Use of such terms as "n00b" and "ROFL" would not work as well (if at all) if spoken. Here the localizers have created allusions that go beyond even spoken idioms due to the textual rather than oral nature of testimony in the game.

The game does keep many fictitious Japanese references, in part because it would have been difficult to expunge all evidence of "foreign" content. The use of the show about the Steel Samurai is only one example of a reference that could easily be seen as Japanese in origin. Another might be in "Rise from the Ashes," where Angel Starr, an eyewitness, sells lunch boxes of rice and fish that are reminiscent of the bento boxes popular in Japan. Increasingly, references to Japanese media and popular foods no longer need to be erased or even heavily modified. Interest in the products of "Cool Japan"—Japanese popular culture such as manga, anime, and video-games—has been well documented.[20] Although many Japanese companies use localization to attempt to erase the "cultural odor" of their products,[21] more recent hardcore Western fans seem intent on preserving as much of the local Japanese flavor as possible.[22] This means that leaving some of the "Japanese-ness" in *Phoenix Wright* is likely as much of a draw as the game's skillful use of language.

The localization for the first Phoenix Wright title was done on a tight budget yet managed to convey the spirit of the original game in its witty wordplay and charming characters.[23] Rather than go through the game in detail and list elements that have been changed, the next section examines

certain aspects of the game, demonstrating the varied role that localization plays in contemporary games and how dubbing works to create game versions that are neither faithful reproductions nor derivative products. Instead, they illustrate how such versions work in parallel with one another, challenging the idea of an original from which all others are derived.

Game Turnabouts: Localizing the Interface, Game Objects, and Interactions

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney is a successful, funny game, but it is not known for realistic three-dimensional graphics, lush virtual worlds, or innovative interfaces. When starting the game, the player is presented with a fairly utilitarian interface that offers a limited set of options for potential action. Episode 1, "The First Turnabout," is about Phoenix's childhood friend Larry Butz, who is being tried for a murder that he did not commit, and it is set only in the courthouse. The game slowly guides the player as new lawyer Wright in his first case to decipher the court records system, examine profiles of witnesses, and figure out ways of behaving in courtroom situations (figure 5.2).

Even in their seeming simplicity, such user interfaces can present a key challenge for localizers, who must work with structural elements such as menus and dialogue boxes that usually are fixed in size and therefore limited in their capacity for text display. Many localizers have acknowledged that when moving from Japanese to Western languages, space becomes an issue because *kanji* take up less space than roman characters to present the same information or dialogue.[24] In the early days, many game development companies forced localizers to trim dialogue, narrative, or menu information to fit the available space.[25] More recently, tools have been created, and better planning has resulted in menus and interface elements that are adjustable, allowing text of different sizes to fit without having to cut any meaning or information from the game.[26] The extensive, exacting dialogue in *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, for example, made spacing and placement key factors to consider when making changes to the game. Simply cutting words to save room was not an option.

Fortunately, many interface elements do not change over time and are quite basic in their presentation. Similar to more traditional text-based adventure games and visual novels, players do not have an avatar to steer through space, and they are not given options for navigating closer to or

Figure 5.2
A key part of gameplay is using evidence to expose contradictions in testimony.

further away from game elements, other characters, or objects (figure 5.3). Instead, the game provides four large buttons for four basic commands when not in court—Move, Examine, Talk, and Present. Pressing the Move button gives players another menu of locations that they can visit. As they progress through episodes, some new locations may open up, and others become irrelevant or disappear from view. In the context of localization, such elements are straightforward and relatively easy to adjust, requiring no real rethinking in terms of culturalization for different countries.

Figure 5.3

No free movement is offered via gameplay.

Source: This screenshot is from the "Turnabout Sister" episode of the iOS version of the game rather than the DS version. There are some changes to layout design, but the essentials—buttons to move, talk, and examine—remain the central ways to interact with the game.

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney lets the player gather evidence by searching crime scenes, and the evidence that is accumulated plays a central role in how one plays the game. During investigations, objects can allow for direct access to new locations (such as through keycards) or indirect access (such as by trading items with various characters to receive more information or another artifact). During trials, objects become important in a different way because they help explain what really happened in a particular case and thereby correct the record. Objects therefore function as a currency for interactions: they help to reconstruct the past and are a mediator of relationships between individuals in the cases.

In terms of localization, objects need to remain fairly stable. Their names may be changed, but their function within the game cannot change to avoid resulting in much larger changes to the gameplay. For example, one object that is introduced in the case against Larry Butz is the murder weapon—a copy of the statue of *The Thinker* that was used to hit the victim on the head. Visually, the statue in the game is a rough approximation of French sculptor Auguste Rodin's original statue, and because the reference is broad enough that most players will understand it, no changes are needed for this item. Other items are stranger, such as the *magatama* (which does not appear until the second Phoenix Wright game). This item is based on the comma-shaped beads that were used for ritual and ceremonial purposes in ancient Japan and is used in the game by Phoenix to help discover characters' secrets. Here the localizers chose to keep the item associated with Japanese culture and the character of Maya Fey, who is portrayed as part of a family of spirit mediums who can communicate with the dead. Such items help the game retain some of its Japanese origins, although they appear alongside cultural markers from different contexts, such as a statue that was created by a French sculptor.

Evidence cannot present itself within the game, and so interactions form a key part of gameplay. Talking with individuals is as simple as moving to the area in which they are located and then choosing the Talk interaction option. Phoenix must investigate all dialogue options, and choosing one option never changes the others or alters the path of the game's story. Where this changes is in cross-examination, when there is only one right answer in interrogating witnesses and exposing faulty testimony. The game forces the player to make a close reading of the text of the game. Because options do not change and the course of the trial cannot be altered based

on player input, the correct response for the player is to find contradictions through close scrutiny of the people and evidence involved. The text is considerably more closed than open: the player will not find the multiple endings that are common in the visual novel genre or the multiple pathways that are allowed by other such games (like *999*, which is discussed in chapter 3). Instead, the player is trying to discover authorial intent—here, how the developers have constructed the case. Rather than being open to interpretation, just as in a courtroom drama, a certain decision must be reached. There is only one correct way to interpret evidence and one truthful account from each witness called (figure 5.4).

In terms of localization, dialogue must be constructed so that challenges to testimony—which must come at particular times—make sense in multiple languages based on the evidence that the player has accumulated, which is replete with localized descriptions. For example, in episode 3, "Turnabout Samurai," Wright has to interrogate the witness Wendy Oldbag, a studio security guard who was at the location where a murder took place. In her testimony about who she saw enter the studio lot, she makes several statements when pressed:

—The only person I saw go to the studio before then was Will Powers!

—No one else went there!

—If they had, I would have seen them!

By choosing to press witnesses, the player can sometimes push them to expand on their testimony, and by presenting particular pieces of evidence after witnesses have made a key statement, more testimony can be evoked—particularly if they are caught in a lie. In the situation above, the player must present Wendy with a photograph from the studio's security camera that is labeled with a 2, which might mean that it is the second photo taken that day. This should cause the player to wonder where the first photo was. The security system is set up to take photos when someone appears, and there is no record of the first photo. By presenting this photo to Oldbag at exactly the right moment, the player can provoke a reaction from her and move the game forward. Note that here the issue for localizers is retaining precision instead of cultural fidelity. Wendy's statements must make logical sense and lead the player to the correct interpretation of the evidence, and the evidence must be labeled in a way that allows the player to identify it as such. Sometimes slippages occur and may not always be perfectly precise in the original version, but for localized versions, such attention to detail
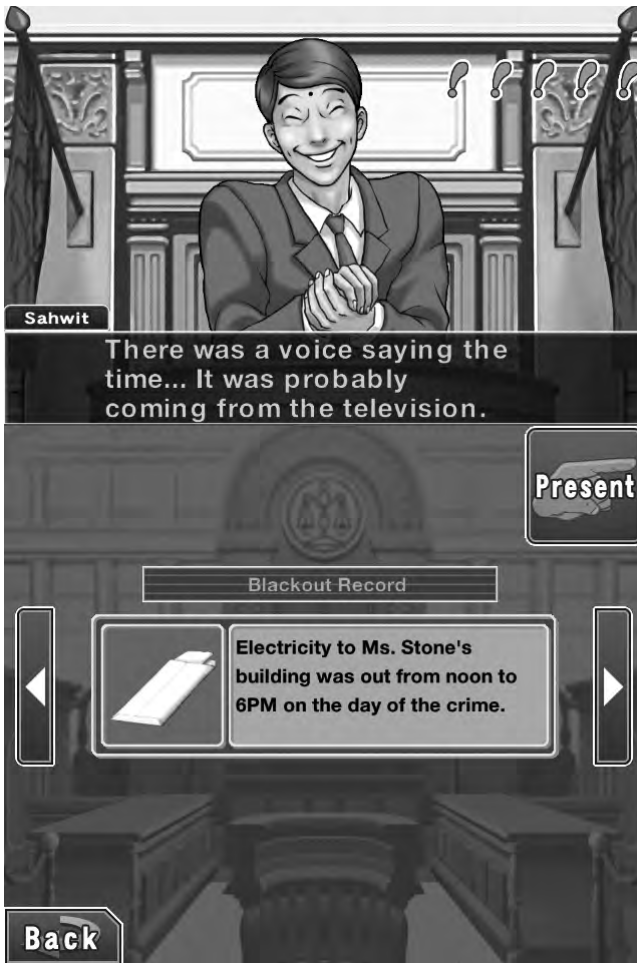
Figure 5.4
Evidence demonstrating the witness is lying about hearing the time from a television show.

can be at least as important as recognizing when to change (or not change) cultural references such as the *magatama* and bento box.

Overall, the localization for the first *Phoenix Wright* was successful, and the game sold well enough to merit future international versions as well as the spinoffs and additions discussed above. Culture brokers such as Smith and his team had to make many decisions (in consultation with

the game's original developers at Capcom) about what to change and what to keep the same. In keeping elements like the *magatama* and *otaku*, the game remains firmly rooted in Japanese culture yet with updated names (Nick and Sal Manella) and popular cultural references that Western audiences understand and appreciate. In response to the mixing of elements, the localized versions are not exactly copies or derivative works from the original. Instead, they have become parallel versions with their own idiosyncracies and secrets to unlock. In an unexpected nod to the popularity of the Western versions, the musical theater version of the game in Japan uses the Western version's character names—including Phoenix Wright—rather than the original Japanese names.

A Localization Shop's Tale: Bringing an Independent JRPG to the West

The prior section examines the work that a small team of localizers did for the original *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* game, which operated with a limited budget but still was an official project that was overseen by the game's developer and publisher. Most of what we know about localization comes from examining projects with traditional paths like this. Yet from the earliest days of localization, individuals and small groups were working on unofficial, nonlicensed localization projects. They were not interested in monetary compensation. Most were driven by the desire to play games that they loved in a language more familiar to them and by the challenge of the project itself. In an earlier chapter, I outline the history of ROM hackers and their own role in extending the reach of Japanese videogames. Here I focus on a slightly different set of activities by individuals and small groups that have evolved in interesting directions. Although they have emerged from (and continue to be supported by) smaller fan and player community groups, they are not content to localize Japanese games unofficially for a small audience of players like themselves. Their goal is to create licensed versions of smaller games that are created by people much like themselves and release those via digital distribution to a growing audience. A new channel for localization and Japanese videogames is emerging as enthusiasts now seek to become indie localizers and take indie games from Japan to sell in Western markets.

It is difficult to pinpoint when such activity began, particularly because ROM hackers and scanlation artists have been working for decades on

unofficial localizations of Japanese videogames. Yet some key moments and individuals can point us toward understanding more about this growing scene. One of the first groups to gain attention for its work on independent Japanese games was Rockin' Android, which was established in 2008 with the goal of bringing small Japanese games to Western console players. Two years later, the company, led by chief executive officer Enrique Galvez, struck a deal with Sony Online Entertainment to "localize, produce and release *doujin*, or Japanese-style indie video games, for the PlayStation Network."[27] The company focused initially on shooter-style games for a couple of reasons. Two-dimensional sprite-based games were becoming popular again, and perhaps more significantly, "we look for games that have familiarity to players outside Japan, easy to pick up and play but addictive. … the shooter genre is well regarded and has been around long enough that most people young and old have a decent grasp on how to play them."[28] The success and attention to such efforts have led other teams to form that focus on other (neglected) Japanese genres. Carpe Fulgur was another small company that created a stir of attention when it was formed in 2010. Started by two individuals who wanted to fill the niche for JRPGs in the West, they followed a slightly different path by focusing on Steam as a method of distribution. Their successful efforts have created welcoming conditions for more small shops to open up. In the next few years, companies such as Nyu Media were formed. Nyu Media focuses on *doujin* games and has already formed partnerships with major companies such as Capcom. Likewise, the Fruitbat Factory was launched in 2012 by three individuals whose first localization project was a story-driven PC strategy game called *War of the Human Tanks* created by indie Japanese developers Yakiniku Banzai.

It is impossible to say how successful or sustainable such efforts can be over time, but the growing number of indie localizers and the increasing range of their products suggest that more and more Japanese games will find their way outside of Japan—for major console and PC titles and increasingly for smaller *doujin*-style games as well. Such individuals and small teams make accessible games that might never appear outside of Japan and thus contribute in ways that the official industry cannot or does not. They can take greater risks because their work is a service atop the games themselves. They are not responsible for the development or production of the game, merely its modification or supplementation for a different audience. In filling that gap, they also become media producers themselves,

working outside established companies to pursue their interests. And that work is facilitated by the growing ease of Internet-based collaborations and by viable markets for digital downloading, all increasingly promoted via online sites and services. In the process, there has been an increase in pro- fessionalization in such creators, who are now helping to transform what we think of as grassroots, nonprofit-centered projects into efforts that on various levels more closely resemble the commercial industry itself.

Such activities by indie localizers might initially be compared to the work of modders, who also modify existing games, adding new life or interest to a commercially released product. However, indie localizers are different in a key way. Modders may create new maps and items or even build total conversions, but they are adding to an already existing product that might already be translated and distributed globally. For indie localizers, the base activity is somewhat different. The original game would remain unplayable for a particular market without that final step of translation or localization. Yet that activity by indie localizers is similar to that of modders in one key regard. It too spans a range from the very professional to the very novice, and deals with core texts as well as with peripheral texts such as strategy guides and companion websites. It is an activity that can be encouraged by some game developers and strongly discouraged (even prosecuted) by oth- ers.[29] It has become more professionalized as indie localizers start to work for hire and start their own companies, acknowledging the monetary value of such participatory cultures.

In engaging in such activity, players contribute to the globalization of culture, whether welcomed officially or not. Like anime fans, videogame players are working to bring a "foreign" object to a wider audience, one that (as is shown in chapter 1) does not have the specialized skills (or perhaps interest) to access such games in their original Japanese form.

Distribution Channels

An important challenge that indie localizers face is the distribution of their products, which in their original form likely were sold outside of traditional retail channels. The history of mainstream gaming activity has centered on games for the major consoles created by companies such as Sony, Micro- soft, and Nintendo and on games for the PC and Mac. Early distribution of PC and Mac titles occurred mostly through retail outlets that carried only major releases, which were supported by a games press that followed

the AAA market almost exclusively. Although games theoretically could be developed and sold for the PC, without marketing and shelf space games were consigned to near invisibility. Console systems were and continue to be walled gardens, and until recently, they allowed the sale and play of titles only via physical artifact—cartridges or CDs and DVDs that contained games that had passed stringent technical demands. Such systems still control who can release on their platforms, but they have changed dramatically due to the addition of online networks that allow players to download games onto their systems and additional content, such as add-ons and new levels or areas to play through. These shifts have had enormous consequences for small Western developers, Japanese indies, and indie localizers.

By raising the gates to the garden even partially, such marketplaces have admitted smaller games and games that might appear more experimental than those in the Madden or Call of Duty franchises. The opening of distribution channels such as PSN and Xbox Live has facilitated greater entry by smaller game companies into the wider marketplace, creating new opportunities for a wide variety of games to appear in centralized marketplaces and increasing demand for smaller, less mainstream games. That has led to wider visibility for Western-based games such as Jonathan Blow's acclaimed title *Braid*, but it also has created opportunities for companies such as Rockin' Android, with the launch of the localized versions of the *Gundemonium* 2D shooter series in mid-2010 to the PlayStation Network.

In addition to the opening of the console market, the digital distribution of games for the PC and Mac has been normalized. Aside from challenges related to hosting games, managing downloads and patches, and a payment system, an even larger problem has been to capture attention. Game developers have always complained about limited shelf space in physical stores, but those limitations focused the interest of potential buyers, who knew where to go to find games and had a selection from which to choose. Early online distribution suffered from a plethora of channels, which overwhelmed players with choices. Over time, a few major channels have emerged that serve targeted markets. For example, in the Western casual game marketplace, Big Fish Games is a major portal where most players know that they can find the release of new Hidden Object, Time Management, and Puzzle games. Smaller more focused sites exist for fans of niche genres such as Adventure games or sites like GOG.com that started

out selling older games, but overall, the biggest development was the emergence of Valve's Steam marketplace.

Game creator Valve first released the Steam distribution platform in 2002 for Windows-based games, and over time the service has evolved to include Mac games and a PS3 service. As of fall 2014, the service had more than 100 million active user accounts.[30] Steam sells games and manages the update process for games, allowing for patches and DLC to be added to games easily. The service has matchmaker, trading, and chat functions and other community tools, making it an important hub for players. It has grown to the point where it is now the dominant space for digital distribution of games. Although it releases no official figures, estimates are that "Steam controls half to 70% of the $4 billion market for downloaded PC games."[31] Steam is the place to be in terms of attention and potential market for any developer wishing to sell a PC (or Mac) game. Increasingly, indie localizers see Steam as a key for launching *doujin* games to a wider Western market.

Increased official opportunities for digital distribution and the affordances of fan cultures online have fostered conditions where indie localizers now can create licensed products that reach a wider group of players. Rockin' Android demonstrated the potential demand for smaller Japanese games and helped to open such marketplaces to a greater variety of genres, but its emphasis on 2D shooter titles left another gap in the market—the independent Japanese role-playing game. Produced in large numbers in Japan by equally small companies, such games have either never been exported or struggled to find decent localization and distribution outside Japan, due to their greater narrative and cultural complexities. But that gap has started to close, filled by a pair of Western game players who decided to create their own localization company and bring such games to the West.

Localizing the Last Mile: How an Item Shop Came to North America

Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale was developed in 2007 by EasyGameStation, a small Japanese game developer that specializes in creating quirky RPGs. It debuted at Comiket 73, a comic market that is held twice a year in Tokyo and that features manga, anime, and videogames created independently and generally not for profit.[32] The game, topically a Japanese RPG, has a twist. Rather than play as an adventurer whose main job is to dungeon dive in search of treasure, the player owns the item shop that sells gear and supplies to adventurers. As Recette, the player must pay off a large debt

Figure 5.5
Bargaining with a customer in *Recettear*.

incurred by Recette's now missing father, which involves buying low and selling high, hiring adventurers to enter dungeons in search of loot, and strategizing how to pay off a debt whose payments increase weekly—all within a fixed amount of time to accomplish this goal (figure 5.5).

In 2009, the company Carpe Fulgur acquired the rights to localize the game and distribute it digitally. The process took about eight months to complete, and the game was released on Steam and other download servers on September 10, 2010. The company that did the localization, Carpe Fulgur, has only a three-person team, and the game was its first professional project.

Andrew Dice and Robin Light-Williams started Carpe Fulgur in the same year that they acquired the rights to localize *Recettear*. As their website explains, they wanted to bring "deserving works of interactive entertainment—independently made or otherwise" from Japan to America.[33] After securing the rights to *Recettear*, they hired an artist to help with some

graphics modifications. The company officially registered in June 2010, only a few months before the release of its first game.

As is true with many of the individuals I talk about in chapter 1, Dice was an early and avid player of videogames, with favorites coming from Japanese developers such as Square.[34] Along with his interest in games grew a fascination with the process of localizing Japanese games. He writes on his website that he "heard of a man named Ted Woolsey, the lead editor for (then) Squaresoft Inc., a man who took games in Japanese and did his best to make them interesting and readable in English. From the moment he heard of that job—taking a game and making it work as well as it possibly could in English—Andrew felt a calling nearly in his *bones* to pursue that path."[35]

Carpe Fulgar's other cofounder shares similar passions. Light-Williams has a degree in Japanese and enjoys games. Both have combined their interests in Japanese culture and language with a passion for games to create a localization company on their own. As Dice related to me, gaining the contract was not easy. They could easily communicate with the Japanese developers at EasyGameStation, but they had to work hard to convince them of their technical ability to get the work done.[36]

After they had the job, the process of localization began. Yet for Carpe Fulgur as for any localization team, the work of making *Recettear* presentable to Western players involved much more than basic translation. As Dice explained, they wanted to make the game accessible, keep its special qualities, and be sure that it did not feel too "foreign" for Western players. In short, they wanted to "culturalize" the game rather than simply localize it—an approach that was in line with the efforts of Smith and his team when they worked on *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* for Capcom.

As localization expert Heather Chandler elaborates, for some games "cultural specificity is necessary to the overall look and feel of the game. These types of games present localization challenges because the localized versions need to convey the character's intent, way of talking, and interaction with the game world to a foreign audience, without removing the uniquely regional characteristics that add to the game's flavor."[37] Dice took such an approach with *Recettear*, which was produced by Japanese developers but was situated in a "faux-France setting." Dice changed some of the food references that would seem incongruous with the setting—such as "characters talking about sukiyaki like it was the most common thing in the world."[38]

Figure 5.6
Recettear kept some of the faux-French atmosphere of the original.

He explained that although Japanese players might not see such food references as incompatible with the French setting, for Western players too many such references would be "immersion breaking" and would pull the player out of the experience—seeing Japanese food in faux-France via the English language would be one addition too many (figure 5.6).

Overall, Carpe Fulgur tried to keep the experience as close to the original as possible and made no changes to gameplay or specific mechanics. To some players (and perhaps game developers), any changes to a game are unacceptable, particularly if one sees games as an artistic form with authorial intent tied to dialogue, visuals, narrative, and other elements that could be changed. In support of adaptation rather than strict translation, Francesca Di Marco writes that

the customization of the text can be considered appropriate only when it helps to maintain the underlying textual intention of the original source. In other words, the aim of localization is not to produce literal equivalence of the original text, but

rather to create the same effect in the game experience for the player as the original text sought to create.[39]

Although individual developers and localizers may vary on their stances toward localization, culturalization, and strict translations, for most commercial developers the opportunity to reach a wider audience has generally trumped the wish to remain faithful to an original that may still be incomprehensible to outsiders, even after translation.[40]

Carpe Fulgur was intent on remaining faithful to the original but also wanted to professionalize its practices relative to releasing and selling the game in the West. It acquired the rights to distribute the game digitally and yet had no preestablished channels to do so and no prior credits as localizers on which to draw for recognition. The company strategically decided not to post a patch file for the game on a fan site or sell a version of the game on its website. Instead, it decided to "come out swinging as hard as we could" via the various affordances of the Internet. Dice cultivated an interest in the project via Western-based anime and game fan sites such as RPGamer.com and Silicon Era, releasing regular news about the project and giving in-depth interviews about the game's status and details about the localization process.

Here we can see how Carpe Fulgur was targeting its core market. Although a service such as Steam would put the game on a much larger virtual shelf than a simple website, the game still could get lost there, given the number of games that Steam regularly releases. So promotion and marketing of the game was done through fan networks, including sites like Silicon Era. Featuring news, interviews, and features centered on Japanese videogames, the site was a logical fit to promote the game and the company Carpe Fulgur itself. Regular readers of such sites would be well versed in the contemporary Japanese gaming scene, beyond major releases from companies like Square Enix and Capcom. By promoting the game on Silicon Era, Dice stoked interest in a game via a channel that was created by and gathered together a group of the game's most likely future players.

Continuing with that strategy, Dice used his company's website and twitter account to keep interest high and in the summer of 2010 released a free demo of the game. As he explains, that demo was likely instrumental in Carpe Fulgur's eventual contract with Steam, which then agreed to carry the game. That exposure was huge—and guaranteed an even wider audience than the company had reached via other means. Carpe Fulgur created

a professionally localized, licensed version of a JRPG and also pursued digital distribution deals that ensured official, wider interest in the game.

Many of the actions that Dice and Carpe Fulgur took never would have been possible without the growth of multiple channels that have developed over the years (including videogame, anime, and manga fan networks online), which enabled them to meet and begin their collaborations across great distances. When Dice and Light-Williams first created their company, they had never met in person, although Dice has since then moved to Oregon to work more closely with his business partner. Carpe Fulgur may have been started by two individuals who had a great interest in Japanese interactive entertainment, but it drew on and skillfully used fan networks and digital distribution outlets to create a new type of product—officially licensed fan products. They chose a game that had been created by individuals much like themselves—a small indie company that made a well-crafted game sold via alternative markets, never destined for AAA status or sales. We can see the evolution of indie localizers as they become more savvy and sophisticated in their responses to popular media and the growing opportunities offered by digital distribution.

Indie Localizers: Bridging That "Last Mile" of Connectivity

Carpe Fulgur worked to overcome the divide or gap that existed between the Japanese version of *Recettear* and potential Western players of an English-language *Recettear*. In doing so, the company's actions could be seen in another way—as overcoming a cultural "last mile." The last mile metaphor is often applied to the telecommunications industry, where overcoming gaps in service usually means spanning a spatial "last mile" in coverage to scattered, remotely placed potential customers. Although the distances can often be much more than a single mile, the concept highlights the difficulties that are involved in the "final stage of providing connectivity" from a service provider to potential customers.[41]

In studies of the last mile issue, scholars and policy makers have emphasized that one of the most challenging elements in rolling out new technologies is traveling the final step from producer to consumer. Without the ability to span that spatial gap, all effort has been basically for naught. That last mile is often expensive, however, with potential customers not easily grouped together in one easily accessible location (in game terms, not all potential players speak the same language). Historically, the last mile

problem has been focused on linking far-flung spaces, such as the dissemination of basic telephone service when stringing telephone line on poles to far-flung individuals, communities, and regions was difficult due to rough terrain and scattered homes. To gain access, some individuals had to pay for lines to be strung before they could receive service. More recently, the last mile problem has been referenced in relation to Internet access and high-speed broadband access.

This concept also can help to explain some of the activities of players who do the work of overcoming a different type of gap—and bridging it with a localization last mile of their own. Some games are large enough or successful enough that developers and publishers can finance the last mile on their own. There is enough history to ensure that customers will want the product, as Capcom concluded with its Phoenix Wright series of games. But in cases where the developer is unsure or too small to undertake such projects on its own, smaller teams also now step in and bridge that gap. Thus, indie localizers can function as service providers by taking a product and ensuring that it can reach potential consumers. The actions of Carpe Fulgur demonstrate fan activities that have been taken to the professional level—individuals who created a company, negotiated a licensing deal, and successfully localized and marketed a product from another country. Fans continue to make unlicensed, unofficial version of games, yet they also are moving into the professional domain and expanding our ideas about what fans and players can do and how they are expanding our reach to global games and media.

Selling the Item Shop

When Carpe Fulgur released *Recettear*, it announced a hope to sell 10,000 copies of the game. That would recoup the company's original investment and localization costs and give it a small cushion to fund future products. After four weeks of release, Dice announced on the company's site that Carpe Fulgur had already sold 26,000 copies of the game, far exceeding its initial hopes. Due to later bundled deals on Steam, the game has gone on to sell more than 300,000 copies. In later conversations, he added that the Western version has outsold the original Japanese title and that the money made would pay Carpe Fulgur's salaries for the next year and then some. The company entered the game in the Independent Games Festival, an annual event at the international Game Developers Conference, where

it was awarded honorable mention in the Seumas McNally Grand Prize category. In the meantime, Dice and Carpe Fulgur have successfully negotiated additional localization deals, with EasyGameStation for the title *Chantelise* as well as localization for Lizsoft's RPG *Fortune Summoner* and *This Starry Midnight We Make* from Cavyhouse.

Carpe Fulgur is only one company that is composed of a few individuals. But it reflects how some players are professionalizing by using the Internet and social media to advance their own goals and broaden the availability of niche media products. In this instance, a small United States–based company that enjoys localization worked with an equally small Japanese company to broaden its market and expand the reach of its games. Those actions were accomplished with hard work but also with tools that only recently were developed and refined—a well-known and feasible digital downloading portal, well-established fan networks, and social media that have an increasingly wide reach. Combined with a sophisticated understanding of the localization process, Carpe Fulgur bridged a localization last mile, bringing a small Japanese videogame to the Western market. Player-translators have enlarged the opportunities available to them and added diversity to the wider market of videogames at the same time.

Conclusions

This chapter has investigated the localization efforts that were involved in two quite different Japanese videogames—one released by a AAA company and one that began life in a comics market. In both cases, the localization process was a painstaking endeavor that involved careful culturalization and attention to precision and detail. Both projects demonstrate that although Western audiences desire games to be available in their language of choice and have some recognizable cultural elements, there is no need to drain the Japanese content entirely from such games. The inclusion of Japanese elements—including artifacts, popular culture references, and art styles—can be a draw for particular players and help to drive sales. In turn, those players have spurred Japanese developers to release games in the West that might have previously been deemed "too foreign," including games in the Persona series and titles like *Catherine* and *Ni No Kuni*.

Far from being noise, such elements become part of a larger pastiche that mixes together Shinto religious objects, sculptures from French artists,

Greek mythological figures, and Western 133t-speak. Culture brokers become conductors who artfully arrange these various notes and voices, letting each have some expression to work together in creating fascinating hybrids. With each iteration or localized project, the process takes another step—creating not a simple translation or derivative copy but instead a fully realized instantiation of the game that takes it in further directions, occasionally even looping back into the original.

Through these actions, indie and AAA localizers serve as last mile providers for game players. Localizers of the systems that I have described, from Japan to the West, have expanded not just where Japanese games are played but what Japanese games are and how they are made to mean. Given the freedom of wider distribution options, the access to increasingly specialized player groups, and smaller and smaller development teams, localization efforts widen the universe of digital games, pushing them across culture and language barriers and formalizing and highlighting the rich and varied experiences that Japanese developers hope them to be.

6   The Japanese Console Game Industry: Capcom and Level-5

In 2007, I attended the Tokyo Game Show, a sprawling mash-up of videogame trade show combined with fan expo for the general public. The show has run since 1996, bringing together slick marketing materials, game demos, cosplayers, fans, and the gaming press. Although the press can be both celebratory and critical in its appraisal of new games, the industry can be counted on to take the familiar role of selling the shiniest, most advanced, and most compelling games ever created. A few years after my visit, something out of the ordinary occurred. During the 2010 show, Keiji Inafune, the head of game development for the Japanese developer and publishing giant Capcom, announced that Japan's developers were "at least five years behind" their Western counterparts and that of those companies exhibiting at the show, "everyone's making awful games."[1] Less than a year later, Inafune quit his position at Capcom to start his own independent development company.

Inafune's actions were not isolated. He was one in a string of Japanese developers who expressed their unhappiness with aspects of their industry by leaving major developers and striking out on their own, often doing so with similarly bold announcements. After Capcom closed its innovative internal project Clover Studios in 2006, several of its developers left to form PlatinumGames, a studio that focused on creating new kinds of games that can reach Western markets.[2] As Tatsuya Minami, president and chief executive officer, states on the company website, "Japanese games that garner worldwide acclaim are slipping away. … We seek to ignite a Japanese games revival."[3] In 2008, Tomonobu Itagaki, creator of the Dead or Alive franchise and the renewed Ninja Gaiden series, also announced his departure from Tecmo and a year later opened his own company, Valhalla Game Studios.[4]

One potential explanation for such changes could be that frustrated designers want more creative control and attention for themselves separate from a large company and its accumulated history. But many business experts, journalists, players, and onlookers have commented on the alleged crisis in development and the need for Japanese studios to learn how to appeal more successfully to Western markets.[5]

Triple-A console titles have played a key role in the history of the videogame industry and continue to be influential, despite the broadening of the market and an increasing segmentation of game platforms and players. Japanese developers and publishers have played an important part in developing and defining that core as well as in conducting the larger business of games. Looking at global tallies for bestselling console titles, Japanese developers are a core part of that list.[6] Nintendo dominates by far with its Mario (450 million) and Super Mario (262 million) titles, Pokémon series (219 million), Wii titles (190 million), and Wii Sports games (109 million). Other Japanese franchises on the list include Tetris (125 million) and Square Enix's Final Fantasy line-up (100 million). As of late 2012, the list also includes several Western series, including The Sims (150 million), Grand Theft Auto (125 million), Call of Duty (120 million), FIFA (100 million), and Need for Speed (100 million). Other Japanese series include Enix's (now Square Enix) Dragon Quest series (57 million games), Sega's Sonic titles (70 million units), Capcom's Resident Evil/ Biohazard survival-horror series (55 million), Capcom's Street Fighter titles (33 million), and the Megaman franchise (29 million).[7] Finally, Konami's Metal Gear Solid franchise of stealth-action titles has sold more than 32 million units globally, and the industry veteran Pac-Man series from Taito has sold more than 43 million copies of various versions of the game over time.[8]

Given such historical and contemporary successes, it would be easy to believe that Japan's role in the global videogame industry is as central as ever. Yet in 2010, the year that Inafune spoke at the Tokyo Game Show, Japan's global share of the videogame market had shrunk to only 10 percent of sales, down from 50 percent in 2002.[9] Looking at more recent videogame sales charts, those changes are easy to understand. For March 28, 2015, the top-selling game in the United States, Europe, and Japan was From Software's *Bloodborne*.[10] However, striking differences emerge from the top five lists for each country or region. The United States and Europe almost mirror

one another, featuring Western console games such as Visceral Games' *Battlefield: Hardline* (which takes up two spots—for the PS4 and Xbox One versions), a Borderlands title from Texas-based Gearbox Software, and Nintendo's *Mario Party 10* for the WiiU. Japan's line-up consists of only one current-generation console game (*Bloodborne*) and only Japanese-developed titles for handheld and older console systems—Tokyo-based Artdink's *Sword Art Online: Lost Song* for the Vita/PS3, *One Piece: Kaizoku Musou 3* by Omega Force for the PS3, Square Enix's *Theatrhythm Dragon Quest* for the 3DS, and Konami's *Pro Baseball Spirits 2015* for the PS3 and Vita.

Using the top-selling charts as an indicator, game players in many countries and regions are confronted with more high-quality products than ever before and increasingly exhibit preferences for the games that seem most familiar to them. Those preferences—coupled with regional lockout barriers, language and culture issues, and the always complex challenges of global business dynamics—have forced game developers and publishers to develop specialized strategies for how to best create, market, and sell games in ever more diversified regions around the globe.

This chapter explores how Japan's major console game development studios have moved from a strong early history of game development and sales to an industry allegedly on the brink of global irrelevancy. To do that, it focuses on Japanese game developers and publishers who work in the AAA (triple-A) space and have released major titles. It concentrates on companies that have made global sales a priority as evidenced by creating detailed localizations, doing global marketing, establishing branch offices abroad, or working with or purchasing foreign studios. This means that a fairly large piece of the Japanese industry is left out of this discussion, but what this chapter sacrifices in greater representativeness, it gains in a deeper, more sustained examination of a smaller piece of the puzzle.

Twenty years ago, "the Japanese game industry" meant Nintendo, Square, Enix, Capcom, and a handful of other large developers and publishers in Japan that created and published the lion's share of console games that were played in Japan, North America, and Europe. In the process of also dominating the production of home consoles and handheld systems, these companies became the face of games in and from Japan—broadly influential in defining the culture of games and game design. Today in Japan (and elsewhere), the industry is much more fragmented and is rapidly evolving in response to such pressures.

In addition to hardware manufacturers and core game developers, the game industry includes mobile game development, online and social games, and indies such as those that sell via the fan-centered Comic Market in Tokyo. Such companies are in the more precarious position of often having a global exposure that is reliant on the work of fan networks rather than international publishing deals. Japanese game developers also now increasingly work with Chinese and Korean firms to release games in Asia because it allows them to gain access to markets previously denied to them (South Korea) and to emerging markets with large numbers of potential players (China). They also are partnering with or acquiring large Western studios such as Ninja Theory and Eidos to gain quicker access to Western markets, diversify their line-ups, and increase profits.

To conceptualize the Japanese game industry now means considering both the Comic Market–born and indie-localized Japanese role-playing game *Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale* in conjunction with Capcom's franchised megagames like the survival/horror-themed *Resident Evil* 6. The scope and influence of such projects are magnitudes apart, but because they both make contributions to contemporary game culture in interesting and important ways, both need to be understood as elements of that history. At the same time, acknowledging this also means acknowledging the futility of being able to say "this" is the state of the Japanese game industry. Instead, this chapter examines two companies—Capcom and Level-5. It compares the operations of a more traditional game publisher and developer with a comparatively younger and smaller company that has been remarkably successful despite claiming not to make extensive efforts to create games for Western audiences. They exert multiple forms of influence on different pockets of players. They have a variety of styles, games, and ways of doing business. Yet to some degree, both grapple with the same questions: Who is our audience, and who do we want it to be? What are we doing to reach them, and how could we do it better?

An Abbreviated History of Japanese Game Companies

To start exploring the complexities of the contemporary Japanese videogame industry, we need to revisit the industry's origins to see how it developed and how markets, beliefs, and practices have changed over time. The goal is not to provide a comprehensive historical narrative but instead

to determine how game companies started thinking about themselves as actors in a global industry. That includes how Japanese companies began to define themselves as both competitors and partners with Western game companies and also as sellers to a global audience of game players with different tastes, cultural contexts, and gameplaying backgrounds.

One difference between Japanese and Western developers is historical. Western game developers and publishers have tended to have backgrounds in software development or in game development or publishing firms that focus mainly on games. Japanese game companies can be much more diverse in terms of holdings (such as *pachinko* machines, health clubs, and other leisure-centered pursuits), revenue streams, and opportunities for synergies and growth. Those diverse portfolios may have helped them create successful media mixes around games or other properties that sold well, but they also tended to limit them to Japanese markets for all but the most globally popular brands, such as Pokémon or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

From Playing Cards to Digital Gorillas: The Role of Nintendo

It is impossible to discuss the history of Japanese games and the industry's development without acknowledging Nintendo's role in several key areas—helping to establish the console game industry in Japan, revitalizing sales of videogames and consoles in the West, and continuously innovating how the industry defined what counted as console systems and appropriate markets. Despite calls over the years for Nintendo to leave the hardware business or complaints that it has abandoned the core market in favor of a casual one, the company continues to help define what games are, how they might be played, and who should play them.[11]

Despite its well-known history as a playing card company, Nintendo was innovating its toys and electronics offerings long before the Famicom. As early as 1964, the company had built shooting games using optical sensors, which led to a partnership with Magnavox in 1975 to produce a game system in Japan that played a variant of Pong.[12] Even with those early innovations, the Famicom "was in fact a latecomer behind Tommy and Bandai … Japan's major toy companies."[13] Bandai had already released its own console—the Super Vision 8000—in 1979, which failed allegedly due to its high price (approximately $560 USD), and Bandai soon dropped support for the system in favor of becoming a distributor for Mattel's Intellivision in 1982.[14] Nintendo ultimately succeeded and became dominant domestically

because of "price competitiveness, initial alliances with hit arcade video games, as well as its ability to deliver original mega-hit software such as 'Super Mario Brothers.'"[15] Nintendo then took that dominance, its knowledge, and a technologically advanced system overseas to broaden its markets and create global demand for its consoles and games.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Nintendo carefully reintroduced games and consoles into American households and into the wider Western cultural imagination. In its annual report from 1991, Nintendo boasted of its dominance in the world of console gaming, claiming that over 48 million Famicom/NES units had been sold globally and that 40 percent of Japanese and 30 percent of U.S. "television households" had such systems. In 1992, Nintendo proclaimed that "almost half of the 20 million primary GameBoy players are 18 or older" and that "women and girls are almost as likely to be frequent players as men and boys."[16] During that period, Nintendo's console systems and game characters (such as Zelda and Mario) were household names around the world. Nintendo also played a key role in developing brands beyond its own titles, acknowledging the need for diversity in what could be played via its NES and Famicom hardware. The company was shrewd in its dealings with third-party developers, establishing relationships with software companies such as Konami, Capcom, and Square among many others. The publisher set stringent guidelines for the types of games that could be created as well as the content within them, but many of those early releases became worldwide bestsellers, many of which still remain at the top of historical sales charts.

For its initial launch in North America, Nintendo was strategic in which games would accompany the system and how the system itself would be portrayed and marketed. The original Famicom was launched in 1985 in North America as the NES. Nintendo was steering clear of the failures of Atari, opting to brand its console as an "entertainment system" rather than as a toy or a game console. Yet parents still feared the addictive qualities of the system and its role in their home.[17] Nintendo's economic success also played a role in the broader "Japan panic" of the 1980s in the United States, demonstrating "how Japan stole American ideas, improved them, and then sold them back."[18] The players did not see the console as addictive or as foreign, however. For them, there was just a game console, and Mario and Zelda were fun characters. Through the lens of time, we can see how Nintendo was both successful and unsuccessful in its attempts to erase the

"cultural odor" associated with Japanese products, based on which audience we consider. Players enthusiastically purchased and played their products, but larger cultural and social discourses about them could not evade debates about addiction, economic independence, and nationalistic pride.[19]

Nintendo also helped to establish key paratexts that generated particular understandings of not just its own games and systems but also the many other third-party games that would be played on a Nintendo system.[20] Starting with its newsletter *Nintendo Fun Club News* followed by *Nintendo Power*, the company instructed players in genre and gameplay expectations through its detailed walkthroughs and strict review formulas for rating games. Likewise, their periodicals taught players how to anticipate new releases, what cheating was, and what acceptable help with a game entailed. In these multiple ways, the company continued to set expectations and helped to define what videogames were and what a "good" videogame might be for several generations of players.

Nintendo has continued to define a core piece of the videogame market through its hardware and software development. Although many early game consoles were synonymous with the term "a Nintendo system," that dominance has eroded. Facing Japanese challengers including Sega and Sony and U.S. companies such as Microsoft, Nintendo has worked to keep its hardware systems profitable alongside its software releases. Responding to the shrinking market share over the years of its Nintendo 64 system (a cartridge-based console that was released to compete with Sony's CD-based PlayStation) and GameCube (criticized for its weaker game library compared to other systems), the company decided to reenvision what it saw as its own core market with the development and release of the Wii (and then the WiiU).

Rather than focus on expanding to reach underserved geographical regions or markets, Nintendo instead sought to reenvision what it meant to play videogames in the home. The company was interested in attracting individuals who did not consider themselves gamers or who perhaps did in the past but had stopped playing for various reasons. Through a careful campaign that showcased its innovative motion controls and haptic-focused gameplay, the company succeeded in making its system part of family and group play. In a way, it circled back to its roots as a company that focused on social entertainment, originally achieved with playing cards, toys, board games, and other amusements.[21] Looking at images of early
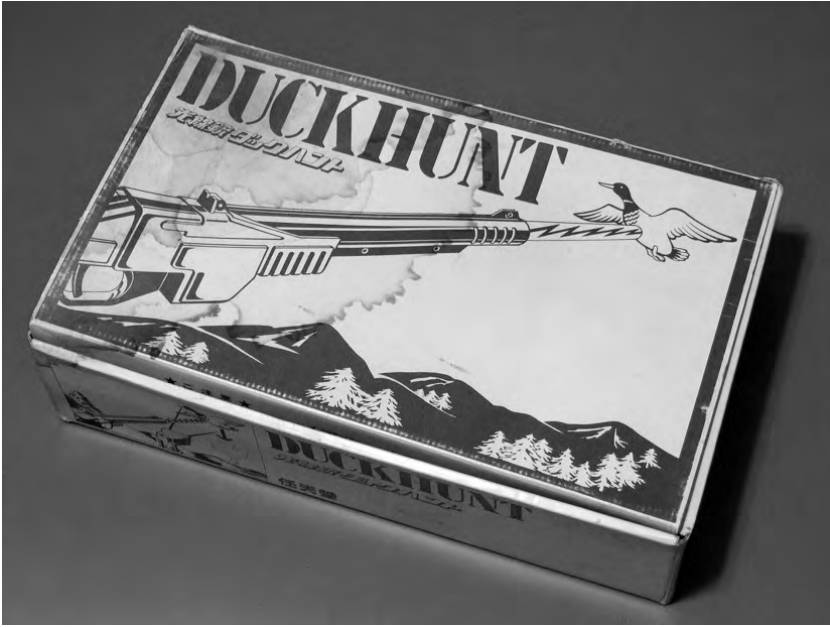
Figure 6.1
Duck Hunt from Nintendo. Screenshot of ebay item for sale.

Nintendo products, we can see that its construction of a market was more diverse than core gamers of a particular age and gender. Varied and colorful, the images often depicted children, adults, and families in equal measure. For example, in the 1970s, the company sold both basic and deluxe playing cards that featured Japanese images and popular culture brands including Disney as well as board games for adults and children, electronic games for arcades, and toys such as an analog version of *Duck Hunt* released in 1976 (figure 6.1). The title actually predated the videogame version and featured a realistic-looking toy rifle and virtual birds created by Gunpei Yokoi, future creator of the Game & Watch and Game Boy systems.[22]

Although Nintendo was perhaps returning to some core ideas about the role of games in the home and among friends and family, the social context (at least in the West) was very different. Japan was no longer an economic powerhouse to be feared. Japan experienced its own financial difficulties, including a recession in the 1990s, and Nintendo was in a different position compared to the rest of the game industry. Because of the relative failure

of the Nintendo 64 and GameCube, it had to reestablish its relevance in the console arena. Rather than trying to compete with the technological advancements of the PS3 or Xbox 360, Nintendo instead returned to its initial focus—promoting family entertainment rather than simply a hardcore system. It rethought the system, the marketing, and the audience. To bring in new types of players, the company promoted the Wii via the award-winning "Wii would like to play" advertising campaign. Costing more than $200 million, the ads feature two Japanese men who were driving around the United States in a Smart car and visiting the homes of diverse American families to show them (new) ways to play games such as *Wii Sports* and *Madden NFL07*. That campaign stands in contrast to earlier efforts by Nintendo to introduce its systems in North America by downplaying the foreignness of their origins. The Japaneseness of the system is not erased but instead becomes a feature, with seemingly nonthreatening Japanese men, a silly-looking car, bright colors, and families taking center stage. They introduce American families to a very different kind of videogame console—one that is decidedly not like an Xbox or PlayStation. The campaign worked, and the Wii went on to sell nearly 100 million units worldwide,[23] outselling both the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 and bringing new and lapsed players into gaming.

Handheld Systems

Any discussion of Nintendo's influence over game hardware and the game industry generally requires at least a brief mention of its handheld systems. Beginning with the Gameboy portable system released in 1989, Nintendo has withstood challenges and competition from different arenas to maintain a dominant position in this market. Moving from the Gameboy to the Gameboy Color, the Gameboy Advance, the DS, DS Lite, DSi, 3DS, and the 2DS, Nintendo has consistently created systems that define portable and handheld gameplay. Despite competition from Atari, Sony, and other companies, Nintendo continues to dominate this field and be almost synonymous with handheld gameplay, at least until mobile play started to become popular. Sales figures for Nintendo systems along with their attach rates (the average number of games bought per system) demonstrate the long reach of the company and its continuing influence (table 6.1).

Although handheld systems (created by Nintendo or other companies) have sold well globally, an interesting and key disparity has emerged.

Table 6.1
Nintendo's lifetime hardware and software sales, 1983 to 2015

Console	Units of hardware sold	Units of software sold	Attach rate
NES/Famicom	61.91 million	500.01 million	8.08
Game Boy	118.69 million	501.11 million	4.22
SNES/Super Famicom	49.10 million	379.06 million	7.72
Nintendo 64	32.93 million	224.97 million	6.83
Game Boy Advance	81.51 million	377.42 million	4.63
GameCube	21.74 million	208.57 million	9.59
DS	153.98 million	942.32 million	6.12
Wii	100.90 million	892.34 million	8.84
3DS	42.74 million	152.29 million	3.56
Wii U	5.86 million	29.37 million	5.01

Source: Colin Moriarty, "These Are Nintendo's Lifetime Hardware and Software Numbers," *IGN*, January 29, 2014, accessed July 2, 2014, http://ca.ign.com/articles/2014/01/29/these-are-nintendos-lifetime-hardware-and-software-numbers.

Handheld systems are far more popular in Japan than in North America or Europe (which prefer consoles), and Japanese players are more likely to prefer games on portable rather than console systems. According to one site, of the approximately 154 million Nintendo DS units sold over its lifetime, 57 million were sold in North America, 52 million in Europe, and 33 million in Japan.[24] North America is estimated to have a population of 528 million, and Japan has 127 million people, so roughly 11 percent versus 26 percent of each population have that system. Even more telling are sales of the Nintendo 3DS, which sold 13.5 million units in North America, 12.6 million in Europe, and 15.6 million in Japan (despite a smaller population). In contrast, the Wii sold slightly more than 45 million units in North America, 33.75 million in Europe, and only 12.76 million units in Japan. Finally, the PlayStation 3 sold 28.48 million systems in North America, 32.98 million in Europe, and just under 10 million systems in Japan.[25] Tying those numbers to game sales, for the week ending May 17, 2014, the top ten games in the United States featured eight console games and two handheld (3DS) games. In Japan, the numbers are practically reversed—three console titles and seven handheld titles. Of handheld games that were sold in Japan, five were on the 3DS, and two were for the PlayStation Vita. Nintendo continues to

release first-party titles for its systems, including four on the Japanese list—Mario Gold: World Tour (3DS), Mario Party Island Tour (3DS), New Super Mario Bros U (Wii U), and Wii Party U (Wii U).

Despite Nintendo's influence and reach, it struggles with various systems and games: currently, the Wii U not is meeting sales targets (see table 6.1), and in the past, the Nintendo 64 and the GameCube presented challenges. Just as Nintendo continually reinvents and reestablishes its role in the industry, other Japanese developers also continuously work to sell their products to an increasingly diverse and sophisticated group of players. To gain a better perspective on those development activities, I next examine two companies and their ongoing strategies for global success.

The Traditional Software Giant Capcom: Mega Man, Resident Evil, and Okami

Capcom first started manufacturing and distributing electronic game machines in 1979 and incorporated in 1983. In 1985, the company opened Capcom USA, and it currently has offices in Japan, the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Hong Kong. The company's name is derived from "capsule computer," which signified that the company's games were protected by a tough exterior shell that would be difficult or impossible to crack by pirates and also that each game machine was "a container packed to the brim with fun."[26]

Many videogame players know the company best for its long-running franchises that span a variety of genres and gameplay styles. Such series usually have come from original intellectual property that was developed and published within the company itself and that has been carefully nurtured and developed over the decades. Yet the company also has roots in related businesses. Capcom has continued to develop its console games and created separate divisions for arcade game development, arcade game rentals and storefronts, and the development and sales of *pachinko* and *pachislo* (a form of *pachinko* combined with slots) machines.

Company History and Global Strategies Two of Capcom's earliest hit series began with the platformer game *Mega Man* (known as *Rockman* or ロックマン, *Rokkuman*, in Japan) and the fighting game *Street Fighter*. Both were created in 1987 and were successful enough to result in multiple sequels and related titles. The company has gone on to create additional franchises, including

the survival horror line known as Biohazard in Japan and Resident Evil elsewhere, the fighting game mashup Marvel vs. Capcom series, the action-adventure–focused series Devil May Cry, the survival-horror–themed series Dead Rising, and the shooter series Lost Planet. Smaller lines that have gained critical success include the Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney, Viewtiful Joe, and Okami series. Game developers and publishers in Japan have followed different paths to success, with Capcom placing greatest emphasis on its long-running and newly developing game franchises.

Capcom has invested large amounts of time and money in those franchises, which comprise the core of its game development and publishing activities. As its head of consumer games business segment, Katsuhiko Ichii, explains, "Capcom's brands are the foundation of our company and our most valuable asset."[27] That is largely true. For example, the long-running Resident Evil franchise has sold more than 56 million units, and seventy-nine titles related to the brand have been released as of this writing.[28] Over the life of the series (1996 to the present), games have sold well in Japan, North America, and Europe. As table 6.2 shows, the survival horror-themed series is broadly appealing (table 6.2).

Such figures can tell us a few things about the series and Capcom's strategies. First, the company has placed a premium on having the game be a

Table 6.2
Resident Evil sales figures, 1996 to 2012 (in millions of units sold).

Title	Year	System	North America	Europe	Japan	Rest of the world	Total
Resident Evil	1996	PS	2.05	1.16	1.11	.73	5.05
Resident Evil 2	1998	PS	1.88	1.47	2.02	.45	5.82
Resident Evil 3: Nemesis	1999	PS	1.30	.77	1.54	.11	3.72
Resident Evil 4 (all)	2005–2011	PS2/Wii/GC	4.32	1.78	.81	.51	7.43
Resident Evil 5	2009	X360	1.96	.87	.12	.33	3.29
Resident Evil 5	2009	PS3	1.83	1.31	1.07	.61	4.83
Resident Evil 6	2012	PS3	.62	.60	.84	.25	2.31
Resident Evil 6	2012	X360	.84	.47	.04	.14	1.49

Source: Resident Evil sales figures, *VGChartz,* accessed July 2, 2014, http://www.vgchartz.com/gamedb/?name=resident+evil.

global seller. Sales differ by system. For example the Xbox 360 version of *Resident Evil 5* sold almost 2 million copies in North America compared to 120,000 in Japan, and the PS3 version of the same game sold 1.83 million units in North America and 1.07 million in Japan. The numbers also demonstrate that North America is too big a market to ignore, with Europe another critical part of the equation. Requiring more than six hundred staff members and several years to complete, the multiple-million-dollar price tag for a triple-A game in the Resident Evil series demands sales beyond one territory.

These concerns are not lost on Capcom, which appears determined to build franchises that can either appeal across multiple markets or are strong enough to compensate for deficiencies elsewhere. The company supports a game like *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite*, released for the PSP in 2008–2009, which sold more than 5 million copies, although 77 percent of those sales came from Japan. Capcom also creates titles that appeal more in the West than in Japan. The Devil May Cry (2001 to the present) series of games has sold more than 14 million copies (table 6.3). Although Japanese players have not ignored the series, it is a stronger seller in North America and Europe based on raw numbers, despite achieving relative success based on the different sizes of each market involved. Such successes also highlight Capcom's concerns for proper localization of games but also ensures that Western players are catered to through what is deemed to be "relevant" game design. Capcom's success has been built on the creation of its own intellectual property—franchises—that have been nurtured over the years. Even though there are only six central titles in the Resident Evil line-up, there are seventy-nine titles across platforms, genres, and history, which

Table 6.3
Devil May Cry series sales figures, 2001 to 2015.

Region	Units sold (in millions)
North America	6.58
Europe	4.36
Japan	2.23
Rest of the world	1.38
Total	14.54

Source: Devil May Cry sales figures, *VGChartz*, accessed May 22, 2015, http://www.vgchartz.com/gamedb/?name=devil+may+cry.

demonstrates the seriousness with which Capcom sees its brands and the lengths it will go to profit from them.

Before exploring how Capcom has attempted to keep its Western players happy, it is useful to detour briefly through a period in Capcom's history when it was interested in design innovation and risk taking and not simply in megafranchises with well-known gameplay styles.

The Curious Case of Clover   Despite Capcom's reputation for multiple long-running series of recognizably branded games, the company has made forays into more experimental approaches to games, which explore new forms of gameplay, creative innovation, and technical achievement. One such notable project was the creation of Clover Studio. Within Capcom's umbrella, there existed—from 2004 to 2007—a unit named Clover Studio Limited that was given great creative freedom to tackle new projects. As explained in an annual report from 2004, the studio was spun off from the research and development department "to create new genres and original titles."[29] Similar to certain production teams at Sega,[30] the developers at Clover were given license to pursue smaller projects that pushed at the boundaries of what typical videogames were supposed to be.

Clover's games included *Viewtiful Joe 2*, *Okami*, and *Godhand*. Clover also handled the port of the original *Viewtiful Joe* from the GameCube to the PlayStation 2. Each of the games was innovative in its own way—including graphical styles, hybrid genre mashups, and game content. For example, *Okami* draws from Japanese mythology to put the player in the role of the sun god Amaterasu, the white wolf who must defeat evil spirits and heal the land. The game received widespread attention for its woodcut, watercolor style, cel-shaded artwork, which complemented one of the game's central features—the use of a "celestial brush" that the player manipulated to draw *kanji*-like characters that unleashed Amaterasu's various special abilities. The combination of Japanese history, mythology, traditional art styles, and musical elements made the game stand out, and it was a critical success, ultimately leading to later ports to the handheld Nintendo DS system (which allowed players to "draw" more realistically via style and touchscreen) and a sequel of sorts featuring a younger white wolf.

Yet despite their innovations, sales of Clover's games were disappointing to Capcom, and the experiment of having a quasi-independent studio exist within the larger company quickly ended. *Okami* reportedly sold

approximately 630,000 copies in North America and Japan,[31] and *Viewtiful Joe* sold between 321,000 and 600,000 copies, depending on the source consulted.[32] The final game released by Clover was the hardcore friendly, beat 'em up game *God Hand*, which sold only modestly in Japan, approximately 60,000 copies by the end of 2006.[33] Only days after the game's release in North America late in 2007, Capcom announced that it was closing Clover to focus resources in other areas of the company. One critic aptly concluded that "we like our illusions that everyone likes to make good games, sales be damned, but laid out in stark black and white is the truth of the gaming industry: Publishers will cut away the developers that don't produce games that make them money."[34] Even if such criticisms ring true, we should acknowledge that Capcom did take risks that the larger game-buying public refused to reward. In spite of critical success and high-quality productions, players perhaps proved just as conservative as Capcom in their tastes for games, globally as well as locally.

Return to the Global   Instead of offering greater creative freedom to small teams to drive the company's future, Capcom's focus has returned to stricter internal control in the creation and maintenance of broadly appealing game franchises. In addition to its ongoing commitment to keeping early franchise development internal, the company has sought outside help for global appeal after a franchise is established, although its commitment to that model is not absolute. The company uses those partnerships in a strategic way to outsource development of its many game sequels after a brand (such as Resident Evil) has been firmly established. But Capcom reassures its stakeholders that although Western studios can handle sequels, the creation of new intellectual property continues to "be done in house."[35] Those efforts are different from localization or translation work. Instead, game design concepts and gameplay itself are rethought on a fundamental level, with Western studios recruited in the hopes that they will make those elements more welcoming or familiar to Western players—although familiarity is often a moving target.

For example, Capcom turned to Western studios to develop sequels for games in its Lost Planet and Devil May Cry series to boost their global appeal. With the Devil May Cry title *DmC*, Capcom partnered with UK studio Ninja Theory, which had experience in developing action adventure titles including *Enslaved* and *Heavenly Sword*. The move was intended to

give the game both a "Western feel" and a "unique sense of cool."[36] The British studio was open about its need to do research into "current fashion trends, street art, popular music and today's attitudes to apply some 'freshness to the series.'"[37] If even Western studios must research music and fashion styles, how are they different from a Japanese studio that also lacks that knowledge? One answer is that Western studios are recruited for their approach to the "feel" of game mechanics, which are believed to be another point of difference. In the case of Ninja Theory, a Western developer is used to broaden the appeal of *DmC* through a revision of its avatar movement style (among other elements). One of the game's developers explained that

Western games tend to focus a lot on realism in animation, so that, if you're walking along and you stop, you should go through a natural and proper stop animation. Which tends to look very good. But, when we're talking about something like *Devil May Cry*, the concept has always been letting the user do what they want when they want—cancel things in mid-motion and suddenly turn on a dime, this sort of thing.[38]

In some ways, this discussion echoes debates about the differences between limited and full animation in the anime industry. Writing about that history, Marc Steinberg explains that both methods have historically been used in Japan and the United States, with full animation best exemplified by "Disney's work of the mid-1930s onward, stressing fluid motion and a realist aesthetic."[39] Full animation demands many more drawings per second to achieve fluid movement, making production costs high. In contrast, limited animation relies on fewer drawings in between key frames and results in "the minimization of movement, the extensive use of still images and unique rhythms of movement and mobility."[40] Much Japanese television anime relies on limited animation techniques to keep down production costs, and the visual aesthetic produced is one that viewers have come to expect. Japanese viewers are therefore familiar with both styles, having consumed a variety of media forms, from childhood through adult viewing, that feature them. In contrast, North American adult videogame players (and their creators) do not have a cultural background that encompasses extensive anime or animation viewing in general,[41] with much more of popular media focused on photorealism as a visual style. Bringing this back to videogames styles, we can see how the limited animation techniques for avatars found in Japanese videogames like those in the early Devil May Cry

series are more in parallel with the style of Japanese anime. To meet the differing North American demands for full animation of avatars, a style needs to be changed, and a new team that has more of that kind of experience needs to be engaged.

In this case, the change was not about content (fashion, slang, or musical choices that could be looked up). Instead, it was about a particular tuning or design of the gameplay. The element in question pertains to the "feel" of the game, and the need for a change suggests that players from diverse backgrounds might have different proclivities for varying styles, which they have developed via different games over their own play histories. The game was turned over to Ninja Theory to maintain and even increase its Western audience. No mention is made of the interests of Japanese players, who must apparently accept the changes to the franchise. Those players and the Japanese market as a whole are no longer important enough to cater to on its own.

Additionally, consider the use of the word *good* in the quote above. It suggests that to Western eyes, the Japanese version of avatar movement does not look *as good*. It is not natural or proper. It isn't realistic *enough*. Those value judgments have always played a part in evaluations of anime. Thomas Lamarre pointed out that "full animation is frequently treated as *the* art of animation, while limited animation is seen as cheap and slapdash."[42] It therefore is no surprise that videogame animations would be similarly characterized. The difference becomes one of culture rather than technical style (otherwise why hire a Western studio?) and is treated as a symptom of the Japaneseness of the game: it has not realistic *enough*, and a Western studio must be brought in to make a change. Capcom employed a Western studio to develop movement styles and animations that were more in line with what Western players have been taught to expect from Western studios and their particular style of avatar movement: a Japanese studio could not do this work.

This type of value judgment is reminiscent of debates about the differences between Western developers' almost single-minded focus on creating photorealistic graphics in games and Japanese studios' reliance on Japanese art styles found in manga and anime. In the early days of game development, the art styles of most games could be perceived as more similar due to graphical and computing constraints. But as game creators gained greater processing power, the race for high-definition images in the West has been

much more pronounced, and many Western players have been taught to demand more *photorealistic* graphics from the games they play. Offerings like *Okami* and *Viewtiful Joe*, which feature colorful and alternate takes on visual aesthetics, struggle to find an audience outside of critical circles and the few players who are willing to look beyond photorealism. Even Nintendo cannot overcome that bias. Despite strong sales, many fans of the Zelda series derided *Wind Waker* for its use of cel-shading and more "childlike" visuals, referring to the game derisively as "Celda."[43]

Ironically, one of the early strengths of Japanese game companies may have contributed to their current difficulties. Scholars examining the emergence of Japanese companies in the videogame industry have pointed to their unique assets and skillsets as principal reasons for their early success. Yuko Aoyama and Hiro Izushi argue that Japanese companies such as Nintendo were able to draw on larger available talent pools in both design and consumer electronics engineering for the development of games and the hardware to play them.[44] Those early moves were key to growing the industry in Japan and also led platform developers such as Nintendo and later Sony to facilitate "fledgling software start-ups through financial assistance and early disclosure of platform specifications."[45]

Perhaps more important, Japan's game industry was aided by the existence of a well-established cartoon and animation industry. This allowed early companies to hire experienced artists to create games, and it led to the establishment of long-standing ties between the industries, particularly with respect to vocational schools. Aoyama and Izushi explain that "practitioners in the industry often serve as instructors, and occasionally students are hired [as] part-time workers, an entry-way for full time employment later."[46] Additionally, some companies initially set up their own training schools, including the Digital Entertainment Academy in Tokyo and Konami's Konami Computer Entertainment School with locations in Tokyo and Osaka,[47] all of which now appear to be closed or have suspended operations. Such early links and strengths were invaluable for helping to launch the industry in Japan, particularly in considering the logical link between the less photorealistic art styles associated with manga and the limited graphical capabilities offered by early console platforms.

As consoles increased their processing power and Western development studios took advantage of the increase in polygon capabilities for games, Japanese developers did not always follow suit. Many continued to rely on

more traditional visual techniques and assumed that Japanese cultural preferences for anime-style graphics would continue to be popular worldwide. Unfortunately, those assumptions proved false, and Japanese companies have had to adapt to a wider palette of tastes or plan for more limited sales abroad.

In the case of *DmC*, the game initially topped various sales charts, and in its first week of release in the United Kingdom, it was number one in the charts, beating *FIFA 13*,[48] despite other reports stating that the game had sold "just a third of the amount" that the series' prior game, *Devil May Cry 4*, achieved in 2008.[49] Overall, the game failed to perform well, and Capcom revised its estimates downward from an anticipated 2 million copies to 1.15 million units worldwide.[50]

Despite weak sales, Western reviews of the game generally have been positive, viewing the game as an interesting reboot of the franchise and praising Ninja Theory for a job well done. Most mainstream reviewers do not draw explicit comparisons between Western and Eastern design decisions, although a few comment on how the game's redesign made it a more "authentically" Western production. Kotaku's Evan Narcisse called the game "excellent" and draws attention to the shift in development origins, writing that "the original set of games—produced exclusively in Japan—focused on a particular strain of *otaku* cool. There was flair, yes, but more than a little cheese as well. Old-school Dante looked like a refugee from a 1980s hair-metal band."[51] In this case, Ninja Theory has done its promised homework on fashion and culture, replacing a Dante that was tone deaf to fashion styles with a new, cooler, and more aware version. Narcisse extolls various aspects of the game, concluding that "this game updates the elements of the Devil May formula—combat flow, maximizing a moveset in a personalized way and slashing around biblically influenced lore—to make it feel like it belongs in the present day." Apart from leaving us wondering how "biblically influenced lore" can truly feel like it belongs in the present day, this review reveals a few things. The comment that *DmC* now "belongs in the present day" is telling, suggesting perhaps that the new visual style combined with redesigned gameplay elements keep the game from feeling stale and being caught in the 1980s moment that Japanese designers originally created. The message is that successful design is progressive and that Western designers are good at updating older Japanese efforts for better gameplay experiences.

Reviewer Darryn Bonthuys of Lazygamer.net goes further and dismisses all prior installments in the series with his review of the reboot. Arguing that this is a game that "puts previous instalments [sic] in the franchise to shame," he praises Ninja Theory for creating a game that is "far more believable, and easier to identify with" for the presumed Western player, compared to prior installments from Capcom.[52] Bonthuys also highlights that the game is "distinctly western in the design department, as the world … combines imagination with gritty reflection, before hitting a patriotic web of the demon-infested internet or the shallow pop-laden arena of a nightclub from hell." Although he does not elaborate further, presumably it's the patriotic elements that are distinctly Western because there are nightclubs and Internet in both Japan and the West and "gritty" design can be found in many popular anime (such as the 2013 Attack on Titan series, based on the 2009 manga created by Hajime Isayama). That only leaves the (still) unspecified "patriotic" elements as the distinguishing marker of West versus East. Finally, Bonthuys concludes that "if you're stupid enough to dismiss this as a bad DMC game because it's too shallow for your tastes or not Japanese enough, then you're also being ignorant and too dismissive to appreciate a damn good action game." He makes an interesting point that some fans may feel that such changes have removed the Japanese feel of the series, although apparently such concerns are "stupid" because the game is "damn good."

Lost Planet 3   With *Lost Planet 3*, Capcom took a similar approach, partnering one of its own teams in Osaka with California-based Spark Studios to create the title. The first two games in the series were made in Japan, yet the majority of sales came from North America and Europe, albeit with poor reviews and fewer sales for the second game. Capcom felt that changes were needed to reinvigorate the series and again formed a partnership to remake the franchise.[53]

That decision was made for a variety of reasons, as was the particular choice of Spark as the chosen studio. One possible explanation is mercenary. Spark's recent efforts were *Legendary* and *Turning Point: Fall of Liberty*, both of which received negative reviews and had not sold well, and so the studio probably would be cheaper to hire. Not all companies wish to work within the constraints of another corporation's intellectual property, but a prototype that the company showed to Capcom executives

demonstrated their willingness and ultimately sealed the deal.[54] A key element of that prototype was the "implementation of a third-person camera. Not character designs, not boss encounters, not a particular gameplay movement—instead the camera's exact angle and placement. How it handled going up and down stairs. How it reacted to action-filled moments."[55] The tech skills that Spark displayed were notable, but the company had to design more than a superior three-dimensional camera for the franchise's third offering.

According to project lead Andrew Szymanski, Capcom wanted a Western studio in part because "it would be great to work with a Western partner to take some of that know-how about characterization and dialogue and everything and bring it in" to the newest iteration of the series.[56] However, reviews of *Fall of Liberty* call into question just how much know-how the studio had with characterization and dialogue. One *IGN* review criticized "the game's thin, trite narrative," which "falls flat" and is an example of "a great idea poorly executed."[57]

Developers often have specialties in one area or another, but the differences here are seen as cultural: the Western studio offers characters and dialogue, and the Japanese studio that supported them "would play the builds and offer feedback."[58] Spark's alleged skills shifted: its 3D engine skills got them the job, and their Western talent for storytelling (however tenuous) propelled development forward.

Employing Western studios is not always successful, which Capcom (again) discovered after the release of *Lost Planet 3*. The game earned low ratings and poor critical reviews, and Capcom reported that sales for the title were "below expectations" in a year-end financial report.[59] One reviewer characterized it as being "a tremendously boring game masquerading as a slightly interesting one" and as containing levels strung together with objectives based on "flimsy narrative pretexts."[60] Although games from North American developers can be poorly reviewed, games created by Japanese developers are often positioned as fundamentally different—particularly as nonserious—when compared to Western games. Talking about the first two Lost Planet titles, David Szymanski describes them as taking "the Japanese, non-realistic, almost-ludicrously stylized aesthetic—ludicrous in a good way—and [they] just happened to have guns."[61] Although Japanese games have a history of global popularity, in this case they are reduced to being defined as ludicrous—as far from what a "real" game could or should

be. That kind of positioning sets Japanese games apart. They are fundamentally different and cannot really be translated. Instead, Western developers must be hired to rethink what a game or a series should be, to (try to) make them more real (and acceptable) for Western players.

Other Partnerships and Collaborations Consistent with past efforts to maximize the number of titles associated with strongly performing franchises, Capcom plans to increase the number of titles released each year but to limit the size of development teams to one hundred members "with multiple sequel titles developed at the same time."[62] To accomplish this, Capcom will increase its workforce by adding a thousand new developers through 2023[63] and pursuing acquisitions and partnerships "for the purposes of creating game content with universal market appeal and acquiring technologies and know-how required for our 'Single Content Multiple Usage' strategy."[64] Yet mergers with large Japanese companies are not considered optimal because they would not contribute to overseas sales—the area where growth is vital.

Despite such efforts, Capcom's most recent financial results have been disappointing for the company. Reporting in May 2015 for its latest fiscal year, which ended March 31, the company announced that its revenue was down "37.1 percent from the previous year," which is also Capcom's "lowest yearly revenue figure since 2004."[65] However, the company remains optimistic about its future plans, which include continuing the Monster Hunter franchise and diversifying its distribution channels with more "digitally delivered content."[66] The company is constantly reevaluating its partnerships with Western studios for its high-profile games as it determines "what they can do to remain relevant"[67] and how to use their own development teams alongside Western partners to keep their games circulating beyond the narrowing borders of Japan.

Level-5 Studios

Capcom was founded in 1979 in Japan and incorporated in 1983, so it could be characterized as a well-established developer and publisher. Level-5 is a comparative newcomer to the videogame industry. The company opened nearly two decades after Capcom—in 1998—with a handful of workers, but as of late 2012, Level-5 employed approximately three hundred employees in offices in Fukuoka, Tokyo, and Santa Monica, California. The company

was started by Akihiro Hino, a programmer with experience working on PlayStation titles at developer Riverhillsoft. Hino wanted greater creative control over the games that he was building, so he started his own company. The name Level-5 is based on the grading system in Japanese primary schools, where achieving level five is the top grade—the equivalent of five stars.[68] Founder Hino has also stated that no game other than *Dragon Quest III* "had ever moved me that much. … I learned that the appeal of a game isn't limited to the execution of the graphics, and that one way of making a game can move that many people, and my interest just caught fire."[69]

To help ensure his company's early success, Hino struck a publishing deal with Sony Online Entertainment to make several games for the PlayStation 2, including an exclusive launch title.[70] The publishing deal tied Level-5's fortunes to publishing with Sony and developing games for the PlayStation 2 console. Hino chose to return to the genre that had influenced him as a child—the role-playing game. *Dark Cloud*'s release was ultimately delayed past the system launch but nevertheless went on to sell more than 1 million units worldwide.[71] Following that success, the company continued to develop RPGs such as *Dark Cloud 2* (known as *Dark Chronicle* in Japan) and *Rogue Galaxy*, also for the PlayStation 2. The game that put the company on the map, however, was *Dragon Quest VIII*, which was developed in collaboration with Dragon Quest series founder, Yuji Horii.[72] Positive reviews of the game, strong sales, and the subsequent development of *Dragon Quest IX* for the DS cemented the company's reputation as a master of RPG-style games in Japan.

Level-5 has broadened its influence and become one of the ten largest development studios in Japan.[73] Level-5 also has taken steps to ensure greater control of its products through the establishment of its own publishing operation. Plans to do so were announced in 2006, and Level-5's first self-published title, *Professor Layton and the Curious Village*, was released in 2007 for the DS in Japan.

Similar to Capcom, Level-5 saw the value of developing its own intellectual property for games and creating series that could be iterated on extensively. With the creation of the Professor Layton franchise, Hino also saw an opportunity to appeal to a broader market of players than previous games had sold to and to reach more than simply Dragon Quest or RPG fans. The studio created a fresh visual style and modeled some gameplay elements on Nintendo's hit Brain Age series to attract casual gamers to their

"puzzle-adventure" style games.[74] Level-5 also set the Layton series in contemporary London, where lead character Hershel Layton was a professor of archeology and consummate gentleman. In doing so, Level-5 positioned the game as familiar to Western players, drawing from what one reviewer called a "European-influenced art style."[75]

The company also created additional puzzle-style games for a Japanese audience under the label Atamania, which was a "new casual games brand" and included titles such as *Professor Tago's Mental Gymnastics* and *Paul Sloane and Des MacHale's Intriguing Tales*.[76] Neither title sold extremely well, however, and although sequels in both series were released in 2009, none were released outside Japan.[77]

One of Level-5's core activities continues to be the development of role-playing games, but it also has sought to innovate and expand its offerings in focused ways. Over time, the company has continued to develop games for both Sony and Nintendo, including their main consoles and hand-held systems. The company did something completely new in 2002 when it attempted to develop a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) in partnership with Microsoft for the Xbox. Level-5's work was highly anticipated, but the title, *True Fantasy Live Online*, was canceled in 2004 after two years of work, allegedly due to the team's inexperience with online games.[78] The experience soured the company's interest in working with Microsoft, and no other games for Microsoft systems have been announced.

Since then, the company has not appeared to be interested in straying too far from what it does best—story-focused games that are RPG- or puzzle-based. An examination of sales of Level-5's most successful games shows that those genres are the only ones represented (table 6.4).

Within those boundaries, the company has innovated successfully in several ways. The Professor Layton puzzle series and the Inazuma Eleven soccer RPGs are the company's current core offerings, both of which have continued to spawn new titles.[79] Contrary to Capcom's business methods, however, Level-5 continues to develop all of the games in its series, eschewing the practice of partnering with other studios—Western or otherwise—to develop its titles. Preferring instead to retain control, the company has remained smaller than the giant developer/publisher Capcom and maintained a tighter grip on its titles.

Those series have also been carefully expanded in traditional Japanese media mix fashion. The company released an anime film *Professor Layton*

Table 6.4
Level-5 title sales, 2000 to 2009.

Title	Year	System	Genre	Units sold (in millions)
Dragon Quest IX	2009	DS	Role-playing game	5.66
Dragon Quest VIII	2004	PS2	Role-playing game	5.21
Prof Layton & the Curious Village	2007	DS	Puzzle adventure	5.06
Prof Layton & the Diabolical Box	2007	DS	Puzzle adventure	3.93
Prof Layton & the Unwound Future	2008	DS	Puzzle adventure	3.05
Prof Layton & the Last Specter	2009	DS	Puzzle adventure	2.42
Dark Cloud	2000	PS2	Role-playing game	1.54

Source: "Level-5 Games," *VGChartz*, accessed July 2, 2014, http://www.vgchartz.com/gamedb/?name=&publisher=935&platform=&genre=&minSales=0&results=200.

and the Eternal Diva in both Japan and North America and has created an anime series and two feature-length films based on its Inazuma Eleven franchise. The company also purchased the naming rights for a soccer stadium in its hometown—Fukuoka—to create the Level-5 Stadium in 2008. The three-year deal was reported to cost approximately $287,000 per year and helped to promote its soccer RPG series.

The company also has been experimenting with its form of game distribution and partnering with well-known designers to do so. In 2012, the compilation *Guild01* was released in Japan for the 3DS. The cartridge actually comprised four games that showcased the work of Level-5 and offerings from several well-regarded Japanese designers—the airport simulation game *Aero Porter* by *Seaman* creator Yoot Saito; the adventure RPG *Crimson Shroud* from *Vagrant Story* creator Yasumi Matsuno (which was developed internally at Level-5); a "fantasy rhythm" RPG called *Omasse's Rental Weapon Shop* created by Yoshiyuki Hirai, where a father and son craft weapons for heroes via rhythmic gameplay; and *Liberation Maiden* from Goichi Suda (also known as Suda51), where the player controls a high school girl who becomes both president of Japan and a *mecha* that fights off an invading country that is stealing Japan's energy. The compilation received good (if not great) reviews, and all four titles were subsequently released in Europe

or North America via Nintendo's online eShop, a marketplace for the 3DS and WiiU. A sequel—*Guild02*—has since been created that contains additional games, including one by outspoken industry critic Keiji Inafune. His game *Insect Tank* (*BUGS vs. TANKS!* in English) puts players in the role of "World War II era German soldiers who have been mysteriously shrunk down to insect size" yet must survive and "exterminate killer bugs before they do the same to you."[80]

Level-5's *Guild* compilations demonstrate a few things. First, the company is willing to take risks by offering players multiple smaller, more experimental games rather than full-length more mainstream experiences. It also gathered well-known developers together and compiled them, which required players in Japan to purchase the full collection and not pick and choose their favorites. The relative success of *Guild01* and the announcement of *Guild02* suggest that those risks paid off. Level-5 can gather together highly regarded designers and also successfully sell players on a format that is uncommon in the industry. But why did this risk pay off for Level-5 but not for Capcom's gamble with Clover Studio?

There are no easy answers to that question, but one element that merits further discussion is the choice of platforms that companies employ. Although individual games may be critically praised or panned as either well-designed or shoddily constructed, platforms also lend weight to which games might sell, how games are judged, and how they are received in different locales. Capcom created games like *Okami* and *God Hand* for consoles, and Level-5 released the Layton series and the Guild titles for the Nintendo DS. Even in the West, graphical standards and expectations differ for handheld systems like the DS, where photorealism is not in such high demand as it might be on the latest console. That works in favor of games like those in the Layton series or in the Guild series, which feature more anime or cartoon-style animations and art styles. Sales demonstrate this. Although not selling nearly as many copies as a Call of Duty title, Layton and Phoenix Wright games have sold relatively well in the West, and Western players do not see the art style as problematic. It is something expected from handheld games.

Furthermore, console systems and handheld systems have different places in Western and Japanese culture. Handheld systems are far more popular in Japan than elsewhere, and consoles have typically been the system of choice in North America (Europe had early preferences for PCs).

The sales figures for top games bear this out, regardless of actual titles. For September 29, 2013, on *VGChartz*, the Japanese top ten best-seller list contained four handheld titles, and the charts for the United States and Europe had none. In terms of systems, Nintendo has sold 12.9 million 3DS systems in Japan and only 10.2 million in North America, despite a North American market that is several orders of magnitude larger than Japan's. This suggests that companies like Level-5 can take risks with handheld games in Japan due to that large installed base and preference for such systems, and if they are successful, they can potentially translate that into sales elsewhere. With a console system like the PlayStation 2, Capcom had higher expectations to meet for its game graphics, based on audience expectations.

Finally, development costs for handheld games can be much lower than for console games, particular when publishers are targeting triple-A status for titles. A Layton game is cheaper to produce than a title such as *Resident Evil 6*, leaving Level-5 more room to find profits and declare a game a success.

Even with these mitigating factors in mind, it still is uncertain why some games will sell well in one market yet meet with failure in others. Games like Level-5's Dragon Quest games are staples of the Japanese marketplace but sell only moderately well in the West. *Dragon Quest VIII*, for example, sold more than 3 million units in Japan but only approximately 430,000 in North America, with similar numbers in Europe.[81] The studio's first offering, *Dark Cloud*, sold 90 percent of its 1 million units outside Japan[82] and the first Professor Layton game (*Professor Layton and the Curious Village*) has sold approximately 5 million copies worldwide, with 20 percent of sales in Japan, 23 percent in North America, and 46 percent in Europe.[83] The company can appeal to global audiences.

The question of the primacy of Western as opposed to Japanese markets is still a sticky one, and not all studios are eager to disregard their core market of Japanese players. At a 2009 Game Developers Conference talk, company founder Hino suggested that Western audiences have not always been a primary concern: "we think about the Japanese market first."[84] Yet the company has a history of localizing many (but not all) of its games for release outside Japan. That strategy may be changing, however, as the company acknowledges the importance of foreign markets to its bottom line. With the 2013 release of *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* in North America (a joint venture with Studio Ghibli), Hino explained that for this

game, "we took the preferences of our Western player-base into consideration too, and implemented action elements such as the ability to move your friends and familiars freely around the battlefield."[85]

The company also continues to take its localization efforts seriously, which form part of its California branch's tasks. It has been hinted that the U.S. studio may be tapped for development of titles for the West.[86] The company has also continued to experiment with the Guild style of releasing games, with options for selling those games via other outlets globally.

The company is facing a bifurcation of markets that may be increasingly difficult to reconcile. Japan's domestic market sales are dominated by handheld titles—which Japanese players appear to prefer to console or PC titles. The North American market prefers console games, and Europe has a stronger history in the PC market, with increasing numbers of console titles doing well. Finally, with 3DS sales not equaling those of the DS and the WiiU also facing criticism, Level-5 may need to make more radical changes to its strategies if it wishes to survive. Although it is not a publicly traded company with stockholders to report to and quarterly earnings that must be made public, the company must still turn a profit, even if it is not beholden to investors to achieve particular levels of growth or revenue.

Conclusions

Creative industries face many risks, and it is difficult to create and sell videogames successfully, particularly over a period of years and in multiple markets. Individual studios and companies must struggle to stay relevant, a fact that often is ignored when we examine global or historical trends. Whether or not Japanese studios chose to compete globally, they did have a domestic market that was happy to consume their products, which they did so almost exclusively, providing a reliable base for company sales. But as production costs have risen and the Japanese market has shrunk, companies that want to make more than small games or low-budget titles have had to reinvigorate their attempts to reach Western players. Yet the gradual erosion of Japanese game sales in North America and Europe has caused many studios to ask if there is some ineffable quality that is needed to compete successfully in the global market. That question has been asked repeatedly over the years and in a variety of contexts. In 1941, Imamura Taihei, one of Japan's most renowned film critics, wrote that Japanese animation

was in trouble because it was not able to create realistic movement and that "perfecting Japanese cartoons will be a matter of conquering Western techniques of material realism."[87] Companies have tried a variety of strategies and found success and failure in nearly all of those efforts. In short, there is no simple answer.

Companies such as Square Enix have found both success and failure in buying Western studios and integrating the practices of those companies into their own culture. Likewise, Capcom's strategy of developing its own intellectual property and then partnering with Western studios for sequels has produced hits as well as misses. Level-5's ongoing practice of keeping development internal, sticking to its strengths in a few genres, and carefully releasing certain games to larger markets has largely (but not completely) been successful, although not every game is a winner, and the firm does not have the added pressures of shareholders to which to answer.

In investigating how Capcom and Level-5 work to create global markets for their games, a few key findings emerge. First, there is a certain larger discourse at work, perpetuated by both game studios and the gaming media, that some ineffable difference exists between Japanese and Western games or at least between Japanese and Western game studios. This is similar to discourses of Nihonjinron of the 1980s about Japanese exceptionalism, which claim that Japan is unique and attempts to understand it fully will fail. That mindset, applied to Japanese game development, is both a source of perverse pride and a business failing. The story goes that Japanese studios simply cannot make games for Westerners—that there is something so different about Japan that it cannot be translated or compensated for. Japanese studios must purchase, partner with, or hire Western studios to do the work for them.

When one carefully examines what Western studios are doing and how, however, cracks appear in this ineffability. Level-5's games sell well in the West due to strong localization, solid gameplay, and studio expertise in creating RPGs and puzzle-style games. Capcom's studio partnerships are based on expertise in particular tools, solid market research, and genre expertise, but those qualities have not always resulted in hit games or positive reviews. Both companies have global top sellers and games and series that are targeted to limited markets. Both studios also develop or license a variety of transmedia extensions to extend their revenues and build their brands. Finally, both companies strive to maintain certain levels of control

over their creations and have attempted various kinds of innovation to advance their prospects. All of these elements suggest that it is not a cultural chasm that limits global game sales—although player expectations and preferences can differ from one culture or region to another, based on past experiences as well as marketing efforts.

Posing the often asked rhetorical question "What's so special about Japanese popular culture?," Ian Condry believes that the question encourages us "to think that there are some general, overall characteristics of Japanese popular culture that explain its success."[88] If we believe in those general characteristics, then failures also must be tied back to cultural origins and failed elements of Japaneseness. As this chapter has pointed out, however, a product's "origins are less important than [its] contexts."[89] Successful games—and failed games—may or may not retain markers of Japaneseness. One way that game studios try to ensure global success is by managing the Japaneseness of games through the hiring of Western studios, as Capcom has done. If successful, they have found a formula for managing the Japaneseness of the game in question. If they fail, they did not. Yet even in the act of hiring that studio and making that admission, the Japanese company performs a discourse: it sets up a situation where Japanese studios cannot minimize Japaneseness enough and cannot create a truly Western game. Japaneseness is deployed as a shield—a way to manage risk in case of failure. Therefore, Japanese companies seek to minimize risk not only through production practices but also through their rhetorics, and Japaneseness is a rhetoric that can be employed in discourse around and about games, promoting certain practices and excusing potential failures.

7   A Game's Building Blocks: Western Developers and Japanese Games

We all have a little Nintendo in us somewhere.
—Jill Walker, Ubisoft Montreal

The last few chapters have focused on game development at a macro scale, considering the practices and processes that help games find a global audience. Yet the individuals who do that work are not studied very much, either in Japan or in North America. Although it would be a valuable project to investigate the work of Japanese developers (and some projects doing so have already begun), this chapter investigates the effects of those Japanese developers on North American developers—looking at how their own interests in games have taken shape and what role Japanese games might (or might not) have played in that process. Before they were developers, the men and women who now work in the game industry in North America were players of many game types, including digital and nondigital varieties. And like the players that I have discussed in other chapters, developers hold a wide variety of views relative to Japanese games. Some developers are great fans of such games, others grew up before those games took hold and have no particular nostalgia for them, and others see them chiefly as competitors in an increasingly diverse industry.

When I first conceptualized this chapter, I envisioned gathering passionate stories from developers in the West about how playing Japanese games inspired them to become developers and shaped their own creative practices in critical ways. The early thesis was that Japanese game developers contributed to a growing game industry in their home country and shaped the Western game industry in multiple ways. I found some stories that confirmed my original hunches about the influences of early Japanese games,

but most developer responses were complex and nuanced, leading me to rethink and reconceptualize what influence meant in the service of game design and development and to recast this chapter in light of those events.

In talking with Western developers, I noted that the concept of influence could be both very broad and very narrow, depending on the person and the context in which it arose. Sometimes individuals shared stories with me of influences that were strong and direct and could easily be traced through particular game titles, over genres, or perhaps over their career arc. For others, influence was diffuse and difficult to pinpoint or did not come from places I initially suspected. Often developers talked of drawing not only from Japanese or Western videogames but also from art, literature, music, and board, card, and physical games as sources of interest and inspiration. One joked that my questions about design influences were like asking musical artists which bands had influenced them. Others went in different directions, talking about how they observed crowds moving in public spaces and families or friends (and other social groupings) interacting as potential source material or lessons in social interactions for their ongoing work.

Such complexities reflect the multiple design trajectories that have emerged and that deserve more detailed study. We are gaining more knowledge of this development process, although research has focused more on what Jennifer Whitson calls "studio studies" rather than individual developers or designers.[1] In addition to studying studios and the development process, it is equally vital to investigate how individuals come to game development, why they make the games they do, and how they think about the process and the industry. Questioning developers about their processes and interests can lead to knowledge that better informs our conceptualizations of individual creative processes, studio cultures, and systems of production.

I use the intentionally broad term *game developer* throughout this chapter because not all of the individuals I talked with identified themselves (or have job titles) as game designers. Interviewees held positions in design, art, production, programming, and writing, among other areas. I use the more inclusive *developer* rather than *designer* to avoid confusion about individual roles. When people mentioned a particular aspect of development that influenced them or that they contribute to, such as how a particular game was programmed, I use the terms they provided.[2]

Studying Developers and Industry Practices

In chapter 5, I make the case that global game developer and publisher Square Enix could be considered an *author* of videogames. This allowed me to rethink how game businesses operate as more than assemblages of marketing strategies and business plans. That chapter also demonstrates how authorial discourses can function as control mechanisms when large studios and corporations exert creative and technical influence over production processes, particularly with AAA games and large-scale productions. Those influences include high-level design decisions and workflow practices that shape games in nontrivial ways. This chapter tackles a different project— exploring the influences that shape the work of individual game developers.

Until recently, reports about the daily ideas, practices, and routines of game developers were limited to features in games journalism, popular nonfiction books, game postmortems, and a few scholarly studies.[3] Industry constraints and concerns over secrecy often left researchers with little or no access to the production process in real time or even after the fact. Existing accounts show that game development is a rich, fascinating, and risky activity. The individuals and groups who construct games draw from their personal and collective experiences with past games, diverse elements of global culture, work routines, technical limitations and opportunities, budget realities, time limits, areas of expertise, genre expectations and constraints, and a host of other elements. The development process is fraught with risks and opportunities, with finished games often bearing little or no resemblance to their original designs. Studying the game development process lets us gain new insights into a business that we know little about. Like other workers in creative industries, game developers work tremendously hard on very risky projects. New technologies may be put into play, creative license is taken, and finished products usually depend on teams of individuals with multiple skillsets. Yet until recently, we knew more about the modders and machinima creators who adapt, mash-up, or convert those original works into something different than we do the original products and those who created them.[4]

The Birth of Studio Studies

Academics are now studying how game studios work and what it means to be (or become) a developer. Daniel Ashton has investigated how game

design students become professionalized during their degree programs and points out several key elements of their education. He writes that over time, students begin to play games differently, noting that their "changing relationship with games here may be described in terms of attention to detail and what has been previously overlooked" in games.[5] Even with greater critical faculties, Ashton notes that the continued pervasiveness of games is "the 'easiest place to find inspiration'" for new designs and for many students is "the most appropriate" source.[6] Ashton questions the continued uncritical use of such pedagogical practices for teaching development, yet admits that those elements are often what industry wants or expects.

In his study of *Second Life* developer Linden Lab, Thomas Malaby engages in an ethnographic exploration of how the company came to define itself through its workplace practices and a particular vision for its virtual world.[7] Relevant for this chapter is his discussion of the importance and prevalence of gamer identities among early Linden Lab employees and the ways that "Lindens imagined themselves and their users as a particular kind of gamer, and therefore favored a particular kind of game, one that accorded with the technoliberal ideology that reigned around Linden Lab."[8] Malaby continues: "for many Lindens a game constituted, at root, a challenge to an *individual* to act within an open-ended system, whether that game involved other players or not."[9] He concludes that because a critical mass of studio employees played games in a particular—individualistic—kind of way, they did not immediately grasp the potential for social games or shared sociality in *Second Life*, because "they had not expected the cultural aspects of *Second Life* to happen at all."[10] How particular developers view themselves can affect (although this view may not be the determining factor) how their games or virtual spaces are designed or imagined.

Casey O'Donnell has conducted ethnographic work on the game studio Vicarious Visions as it worked on *Spiderman 3*.[11] O'Donnell argues that certain competencies can help individual developers fit more easily into their workplace, where routines to ease and manage daily practices are often employed. He points to the importance of "game talk" as a linguistic competency for developers to possess.[12] Game talk usually draws on a broad range of games, especially console, AAA titles. Game talk allows developers from disparate areas such as programming and art to talk about design elements or gameplay features via the shorthand of prior experiences—leading to the creation of community and shared ways of understanding

development problems and design mechanics. As O'Donnell points out, however, even as game talk can bring people together, it is a challenge for those who do not play games or the right kinds of games when growing up. For many women, game talk can exclude more than it can be a tool of inclusion. O'Donnell investigates additional elements of studio culture in his study, but his key point for this chapter is that developers need to be able to talk about games in their daily work. When talking with their peers, past games played are a solid foundation on which to build the next generation of titles.

Finally, in *Co-Creating Videogames*, John Banks examines an Australian game development studio and looks at the many ways that studios internally negotiate different expectations and ideas for how games should be made.[13] For example, when Auran studio was developing the SAGE game engine, he argues, the engine changed "as it move[d] through the network: a CEO's business model can also be a tool for implementing a game design, a physics modeling machine, an AI system, and a problem in the coordination of Auran staff and resources."[14] Such competing visions means that "designers and artists [are] in conflict with programmers, and both groups question … the broader corporate strategies and direction."[15]

Although studio employees may share common identities as game players (or even gamers) and may draw on that history for a common discourse (such as game talk) to talk across disciplines, they still can bump up against differences in what is prioritized and how games get made in daily practice. This suggests that studio culture is indeed important to navigate, manage, and understand but that the individual beliefs, practices, and thoughts of game developers can provide valuable insights into the process as well. This book adds to work on understanding studio practices and cultures but at a slight remove. It refocuses on individual practitioners and the ways that a multitude of design influences can make their way into games.

Globalization, Techno-Orientalism, and Japaneseness

Another theoretical starting point for this chapter is a reconsideration of theories of Orientalism and more recently techno-Orientalism to interrogate the notion of Japaneseness and the ways that it gets expressed via contemporary Western videogame developers. Earlier chapters deal with issues of globalization, localization, and the role that the culture broker plays in easing the global travel of games. This chapter is a deeper exploration of

how globalization operates in and through various discourses at the individual level.

As writings by Ashton, Malaby, and O'Donnell demonstrate, game developers regularly draw from their prior experiences with games when they communicate about design elements with other team members and when they start to envision future products. Considering how Japanese games—and by extension Japanese culture—become part of that talk and shorthand adds depth to our understandings of how globalization works and how discourses of the foreign or the "other" are played with, understood, or rejected as part of the design process. It also provides further evidence for (as I have argued elsewhere) the futility of pursuing "purity" in cultural influence or form and for trying to seek the essentially Japanese videogame or essentially American (or Canadian or British) game.[16] Instead, this chapter points to how Japaneseness works as a signaling device or rhetorical trope for Western developers and how they deploy it in relation to ideas about design.

To do so, I first disentangle (1) game design inspirations or influences that come from Japan but are not related to a particular sense of Japaneseness from (2) ideas or qualities that are related to Japanese games that reference elements of Japanese culture, language, artistic styles, literary themes, and even sometimes design processes or aesthetics. Developers use that second sense to refer to design elements that possess an almost ephemeral quality of Japaneseness. This quality holds together multiple beliefs where Japaneseness can be an invocation of the positively valued, weird, wacky, and beautiful, elements of a game as well as of the perhaps alienating, remote, or irreducibly foreign components that Western developers cannot imitate or emulate. Exploring how those elements come together, and in what configurations, is the goal of this chapter.

Design Generations: Formative and Lifelong Influences

The contemporary commercial game industry has made explicit its desire to hire individuals who are enthusiastically passionate about games, often listing that quality among technical requirements in most position descriptions. A by-product of that passion is the recruitment of those who love games and are willing to overwork themselves for the sake of creating similar products.[17] Such a predisposition also suggests a deep familiarity with

many types of games (including usually Japanese games), allowing for the type of game talk that O'Donnell identifies as necessary for contemporary development work.[18] To what extent is that fluency in game talk actually present among developers, and on what factors does it depend? O'Donnell argues that gender is often an exclusionary factor in determining game talk because many women have not been avid players growing up and so lack a critical fluency in game history. Another factor related to game talk fluency is generation. The age of game developers plays a critical role in the games that they are familiar with and perhaps passionate about.

But generation is not a guarantee of fluency with particular games or games that came out in a certain era. Individual differences and preferences also play a role in what developers play and why. Some developers did tell me stories of growing up with Nintendo's consoles and games, enjoying long sessions with Mario and other characters. But some developers did not like Japanese games. Sheri Graner Ray, formerly a senior designer at Sony Online Entertainment and now director of design and production at Big Noise Games, felt that in her own work, "I've always been kind of annoyed when I was pushed to make things more Japanese" because "I really don't care for the art style."[19]

One of the main reasons for differences was the generation of the game developer in question. Developers who had the longest histories in the industry were also instrumental in creating the digital game industry. They came of age before the era of Nintendo and the NES, even if they were familiar with arcade games before that. Although many such developers talked about their admiration for the design of Mario and the ways that Nintendo helped to define their industry, they could not claim that those experiences shaped their initial gameplay interests in the way that those experiences did for younger developers. Although more veteran developers now play Japanese games to varying degrees, they do not view those games through a nostalgic lens, which makes their own experiences qualitatively different from those who came along later. Historically, that context included the 1980s "Japan panic" that affected Western businesses and was reflected in popular media of the time.[20] None of the developers I interviewed said that the Japan panic influenced them, and I did not bring it up during our interviews. One interviewee alerted me to the important undercurrent that this issue played in the development of a regulatory system for the digital game industry in the United States in the early 1990s. In her book on the history

of sex in videogames, Brenda Romero (then writing as Brenda Brathwaite) recounts that the 1993 congressional hearings on increasing levels of violence in videogames led to the development of two competing and voluntary ratings systems. One system was developed by the Software Publishers Association (SPA) and was backed mainly by computer game publishers, and the other was created by the Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA, which later became the Entertainment Software Association, ESA) and was led by videogame publishers.

With the exception of EA, most American publishers supported the SPA, and Japanese publishers including Nintendo and Sega led the IDSA. Animosity was reported between the two groups, based on a number of factors.[21] After the IDSA's system—the ESRB—became the default, one anonymous committee member remarked that "it was all about who would be the mouthpiece for the entertainment sector. The last thing we wanted to see was to hand over control of the video game business to the Japanese, as is the case in electronics."[22] Although we do not have information on how Western developers felt at the time about this issue, some involved felt that "the Japanese" should be prevented from dominating another industry in North America. That belief was reflected in how media portrayed Japanese products and how the Japanese were constructed as a particular sort of global business competition—one not in solidarity with or friendly to Western interests.

Pre-Mario

For the pioneering developers, digital games—particularly home console games—were not a major part of their childhood or formative influences. For example, Steve Meretzky played board and card games while growing up, as well as arcade games including *Pong*, *Asteroids*, and *Pac-Man*. After completing a bachelor of science degree in construction management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1979, Meretzky began working at Infocom in 1981 as a part-time tester working from home. He eventually went on to full-time testing and then was asked to write a game. His games—including *Planetfall*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, and *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*—were published from 1983 to 1986 and helped to define interactive fiction and adventure games and influence many more games and developers over the years.[23] Even though he played games like *Pac-Man*, however, Meretzky's interests lay in writing

and crafting clever puzzles rather than in creating combat systems or developing better graphics. As he explains, "literature was influence number one," after that was humor such as "Woody Allen, Monty Python," and finally puzzles and other games created by Infocom designers.[24] The Japanese arcade games that were so popular elsewhere were not a major (or even seemingly minor) influence for him, at least in his early work.

Similarly, Gordon Walton graduated from college in 1981 but wrote his first commercial game, *Trek-X*, in 1977 for the Commodore PET home computer. One of his primary influences was the Plato system, and he started making games because it was a challenge. That activity became a habit that was reinforced by early computer magazines: they invited game submissions, he sent them in, and they were happy to publish them for a broader audience.[25] He went on to make a variety of simulator-based games for Spectrum Holobyte, moved into massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), and then worked in social game production. His motivation was simple: "You did it because you could—just to show you could. … I was doing computer science back in the days of punch cards and the microcomputers came out and I said I bet I can write a game on one of those home computers."[26] Walton is another developer who helped to build the industry, working on games that influenced later developers around the world. These include *Ultima Online*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, and one of the earliest serious games—*Reader Rabbit* in 1986.

For developers who were born a decade or so later, entry into game development still was something novel, and influences often came from an interest in board, card, and arcade games. Brenda Romero, a founder of the Game Developers Conference and winner of multiple awards for her board game *Train*, began working in the industry in 1981 on the Wizardry series when she was only fifteen. Her love of games and game development had deep roots. She recalls that when her mother bought her used board games at yard sales, she would gather all the game pieces together to create new games. For her, Japanese influences were minimal or nonexistent because the first games that she worked on (such as *Wizardry*) went East, influencing how Japanese role-playing games were made rather than the other way around. Her own inspirations came from Dungeons & Dragons and board games, which fed her fascination with game rules and designing role-playing game (and other game) systems that were balanced yet challenging. As she elaborates, "I was coming from Ogdensburg, New York,

where there were zero game stores. … I primarily had access to American games."[27] Such developers are not unusual for their generation: they were drawing on what was available from contemporary culture at that time. Early Western developers affected games created in both the West and Japan. As Nick Fortugno sums up, "if you look at the RPG space, it's impossible to disentangle the relationship from Dungeons and Dragons, through Final Fantasy and say like 'who owns this space anymore,' I feel like it's been so cross-pollinated."[28]

Nintendo Kids

Time passed, and another generation came of age. This one was very familiar with Nintendo systems and names like Mario, Zelda, and Link. For most players, such games did not immediately spark a desire to become a developer, but they did capture their imaginations and much of their time. Colleen Macklin, a developer of *The Metagame* card game with the studio Local No. 12 and professor at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City remembers that she "stayed up for 36 hours playing Super Mario World."[29] The creator of acclaimed indie games such as *Passage* and *Castle Doctrine*, Jason Rohrer, recalls calling Toys "R" Us every day after *Super Mario 3* was released, asking if it was available.[30] Chaim Gingold, former *Spore* developer for Maxis/EA, accepted an invitation to a sleepover party for the chance to play *Super Mario 3* and failed to inform his mother that the host had chicken pox (which Gingold soon contracted).[31] *Offworld* editor-in-chief Leigh Alexander tells the story of sitting in a basement with a friend playing Mario and "making up songs for luck" as they played—something she recalls fondly decades later.[32] For Minority Media developer Nicolas Barriere, playing Japanese games like *Jet Set Radio* during his teens was "an out of body experience."[33] And Ubisoft game writer Jill Walker believes that even though she did not play many Japanese games growing up, they are so predominant in the culture now that Nintendo is the "first thing that comes to mind" when the "save the princess" trope in games is mentioned.[34]

Most players do not grow up to become developers or writers in the industry. Yet for those that do, various "bits of DNA" from those games become part of their cultural memory, shaping their ideas about what games are, what an excellent game "feels like," and how games can (and should) make players feel.

8-Bit Indie

The importance of such early experiences is also reflected in the creation of and discourse surrounding many contemporary indie games. Games like *Knights of Pen and Paper +1 Edition*, *Evoland*, and *Retro City Rampage* are available on Steam, and all draw from retro themes and art styles as part of their appeal. Such games explicitly or implicitly (depending on the title) tap into the nostalgia surrounding 8-bit games, early genre conventions, and early play experiences. The creation of such games—including *Super Meat Boy*, *Fez*, and *Braid*—has been chronicled and celebrated in documentaries such as *Indie Game: The Movie*. Those same efforts (both film and games) have also resulted in a backlash as other independent developers lament such experiences as "a bunch of white dudes [that] remake Mario three times."[35]

One particularly ironic moment came in relation to the indie game *Fez*, which was created by Polytron Productions, comprised of Phil Fish and Renaud Bedard. The game has won numerous awards and has been described as a "2D platformer set in a 3D world" that "delights" in being very difficult to play. Developer Fish said in an interview with the *New York Times* that his "first video-game memories are of playing *Super Mario Bros.*, the *Legend of Zelda* and *Tetris*."[36] The article continues, "Fez, his tribute to 1980s gaming, is lovingly, almost excessively, devoted to the golden age of Nintendo, from its chunky, lo-fi art style to its numerous homages to those three titans of Mr. Fish's youth."[37] Here is Nintendo-era nostalgia at work in a developer from a generation that is primed for those experiences. Yet those warm memories do not necessarily extend to the current period. Despite his affinities for those early 2D spaces, Fish caused an uproar among his fans and the game development community when he responded to a question from a Japanese developer for his opinions on "modern" Japanese games. The question was asked just after a public screening of *Indie Game* during a question and answer period. Without pausing he replied, "your games just suck" to the entire room.[38]

Although Fish has admitted that "my delivery could have been more tactful," he remains critical of contemporary Japanese games, arguing that many of them are "stuck in the past."[39] A love for or interest in past games in a particular genre, such as Fish's, does not necessarily equate with satisfaction with current offerings. But such nostalgia and nostalgic backlash are markers of the key role that Japanese games have played in the personal as well as collective histories of Western developers.

Ongoing Influences

Developers form impressions during childhood and in early play experiences, which inspire their future creations. But they also keep playing games throughout their careers to learn about different genres, mechanics, storytelling devices, and the like. This is how they stay fluent and up to date in game talk. When Nick Fortugno started at GameLab after a prior career in live-action games, he spent considerable time reacquainting himself with videogames, trying to understand their depth, scope, and design particularities. Developers continue to play throughout their careers to get a sense of what is new and innovative and what the competition might be doing.[40] Developers also find ideas in many sources apart from videogames and have inspiration come to them because of that diverse exposure. Japanese games and culture continue to be among those inspirations.

Conditions in Japan itself have changed over the years. In the 1990s, a recession hit Japan, and the country had to recreate itself. As Douglas McGray documented in 2002, what emerged was a new kind of superpower, where "instead of collapsing beneath its political and economic misfortunes, Japan's global cultural influence has only grown. In fact, from pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and food to art, Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic superpower."[41] The rise of "Japan Cool" even led to the creation of a national creative industries policy that encouraged the spread of "soft power" through the spread of culture abroad, which continues to function. What is now public policy replete with PowerPoint presentations and graphs depicting the spread of manga globally (among other content) started as a growing global fascination with elements of Japan's culture.

Eric Zimmerman, founder of GameLab and creator of *Sissyfight2000* and *Diner Dash*, recalls living in New York City in the 1990s, a period when Japanese popular culture was considered innovative and cool. He collected manga, Japanese soda cans, and other artifacts—not simply to own them but to analyze them more deeply. In 1996, he and Elena Gorfinkel wrote an essay about *kisekae*—Japanese paper dolls—and potential reasons for their popularity in the West.[42] Those specific cultural elements were not central to his later game design work, but they form a reservoir of past experiences and interests from which he can draw, and they have helped him to develop a sense of his own design interests. Chaim Gingold also is intrigued by many different elements of Japanese culture, particularly as they relate

to his interests in design. He recalls reading books on Japanese architecture, woodworking, and packaging and the aesthetics of the lunchbox, among other things. Most important for him were Japanese garden design manuals that explored the creation of environments to evoke particular feelings, which was accomplished through the careful placement of elements including rocks, sand, and water. Gingold was so interested in the topic that he wrote his master of arts thesis on those influences before he went to work at Maxis/EA. He believes that all of these components were relevant to his work on the creature creator for *Spore*, which he tried to imbue with a sense of "simplicity of design" that was reminiscent of both Japan and the Western computer company Apple.

Other developers have been influenced more directly by early Japanese games and have drawn from them when conceptualizing their own designs. Andy Nealen, cocreator of the abstract puzzler *Osmos*, for example, believes that game feel and control are the keys to successful design in his games. One of his earliest inspirations was *Super Mario Bros.* because of its tightness of movements: "if you look at the path in the air … the path of Mario is very very—maybe *evocative* is too strong a word—but it allows for a lot of player performance. … I like that form of discreteness of a game. But I don't think I like it in a game that's more about a protagonist jumping around in a world," and so "*Mario Kart*, *Super Mario Brothers*—those are probably the things that influence my designs."[43]

Formative influences that are encountered early in a developer's life and during the course of a career demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of how games come to be. Nostalgia can be a powerful motivator when thinking about what games "should be like" or "used to be like" in a real or imagined past. Yet nostalgia depends on a particular historical moment, and generational differences can play an important role in determining what is subject to nostalgia—board games, pen and paper games, arcade games, early console systems, or other places. As generations of game developers keep emerging, there will be shifts in what is considered classic, formative, or influential for those different groups.

Designs from Japan versus Japanese Design

Many aspects of a game—its controls, integration of story and game mechanics, sound design, programming, and use of characters and world

building—may be catalysts that lead developers to make a new game that riffs off those elements. Many of these elements or components are not "essentially Japanese" in any way, as prior chapters point out. Those components, mechanics, or entire games may have been the first or the best at doing something. When developers do things first or extremely well, their work is identified as being influential or standard-setting, as establishing a genre, or as creating a new mechanical or technical innovation. This section examines those influences, which are defined as "designs from Japan." The following section examines games that inspired due to their elements of Japaneseness and the meanings of that term for Western developers.

Designs from Japan

Nintendo is an early and continuing exemplar of excellence in design efforts. As Nick Fortugno argues, one can never underestimate "the extent of early experimentation of Nintendo at a fundamental level" and its effects on advances in the game industry. Even developers who did not engage with Nintendo games in their youth or carry that nostalgia forward recognize the company's role as an innovator that developed not simply games but entire genres that many other developers have iterated upon. For example, the recently defunct *Game Developer* magazine put Nintendo at the top of its list of the top thirty developers of all time, stating that "most people reading this article owe their fascination with video games in some part to Nintendo" and that "it's not just their work from almost 30 years ago that earned Nintendo EAD a spot; we're impressed by the way they consistently manage to push video games as a whole in new directions."[44] Most of those developments—by Nintendo and many other Japanese studios—are not tied to cultural elements from Japan. The platformer is not a necessarily Japanese genre. It was the product of iterative work and creative inspiration by Shigeru Miyamoto. Yet it also created the conditions for other developers to experiment and iterate upon, building a genre from a successful game with particular mechanics and rules.

A more recent example of such influence is the rise of the Bemani or music-rhythm games that were created and popularized by Konami, first in Japan and then worldwide. By featuring music, performance, and spectacle as elements of the experience, games such as *Beatmania*, *Dance Dance Revolution* (*DDR*), *Guitar Freak*, and *Para Para Paradise* offered players a new way to interact with games. *DDR* (released in 1998 in Japan and in 1999 in

Figure 7.1
Dance Dance Revolution Supernova (2006).

North America and Europe) was especially popular and led to multiple spin-offs, tournament competitions, and exercise programs (figure 7.1).

Doug Wilson, developer on *B.U.T.T.O.N.* and *JS Joust*, recalls being "obsessed" with *DDR* in college, explaining that while some people studied and others drank, he and his friends at Stanford "would play *DDR* all the time."[45] Although he believes that *DDR* did not directly influence his later development efforts, he admits that

I have to feel like, because *DDR* was definitely one of the games that I spent the most time with, all of the things with *DDR*, the spectatorship and performance; which are incredibly relevant … I feel like there must be some super deep unconscious link there.

Wilson is interested in creating many different kinds of games in the future, but he acknowledges that he currently is best known for being the "weird controller guy" who makes games that play with games' uses of public space, player interpretation of rules, and improvisation and performance—all elements that play a role in games like *DDR*.

Another developer who found small but direct inspiration in early Japanese games saw them as important not for their fiction or cultural expression but for their creative use of programmed artificial intelligence (AI) techniques. Former Bethesda-based programmer and now independent

developer Brett Douville recalls playing *Pac-Man* as a child and being impressed with the movements of the ghosts, which he learned had deterministic behaviors and did not include elements of randomness. That knowledge "changed how I thought about the role of the gameplay objects; and how despite the fact that they were deterministic in *Pac-Man*, I felt like there was an intelligence behind them. … they are after you, they know where you are."[46] That knowledge—a shift in strategies for engaging with AI programming rather than a particular tip or code for doing so—stayed with him as he became a professional programmer. What proved to be influential beyond the game's lifespan were not any particularly Japanese elements of *Pac-Man* (whatever those might be) but instead the masterful approach to simulating the ghosts' behavior and AI behavior more broadly.

Great design ideas like the ghost behaviors in *Pac-Man* or movement-based Bemani games are not unique to one culture or another, although credit accrues to those who can implement the idea in the most elegant way possible. Despite an admission that his work has drawn little inspiration from Japanese games, the chief game designer at Google and former LucasArts developer Noah Falstein told me about one of his favorite games—Intelligent System's *Advance Wars*—which was made in Japan. Falstein has talked about the game in past presentations at Game Developers Conferences, and he has written about the game for *Well Played 1.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, beginning his essay with "How can I begin to talk about one of my favorite games of all time?" For Falstein, the game is "a shining example of excellent use of several fundamental principles of design, and one of the most remarkable is the use of excellent unit balance. Game design is all about tradeoffs, and is both an art and a science, and unit balancing is one of the areas that demonstrate that."[47] Such masterful design is not unique to Japanese developers: the game's mechanics align closely with Falstein's own personal design interests. Prior to its release, he had made elaborate war-based strategy board games with various units, and "it was as if someone had watched me making the game" (figure 7.2).[48] Falstein's use of the term *fundamental* suggests that there are (or could be) cross-cultural elements at work that go above or beyond fads or limited and local applications.

Another Japanese game that some Western developers believed made similar fundamental contributions to design was Square's RPG *Chrono Trigger*, which was released in 1995 (figure 7.3). Created by industry stalwarts

Figure 7.2
Advance Wars (2001).

Figure 7.3
Chrono Trigger (1995).

including *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi and *Dragon Quest* creator Yuji Horii, the game follows lead character Crono and a band of adventurers as they travel through time to prevent a worldwide disaster. Despite a history of "hating JRPGs" due mainly to their menu-driven combat systems, developer Nicholas Fortugno argues that it is one of the most important games ever made. He thinks the story is very good, the sound design is solid, and the battle mechanics are particularly impressive: they are "both very powerful in terms of having repeatable play that wasn't repetitive but also very strategic." For example, strategy came in because a magic user's "mana" or magic points were "not regenerated between battles, it was only regained when you rested. … Even though each battle was relatively simple … one battle won't sink your ship, [but] five battles could." Furthermore, the final battle in the game was "one of the greatest boss battles ever made in game history" because players cannot use brute force or a simple strategy to win. Instead, the player must "figure out a fairly complex puzzle and then enact the solution well. … comparing it to Zelda puzzles … it's a magnitude higher in sophistication."[49]

Although Fortugno credits *Chrono Trigger* for setting a new standard of excellence in battle mechanics, developer John Romero—originally of id software and creator of *Doom*—was impressed by the music of *Chrono Trigger*. He recalled that after playing the game he was "100% turned on to Japanese game music." He even recorded the game audio on a compact disc to listen to in his car before he could purchase an official version of the soundtrack:[50] "it got me to really focus on it, as something that was just as important as graphics on a screen."

Among developers, *Chrono Trigger* has something of a cult following, perhaps due to its strong design execution. As Brenda Romero explains, there is "no game like *Chrono Trigger*": "if I declare that it fails to hook me, it will always provoke an attempted religious conversion—like sitting among clergy and I declared I was an atheist. … No other game out there has that level of conversion attempts."[51]

For some developers, design influences are based on a particular execution of certain game elements—strength in design, in particular mechanics, in use of music, and so on. Excellent games can come from anywhere and inspire many others to iterate on them in multiple ways.

The Japaneseness of Game Design

A trickier element of design is revealed when developers point to a component of a game's Japaneseness that influenced them. Japaneseness can contrast with a strong design decision that might have come from anywhere, but Japaneseness here is rooted in Japanese culture. An excellent example of this relates to Keita Takahashi's cult hit *Katamari Damacy*, which was mentioned by several of the developers I interviewed (figure 7.4). In this game, released in 2004 for the PlayStation 2, players create *katamari* (or balls of stuff) by rolling up the objects in a level to create one giant ball. The game's whimsical style, including a colorful aesthetic and soundtrack, led it to become a commercial and critical success, and several sequels and spin-offs were created.

Several developers mentioned *Katamari Damacy* as a game that was innovative and influential for them, but they described the game and its influence in different ways. All of them identified the game as recognizably Japanese and mentioned this as part of its appeal. Brenda Romero believes

Figure 7.4
Katamary Damacy (2004).

that the game "gave all game developers the freedom to make something utterly ridiculous," and Robin Hunicke (who has worked for thatgamecompany on *Journey* and tinyspeck on *Glitch*) feels that the title lets players "explore the fun we have as kids, exploring physical space and how things work," something that she wants to replicate at her new company, funomena.[52] Although innovative, such elements are not necessarily "Japanese" but are about the freedom to innovate and explore the nature of fun by incorporating everyday physical spaces. In those ways, the game offers designers a new way to think about game design—trying out new modes of gameplay, working with new settings, and making the mundane exotic in some way. For Colleen Macklin, the game is "so much" a Japanese game due to "its specificity of objects and music, [its] beautiful celebration of material culture, [its] Japanese culture." For Macklin, part of the game's appeal lies in the particularity of the objects and styles used in the game. In the miniaturized versions of elements of Japanese daily life, such as pencils and bento boxes, the game's Japaneseness comes into focus. They are the "cool" element that Allison points to that are likewise parts of the "cool Japan" project pushed by Japan itself.[53]

That neat bifurcation is not really so tidy when discourses about techno-Orientalism and the technocute in Eastern popular culture are reconsidered.[54] Games that are unusual in some way (not only *Katamari Damacy* but *Tokyo Jungle*, *Catherine*, and older titles such as *Seaman* and *Sega Gaga*) often are described with terms like "utterly ridiculous," "wacky," and "strange." Even Japanese games that we now consider as industry standard setters, like the Super Mario series, offer bizarre elements like mushrooms that increase one's size or fire flowers that allow Mario to make fire attacks. Those elements now seem normal, however, and are almost expected components of gameplay.[55]

The language of "crazy," "wacky," and "ridiculous" can have dual meanings. It might signify the foreign other in a way that reduces it to the unknowable essentialist other, or it could signal things that feel very non-Western in a positive sense. Sometimes the terms can imply a fetish or foreign curiosity, such as what is found in the classic *Wired* magazine "Japanese schoolgirl watch" that lists elements of "weird" Japanese culture deserving of attention. When developers discuss design inspirations, the "weirdness" of Japanese designs seems to imply a freedom to explore the boundaries (or even go beyond the boundaries) of normal relations, to play

with what might be considered frivolous or unusual, to allow oneself to be fascinated with and explore the out of bounds, and to create games that are silly, horrific, or bizarre. The term relates to a sense that Japaneseness is about having a particular style or aesthetic but also about playing with styles and aesthetics in unpredictable ways. It can be about signaling or rhetorically marking something.

Final Fantasy VII

For developers who grew up in the 1990s, *Final Fantasy VII* has been influential on multiple levels, but it affected one developer so strongly that he uses one of the game's names for his own first name (figure 7.5).[56] Jenova Chen grew up in China and had to choose a Western name to use in his English classes. He wanted to use the name Cloud, who was the hero of the game, but his friend chose it first, so he chose Jenova. For Chen, the game's storytelling was memorable, and he spent "days and weeks" thinking about it until he was convinced that he was a "better human being" for having played the game and wanted to re-create the experience for other people.[57]

Figure 7.5
Final Fantasy VII (1997).

After obtaining a degree from the University of Southern California in game design, Chen cofounded Thatgamecompany and created games like *Flow*, *Flower*, and *Journey*, which also have Japanese sensibilities in them, although in ways very different from something like *Final Fantasy VII*. He did not necessarily want to duplicate the experiences of grinding, battles, and hours of gameplay. Instead, he was inspired by the emotional experiences that early Japanese role-playing games offered him. For Chen, game design is a space where developers can evoke different types of emotions in people and fulfill their emotional desires.

The influence of those games is so notable that Chen's 2012 game *Journey* was mentioned by several developers I interviewed as a game that "could be Japanese" or "felt Japanese" in some way. One even asked at first if it was a Japanese game and then realized that it was not. These remarks hint at the design team's success in making those links strong. Robin Hunicke, who worked as an executive producer on *Journey*, explains further that "you can see how the entire team has been influenced by these original Japanese games. From the juicy, tactile physical movement, to the interactive sound and even the underlying focus on feeling."[58]

Chen has noted that the most influential Japanese element in his game design work has been Miyazaki's anime films. In trying to figure out why Mikazaki's films have been so successful globally, he determined that they

always express very fundamental things that cross the boundaries of language and culture; it's the human condition. It's peace, it's nature versus industrialization, it's love and flight, flying and free, and youth. All these beautiful things. And romance. Most of the Japanese games tend to have that romance way more than Western games. There's a beauty and a hoping, I guess. Growing up in Asia I do appreciate that. I kind of have a sensitivity for those things. So when I was designing my game, I wanted to focus on elegance, beauty, not just in terms of the visual, but the way that things move, the way things feel, the way people treat each other, for example in *Journey*. … I think that's the biggest inspiration I got from Japan.[59]

It speaks to the global power of games that a Chinese developer working in the United States has been strongly influenced by Japanese games and culture.

Games Influencing Games

Some of the stories related so far demonstrate how a particular game design has influenced another game or how a series has inspired further

experimentation—either to build on excellence or to correct what are perceived as missteps. Some stories are simple. As a child, Brett Douville built an early *Space Invaders* clone with a Western theme. In it, the player hid in a house and fought off advancing Indians who moved back and forth, inexorably heading toward the player. Other developers made similar types of games, often riffing off early Western games as well. Raph Koster made a board game version of *Qbert* because the arcade game was not available in Peru at the time. Colleen Macklin wrote computer games for the PC with her friends. Brenda Romero assembled random game board pieces and created new rules and systems for games. The drive to create pushed such developers forward, and early games were one catalyst for their own work.

More direct influences can be identified, too. Although id Software may seem about as far from Nintendo as a game studio can be, some early work at id was directly influenced by the work of Miyamoto and his teams. In 1988, for example, John Romero created *Dangerous Dave* for the Apple 2 and was "on purpose trying to make a Mario game." The game is a side-scroller with the goal of collecting as many gold cups as possible. A couple of years after making the game, Romero joined John Carmack and other developers to open the id Software studio, and they used the game as a template for a clone of *Super Mario 3*, which they submitted to Nintendo for review (figure 7.6). According to Romero, the idea was to push PC architecture as much as possible and see if Nintendo was interested in bringing Mario to the PC. Nintendo passed on the offer, saying that it did not want Mario to appear on another platform. Romero remembers that "we were not upset about it; we were just like 'Okay, it didn't work out. We'll make our own game.'" They went on to make the Commander Keen series instead, with the first unpublished demo referred to as *Commander Keen in Copyright Infringement* in honor of the failed attempt with Nintendo (figure 7.7). Romero refers to Keen as "the US Mario," and "that's Nintendo's influence all over the place."

In addition to Nintendo, other Japanese games played a significant role in id Software's game production. Although not a direct design inspiration, members of the id team often played *Street Fighter 2*, *Fatal Theory*, and *Art of Fighting* in the studio while on breaks. The team developed elaborate rules for gameplay, such as requiring the loser of a match not to respond verbally to the winner, even during the winner's trash talking. Instead, the loser was allowed to destroy any furniture or tech in the area, leading to many
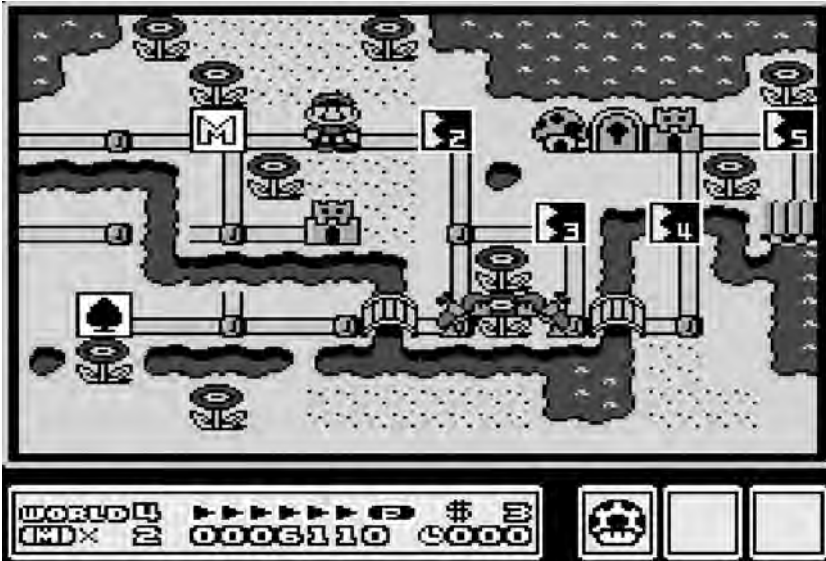
Figure 7.6
Super Mario Bros. 3 (1988).

Figure 7.7
Commander Keen (1991).

smashed tables and blown-up televisions. As Romero relates, "what we were doing was something that invented *deathmatch*. … so you could say that Japanese fighting games fueled the creative impulse to create *deathmatch* in our shooters."

Silent Hill, Resident Evil, Uncharted, and *The Suffering*

In addition to being influential with fighting games and role-playing games, Japanese games also have influenced developers in horror series and games, like those in the Silent Hill and Resident Evil franchises. But influence is complex. Influences do not necessarily lead developers to create games in the same genre. Ideas and inspirations flow across games, fictions, and mechanics in unpredictable ways. Likewise, influence can grow or shift over time, and as developers create more games, they can integrate multiple influences and advance their own visions of how various elements should come together.

That bricolage approach is probably more common than the "one influence, one game" model that I originally conceptualized. For example, *Uncharted* designer Richard Lemarchand has always been interested in creating storytelling action games, and his work has multiple influences, including German expressionist theater, action adventure romantic comedies of the 1980s (themselves based on screwball comedies of the 1930s), Japanese games, and films from Studio Ghibli. When *Mario 64* was released in 1996 during the development period for his game *Gex: Enter the Gecko* (released two years later), he felt that Mario was "an enormous advance for character action games," in part because it did not have an "overt storytelling through line," which he believed hinted at greater possibilities for storytelling in games than simple cut scenes or straight dialogue (figures 7.8 and 7.9).[60]

In 1999, during the making of *Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver*, Richard Lemarchand and his team again drew from titles that they felt captured some method for combining storytelling with gameplay particularly well, including the classic *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. Because of its success in combining "rich gameplay and terrific storytelling" and the fact that the "goals of the characters in game and the player [were] so closely aligned," this game offered additional ideas and inspiration. One challenge (among many) that developers face when trying to develop deep stories is how to point players in certain directions or explain game elements while

Figure 7.8
Gex: Enter the Gecko (1997).

Figure 7.9
Mario 64 (1996).

Figure 7.10
Soul Reaver (1999).

keeping the player within the realm of the narrative or game fiction, if at all possible. Lemarchand feels that this was achieved with *Soul Reaver* with the creation of an Elder God character that directs the player (as Raziel) to undertake various missions (figure 7.10). Because that character is described as a god, he can address the player-as-character at any time without seeming disruptive, thus merging the fiction of the world and the need to direct players in some way in a satisfying manner.

Further influences came into play during the development of the Uncharted series, with the Resident Evil series affecting the conceptualization of the experience. Without wanting to take on the horror theme, *Resident Evil 4* (released in 2005) offered Lemarchand and the Naughty Dog team an excellent example of implementing atmospheric storytelling and offering players triggered events and multiple other ways to engage with the story as they moved through the game (figure 7.11). Perhaps even more critically, *Resident Evil 4* "felt like it was for a more mature audience and it didn't talk down to its audience." The growing popularity of such adult

Figure 7.11
Resident Evil 4 (2005).

gameplay themes gave the development team license to create a game (and then series) that was more cinematic and expansive in scope and more emotionally meaningful for the player.

Although Lemarchand felt that the Resident Evil series (particularly the fourth game) was a marker for what games might achieve in terms of storytelling or mature themes, Richard Rouse found the same series to be a step back for horror games and something that he wanted to improve on with his own games. When creating games, Rouse favors great mechanics and a world that allows players a large degree of freedom to explore and make choices that matter. *Resident Evil 4* was to him a "really well executed game" but with a less than compelling story, where "it's about a guy with weapons in his coat who just shows up."[61] Instead, Rouse wanted to "reclaim the horror genre" from the Resident Evil franchise with *The Suffering,* released in 2004. Rather than limit player freedom to create a particular experience, Rouse wanted to "allow for improvisation" because he favors creating simulations where many things can happen—where even if "some stuff is broken … [it] might be insanely good"— rather than keeping things walled off. Rouse sees the apotheosis of this walled garden approach in the Resident Evil spinoff series Devil May Cry, which he describes as "a beautiful world covered in Saran Wrap" where the player cannot affect or even touch anything.

These approaches to game influences reveal few straight-line pathways from one game to another. Some developers see component pieces or experiences that they want to improve and see earlier games as either formative or experiences to work against, depending on their own interpretations. Japanese games can serve as inspirations in ways that their early designers did not imagine. Perhaps this will happen as developers borrow from many different genres or via their own gameplay experiences and are motivated to launch new ways of playing and interacting.

Although there are few direct influences, most developers will acknowledge the role that games played either in their youth or over their careers as developers. Most also recognize that early Japanese games helped to define genres, influence what counts as a game or game mechanic, and shape what a good game might look like. They often seek to build off that work in a variety of ways. One of the most interesting of those approaches is that of Jason Rohrer, indie developer of games like *Passage*. Rohrer's main intent is to create games with no prior influence in them. Although he admits that this goal is largely impossible, he works to avoid creating games that might be described as mashups of different titles or genres. Instead, he seeks to create unique experiences, such as the online home robbery game *The Castle Doctrine*. As Nick Fortugno reminds us, however, it is practically impossible to get past the influences of early games because they established the classic mechanics and genres. Rohrer admits this yet tries to work in the opposite direction—perhaps trying to do what early Japanese and Western designers did—to create new experiences and modes of gameplay without direct reference or recourse to other games.

Conclusions: Rethinking Studio Studies and Developer Influence

When making games, developers draw from the work of prior developers, but they also bring into the mix other interests and ideas from other areas, including cinema, books, art, crowd watching, and mathematics. Japanese games are part of that mixture—both positively and negatively. And Japanese games contribute to the design fluency—the game talk—that Casey O'Donnell identifies as central to the work of contemporary developers. Having such a shorthand helps workers see connections and ideas quickly, which gives them a common ground from which to build.

That common ground is not always completely common. O'Donnell points to gender and national differences between developers as points where this communication breaks down. This chapter also makes the case that generation matters to developers in terms of what game history they have and what they consider to be foundational. That will become magnified as time goes on. We probably also will see shifts as studios stratify into AAA and indie spaces and developers have more varied backgrounds: growing up, did they play one of the Medal of Honor games or the latest Grand Theft Auto, or were they drawn to the Persona series or *Recettear*? More work may be needed to find common ground.

Very little is "pure" in terms of cultural origin relative to game creation or design, however. Many if not most of the developers I talked with claimed to like Studio Ghibli films, with a subset of those admitting to enjoying various forms of anime and manga. Others enjoyed Japanese horror cinema or were fascinated by Japanese architecture or design principles more generally. Some also liked German cinema, surrealist art, classic and modernist novels, heavy metal music, and fantasy and science fiction literature. This suggests that culture creation is really more like "cultures creation" in its ultimate expression. Bits of Japanese horror cinema mix with American comic book art styles, tempered by European painters. Those are only some of the influences that make up Western videogames. Just as many other diverse influences went into the creation of Japanese videogames. But we can end with this: Japanese videogames have influenced Western game developers in a multitude of ways and in doing so have contributed in key ways to a global culture. That work is perpetuated in Japanese games and in the design inspirations that they have fostered in other developers around the world.

8 Conclusions

While finishing this book, I had the chance to read new scholarship in the area of anime studies, which has evolved almost as much as game studies. Scholars in that area, as I point out in several chapters, have also grappled with how anime does or does not express Japaneseness or even if that is the correct question to ask. Thomas Lamarre argues that to search for evidence of Japaneseness in anime's representations and stories is reductive and presupposes that there is one history or one set of core elements of Japaneseness that can be unearthed. Similarly, Ian Condry points out that searching for those elements can be compared to identifying "cultural resonances," which imply static relationships between people and media—something that is far from the case with videogames. An even more intriguing objection to simple searches for Japaneseness can be found through an examination of the production practices of Japanese anime, which tells an intriguing origins story for at least some "Japanese" anime.

At Toei Animation, one of Japan's leading animation houses, labor practices confound what we think we know about Japanese anime. The company has employed star creators and made some of the best-known anime series by subcontracting with South Korean companies for that production. According to Kukhee Choo, this was not for minor polishing: "the storylines and scripts were delivered from Japan, but everything else, including drawing, tracing, and filming, was executed in South Korea."[1] That labor was made invisible through Toei's crediting practices, where, as Joon Yang Kim explains, the company often replaced the names of Korean animators "with fictitious Japanese names in the credits of animated series broadcast on television in the 1980s. It was necessary to disguise overseas subcontracting, given that there were sometimes noticeable visual inconsistencies" in the anime.[2]

The South Korean artists who were employed in this way took pride in their work, and some tried to subvert the "authenticity" or alleged Japaneseness of the work and expose its hidden origins. As Choo explains, the Japanese producer of the television series *Candy Candy* (1976–1979) on numerous occasions returned drawings to South Korea

because artists had tried to leave their "stamps" on the animation cels. One particular artist repeatedly put small Korean temples in the background, even though the narrative of *Candy Candy* was set in the United States and Europe. ... the cel artists asserted that they were not mere subcontract laborers to Japanese animation companies but Korean artists who could intentionally sabotage, undermine, and subvert the authentic "Japaneseness" of anime.[3]

Such stories lend additional weight to skepticism surrounding any claims to essential Japaneseness in anime or videogames. But does animation done in Japan pass the Japaneseness test? In his work studying the anime industry and its studios, Condry writes that some early Toei animators in Japan relied on a guide created by the American Preston Blair for their work. The textbook analyzed human movements and explained how to animate them in detail, but they felt that the material was "lacking": "these were still the exaggerated gestures of Europeans and Americans ... like the way some Japanese who have lived abroad will spread their arms and shake their head when they say 'oh no!'"[4] As Condry points out, Japanese animators adapted those methods, and the practices of the Toei company were "less an exercise in defining a unique Japaneseness than an effort to secure a sustainable position in an evolving media market."[5] As with anime, videogame origins and history are a tricky business, and to try to identify truths or resonances for their success will nearly always fail, particularly when we rely on cultural origins as an explanatory device. Better to investigate the multiple contexts that cross cultures, societies, and practices.

The Rise of Multiple Digital Game Industries

One key point to arise from this research is the need to reenvision how we talk about the game industry. It is a fiction to talk about "the game industry" as if it were a monolith. That might have been true in the early days of development, but it is definitely not the case in the twenty-first century. Multiple industries now span different regions, hardware platforms, studio sizes, and levels of professionalism. These differences determine how we

talk about and study the industry and what kinds of claims we can make for it as it continues to evolve.

The first way to think about multiple industries is the growing muddle of the global marketplace. National and regional borders can mean more and less than they did even a couple of decades ago when thinking about the game industry. We have shifted from a relatively well-defined system of regions protected by lockout software and broadcast standards (NTSC, PAL) to one where games are simultaneously released globally and are available via legitimate or illegitimate download from any number of international vendors or sites. Along with that shift, game publishers and developers must consider how to reach multiple audiences around the world, either by using sophisticated localization, by purchasing and utilizing native studios, by making selective releases regionally, or by other means. As the investigations of Square Enix, Capcom, and Level-5 demonstrate, however, there are no simple answers, and what works in one case will not necessarily be successful in another. Even the option of attempting to erase signs of the foreign from a game to appeal to other cultures can fail, and in some cases strategically retaining and promoting a certain kind of Japaneseness—whether through use of particular art styles, storylines, music, or even genre (such as the Japanese role-playing game)—can be more successful.

Another type of industry specialization is the growing difference in emphasis on console and handheld systems between Japan and North America. Although games on both types of platforms can sell well in either region, Japan is far more invested in handheld titles, and North American players are more likely to play via home console. That distinction has important implications for how Japanese and Western developers approach their markets and also influences the types of risks they take. For example, Capcom might not be able to rely on equally strong sales of a console title in Japan, North America, and Europe: the latter two are more possible than the former. That suggests that if a Japanese studio is producing a console game, it is likely under more pressure to get it right for Western audiences—which explains why Western players are increasingly catered to by Japanese developers like Level-5, which must now consider their preferences more carefully. On that platform—the console—the Western player is increasingly valued. In contrast, Japanese developers can more safely assume a Japanese audience for handheld releases and can take more risks with those types of games due to their generally smaller budgets, shorter development

cycles, and different expectations from players. But the Western market might never equal (at least in relative terms) that of Japan in terms of players who enjoy and prefer handheld games—making the platform a far from certain bet.

A third and largely unremarked type of industry division that deserves more study is the division between the official for-profit industry and ROM hackers and fan translators. Although many individuals in this scene would argue that the golden era of ROM hacking has passed, it is still an active and vital activity in need of better documentation and analysis. The history of ROM hacking ties in closely with players' wishes for more and faster official game localization efforts, but it now centers on older and extremely niche titles and so provides a valuable service to interested players and to game historians as well. Small groups like Aeon Genesis Translation Project continue to release ROM hacks for older Japanese titles, creating a back catalog of titles for North American players and scholars to explore and enjoy. More high-profile projects like the *Mother 3* translation have been featured on prominent games journalism sites and probably will attract more attention to this work. Their activities also demonstrate the global work being done. *Mother 3* now has ROM patches for many other languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and German with others underway. ROM hackers also leave behind key artifacts via their translation notes and progress videos, giving researchers rare documentation of their decision-making processes. They also work at the edges of the professional industry—sometimes getting into legal troubles for their work and other times making the leap into professional translation. They also give us very different types of localizations and translations of games than do more commercial companies. As Jeremie Gagnon-Pelletier explains, they usually are more interested in retaining fidelity to the original source material[6] than are large companies like Square Enix, which must, as Richard Honeywood points out, endeavor to make the game feel familiar to many different kinds of audiences and so tries to eliminate any trace of the foreign or strange.[7]

Finally and perhaps most visibly, multiple industries are emerging as independent (or indie) studios become prominent and middle-range studios become more rare due to the ever-increasing costs of console game production. In Japan and North America, there are increasingly very large development houses and publishers and very small ones. Although small and nonprofit (or nonprofessional) game creators have always existed (with

many selling *doujin* games at the Comiket), they are now reaching out to a global audience and offering interesting alternatives via outlets such as Steam and Xbox Live Arcade. Likewise, indies are specializing, concentrating on particular platforms such as mobile or social, which give them a more level playing field in terms of game scope and design. They may not compete with AAA studios on reach (except on rare occasions), but indies and AAA studios must both be considered when thinking about Japanese games and what types of games are circulating. Given the surge of critical interest in indie game development, such studios—in Japan and the West—are now increasingly considered vanguards for experimental and innovative design and so may offer even greater influence than their sales may suggest.

Cosmopolitanism and Globalization

Another way to understand the influence of Japan's videogames on players and the industry is via theories of globalization and cosmopolitanism. Increasingly, we are studying players and learning more about what they do and how they understand and interpret gameplay activities. Yet much of that study remains confined to the act of interpreting gameplay itself and does not take account of players' broader lives and experiences. Western players who enjoy Japanese videogames are an important group. For many of the players I talked to, games were a starting point or another step toward a greater awareness of a culture other than their own. Besides having a great interest in Japanese games for their unique qualities, players also became interested in Japanese language, society, and people—the culture that the games came from. For some, interest and appreciation were enough, and they formed one end of the spectrum of cosmopolitanism—displaying a basic or surface form that does not engage as deeply with cultural forms as others on the spectrum. For others, it led to increased study, awareness, and exploration, and for a few, it meant language acquisition, travel, and perhaps even career or life changes as they moved to a more engaged cosmopolitanism. All of those activities suggest the greater variety of cosmopolitan dispositions that global citizens now share, although to varying degrees. Understanding how North American players make sense of a foreign country and culture and foreign products demonstrates another way to interpret the act of gameplay and the ways that players engage with

diverse game cultures. Cosmopolitanism can be a key lens to understanding the increasingly transnational act of gameplay—and game studies offers theories of globalization, new sites for study, and more engaged individuals to theorize. Using a spectrum also helps us move beyond binaries of cosmopolitan or not cosmopolitan, which are of little use when trying to gauge the complexities of everyday experiences and activities.

Companies like Square Enix are also global players that must contend with the challenges of creating cultural products that are familiar to some audiences and may come across as noise to others. How such companies deal with issues like multiple targeted regions and differences in cultural tastes, platform preferences, and language barriers is critical to detail and analyze. Different companies take different approaches, and as the chapters on Square Enix, Capcom, and Level-5 show, there is no one path to success. What works in one instance might fail miserably in the next, and what one company might see as the wrong approach might be deployed as a successful strategy by another. Likewise, the emergence of events and organizations such as bitSummit in Japan show how indies can take part in the global circulation of games. Started in 2013, bitSummit hosts events to facilitate networking and community building among independent developers in Japan and links those developers with Western distributors such as Steam, mediating between the groups to foster successful exchanges.

Another key concept to emerge from these studies is the culture broker—an individual or group that navigates and mediates across different cultures to determine how best to keep or change products as they travel. Localization experts are one type of contemporary culture broker, and their activities deserve greater study. Now that studios are moving into more diverse markets than ever before, the role of the culture broker is essential. For example, the indie localization studio Carpe Fulgur helped the Japanese company easygamestation reach a North American audience for one of its games and also engaged in marketing and promotion that capitalized on Western interest in Japanese role-playing games, anime, and Japanese culture generally. The company also walked a line between localization that eliminated elements that might be read as noise by potential players and keeping enough of the Japanese elements of the game intact for Western fans of the genre and culture.

In the future, perhaps multiple culture brokers will be needed as markets expand beyond Japan, North America, Europe, and Asia to include Southeast

Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Russia, and China. And given the role of the culture broker as more than merely translating but also being involved in "geopolitical awareness," game studies theorization of this area can offer even more to general theories of globalization.

Signaling Japaneseness

Discussing the unstable yet evolving nature of a game's Japaneseness has been a key but fraught topic throughout this project. In discussions of Orientalism, business strategies, and developer interests, Japaneseness as a concept has remained slippery, transforming itself with each page and topic shift. What this exploration has made apparent is that Japaneseness is inflected with the ideologies and practices of Orientalism and techno-Orientalism but ultimately is not defined by them. Western ways of seeing and understanding "the Orient" have power relations built into them. As other scholars have observed, Japan's relationship to Orientalism is different than that of the Middle East that Edward Said wrote about, due in part to its relationship to the United States and the West and the lack of colonization in its own history. That difference is played out in the history of the game industry, which challenges simple binaries of East-West or even West-rest. This is due to Japan's early domination of the console industry and its persistent presence in that arena, both in hardware and software development and production.

Furthermore, Japan's "cool Japan" policy and economic initiatives position the country as a self-aware actor in the digital economy of culture, where its games, anime, and other products are created and sold with full recognition of their origins—which in certain cases are their selling points. In that way, Capcom, Square Enix, Level-5, and Nintendo can be seen as walking a fine line. Some of their products are made in Japan and explicitly draw from and point to that culture of cool. Other products (games or consoles) are deemed as in need of a broader appeal beyond fans of cool Japan, and therefore in those cases the creators work to eliminate, reduce, or deny those origins. At work in those processes are increasingly skilled culture brokers who must make decisions about which elements of a game like *Recettear* or *Phoenix Wright* must be changed and which can remain the same. Some decisions are practically oriented: handheld games will be more popular in Japan, and console games are dominant in other markets.

Some franchises and genres (such as visual novels and the Inazuma Eleven series) are persistently popular in some places, while others (like Pokémon) have seemingly global appeal. Language issues and local laws, policies, and market situations will always give rise to the need for localization.

The fans of Japanese games that I studied profess to love such games at least in part due to their Japaneseness—defined as whatever element they enjoy that sets them apart from Western games. Although we could measure and attempt to explicate exactly what those elements are and in what combination they appear, it might be better to conclude that fans are identifying components that signal Japaneseness to them in some idiosyncratic way—and that is in itself meaningful. For them, Japaneseness is a positive element to find in a game, and they find it where they wish to look.

In other venues and for other individuals and groups, such as in the studios of Capcom, Japaneseness presents a potential problem. It is an indefinable essence that reads as noise to foreign players and therefore must be removed to make AAA console games feel more familiar to Western players. To compensate, companies like Capcom buy Western studios, hire them, or bring Western developers onto their staffs to help overcome this issue with respect to their franchises or for developing new intellectual property. The elements that signal Japaneseness that must be removed are always slippery and include language (which can be translated), culture (which can be researched and changed), gameplay feel (which can be altered), genre (which can perhaps be mashed up with another more popular one), and platform, storyline, or development pipeline and workflow structure. No one answer can ever be definitively identified, and that probably is the point. Instead, studios try multiple approaches or circle back to those that worked once and repeat those as long as success results. In the process of doing so, Japaneseness is constantly reinvoked as a mythical problem. It is always/already a problem—something that cannot be fully grasped or corrected for, that has been carefully managed when a game is successful, or that has been felt too strongly when a game fails. The only constant is the lack of a constant object. Even as one element of traditional Japanese culture is the stress on impermanence and change, Japaneseness becomes strangely eternal even as it manages risk by always changing and altering itself to fit with particular studio needs or worries.

But even if Japaneseness is shifting and varied, what are some elements that we can identify as contributing to its structures and its form? How

game developers talk about Japaneseness can be indicative of what Westerners see when they look for Japaneseness. There is a sense of the ridiculous, whimsy, or disregard for expectations. In the way that developers describe *Katamary Damacy*, we can see it at work—the play space where the world becomes a playground of objects to roll up so that we can repopulate the sky with stars removed by our drunk king father. Some elements of Japanese culture feel foreign to Westerners and invoke that sense—the bento boxes, *hashi*, red paper lanterns, *kanji* script, folk music, folk tales, and invocations of religions not widely practiced in the West, such as Buddhism and Shintoism. There also are a breaking of taboos that cultures outside the West do not apply, ways of relating to others through levels of politeness, high school systems that differ radically from Western ones, and other elements of culture that do not feel familiar to Westerners.

It is possible to devalue those differences or make them the other and remove those differences from games when selling them to a global market. But for many Western developers, those elements are sources of inspiration: they are ideas for new ways of telling stories and making games. They might also comprise nostalgic memories from childhood—either through Japanese games played in the past or through their own explorations of Japanese culture. In either case, they form a core set of elements and experiences that developers use to craft their own games, and some explicitly invoke or iterate on elements as they acknowledge their interest or the excellence of a prior form.

Defining Japaneseness as a concept cannot be done easily, or perhaps usefully. It is instead more useful to consider it to be a signaling device—a signifier that can be deployed strategically in a multitude of ways. It can be a marketing rhetoric that boosts recognition of particular products—as the cool Japan initiative seeks to do. Western players can search for it via their gameplay and recognize it as an element that sets their choices apart from Western versions. Japanese studios can employ multiple strategies to eliminate "too much" Japaneseness, and Western studios are thought to be helpful in that process. Finally, Japaneseness can be an inspiration for Western developers who are seeking to create new games. It is one element among many that they draw from in their creative processes. In all of these activities, Japaneseness is not successfully defined or even eliminated. It remains at the boundaries of definitions but is still very real in that movement.

The Future of Japanese Games

The 2014 Game Developers Conference included several interesting presentations by Japanese developers, including a retrospective postmortem of *Shenmue*, a discussion of the relaunch of *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*, and a postmortem of *Animal Crossing: A New Leaf*. Each was indicative of the centrality and shifting fortunes of games made in Japan. Talking about his 1999 Dreamcast classic *Shenmue*, Yu Suzuki told the audience stories about amusing bugs found during development and about the thoughtful and extensive research into Japanese culture that went into making the game. Suzuki also related elements of the game that were revolutionary for their time (such as weather patterns that used real historical data) but might seem commonplace today. These kinds of stories provide a better understanding of what went into making a game and flesh out the history of development in Japan. They are not widely told and only recently have they begun to be systematically gathered and preserved. For a 2013 Kickstarter project, for example, a UK writer traveled to Japan to interview Japanese developers to preserve such stories. We are now at a point where such stories (beyond simple business histories of companies like Nintendo) are deemed worth telling, but we need more of them. They reveal how games are made, how cultural influences work, where different ideas come from, and why some game elements work the way they do or never see the light of day.

The new producer of Square Enix's troubled massively multiplayer online game *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* seemed to delight in detailing the mistakes of his predecessors and the challenges that a Japanese company faced in trying to make a new MMOG "post-*World of Warcraft*." Defying stereotypes of Japanese individuals who never speak negatively in public, Naoki Yoshida recounted how the former development team had an "obsession with graphical quality" that nearly destroyed the game's chances for success. He pointed out the lack of popularity of MMOGs in Japan, which has resulted in a local industry that includes few developers who are skilled in building such virtual worlds. Given the task of remaking the game while the original version was still running (and needing to provide continuous updates for it in the process), Yoshida spoke convincingly of how a Japanese company overcame many challenges, shed some "Japaneseness" in the process, and appealed to Western players with the updated *Realm Reborn*.[8]

In the most surprising presentation, Nintendo project leader Aya Kyo-goku discussed how her team updated the Animal Crossing franchise to attract new players and concluded that diversity on the development team was important to the game's appeal: "in my years at Nintendo, I have come to discover that when there are women in a variety of roles on the project, you get a wider [range] of ideas."[9] After she was done talking, the game's producer, Katsuya Eguchi, reaffirmed her remarks, stating that the diversity of the game's team reflected the diversity of the audience that they hoped would buy the game. And it probably did: the game had sold more than 7 million copies at the time of their presentation.[10] Kyogoku's talk also focused on multiple elements of the game that were updated or changed, but Nintendo had an explicit commitment to diversity in its audiences and development teams. The talk was scheduled as part of the highly popular "Design" track at GDC (and not in the newer, less well attended "Advocacy" track), and therefore the talk of diversity was even more significant. Nintendo wanted to send that particular message, even if a few months later it stumbled over the issue of diversity by insisting that the game *Tomodachi Life*, when localized for the West, could not allow gay marriage.[11] Diversity is an ongoing project, but Nintendo's pursuit of broader audiences for its games and the networked features that were built into *A New Leaf* indicate the company's willingness to take risks when trying to sell more games and reach wider markets.

Such talks signal the continuation of a trend not just in videogames but also in culture more generally. Writing about East Asian art and its influence on North America, Warren Cohen argues that cultural influences between East and West are long and enduring and affect more than just the artwork that is created: "the collecting of East Asian art affected American perceptions of China and Japan, American taste, American conceptions of art, American culture."[12] Those who studied art sometimes took that interest further to learn about another culture, such as the art historian James Jarves, whose "appreciation of Japanese art let him to study the culture, to understand the relationship between religion and art in Japan."[13] Much like later Western fans of Japanese videogames, nineteenth-century art historians and collectors in the United States were influenced by Japanese art to learn more about Japan and its culture and to deepen and broaden their understandings. Just as more recent Japanese videogames are localized for Western audiences, so too was early East Asian art altered by Western

interests. Some art remained at home in the East, but increasingly "artists in [Japan and China] devoted themselves to producing art for Western, sometimes specifically American markets. … Ceramists and painters of both China and Japan modified their styles, their subjects, and occasionally their medium, to sell abroad."[14]

The process of game localization and global sales is not new, nor is Western fascination and interest with Japanese culture and arts. If videogames are the predominant art form of the twenty-first century—the Ludic century, as Eric Zimmerman and Heather Chaplin argue,[15] they will continue to be an amalgamation of influences and styles from both East and West, maintaining the tradition that other artworks before them have started.

Notes

Introduction

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3. Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 94.

4. Ibid., 134.

5. Lamarre, 89.

6. Ibid., xxviii.

7. Brian Ruh, "Conceptualizing Anime and the Database Fantasyscape," *Mechademia* 9 (2014): 168.

8. Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006); Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Misa Matsuda, eds., *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Takayuki Tatsumi, *Full Metal Apache: Transactions between Cyberpunk Japan and Avant-Pop America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

9. Timon Screech, *The Lens within the Heart: The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Late Edo Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

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11. Ibid.

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15. Condry, 93.

16. Lamarre, 14.

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18. Winther-Tamaki.

19. Lambourne, 16.

20. Ibid., 112.

21. Winther-Tamaki, 13.

22. Ibid., 12.

23. Ibid.

24. Allison; Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda; Iwabuchi; Tatsumi.

25. Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda.

26. Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 98.

27. Allison.

28. Ibid., 38–39.

29. Ibid., 20.

30. Iwabuchi.

31. David Sheff, *Game Over: Press Start to Continue* (New York: Random House, 1999).

32. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 322.

33. Bryan Taylor, "From Orientalism to Global Sociology," in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. Alexander Lyon Macfie (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 370.

34. Ibid.

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39. Christopher Douglas, "You Have Unleashed a Horde of Barbarians! Fighting Indians, Playing Games, Forming Disciplines," *Postmodern Culture* 902 (13.1) (2002): 27.

40. Leigh Schwartz, "Fantasy, Realism, and the Other in Recent Video Games," *Space and Culture* 9 (3) (2006): 320.

41. Jeffrey Ow, "The Revenge of the Yellowfaced Cyborg Terminator: The Rape of Digital Geishas and the Colonization of Cyber-Coolies in 3D Realms' *Shadow Warrior*," in *Asian America.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*, ed. Rachel C. Lee and Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, 249–266 (New York: Routledge, 2003).

42. Elmer Tucker, "The Orientalist Perspective: Cultural Imperialism in Gaming," *Gameology* (2006), accessed June 30, 2014, http://gameology.org/essays/the _orientalist_perspective_cultural_imperialism_in_gamin.

43. Ibid.

44. Schwartz, 320.

45. Ibid.

46. Lacking an extensive background in Japanese studies or the Japanese language, I cannot know the intricacies of Japanese culture enough to understand the place of such games in their home market.

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49. Simon Carless, "Analysis: What *VGChartz* Does (and Doesn't) Do for the Game Biz," *Gamasutra*, June 23, 2008, accessed July 7, 2014, http://www.gamasutra.com/ php-bin/news_index.php?story=18919; Alexander Hinkley, "Why *VGChartz* Isn't Considered Reliable," *Examiner*, July 29, 2010, accessed July 7, 2014, http://www .examiner.com/article/why-vgchartz-isn-t-considered-reliable.

Chapter 1: Playing with Cosmopolitanism

1. All of the names of people who spoke with me about their interest in Japanese videogames are pseudonyms.

2. Most of the players I talked with started playing videogames in the 1990s, when Japanese companies such as Nintendo, Square, and Konami produced a large number (if not most) of the games that were released globally. They were unfamiliar (except as a historical event) with the Atari 2600 system and thus associated their early gameplay experiences with Japanese products.

3. Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

4. Zlatko Skrbis, Gavin Kendall, and Ian Woodward, "Locating Cosmopolitanism: Between Humanist Ideal and Grounded Social Category," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (6) (2004): 117.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 121.

7. Petra Riefler and Adamantios Diamantopoulos, "Consumer Cosmopolitanism: Review and Replication of the CYMYC Scale," *International Marketing* 62 (2009): 407–419.

8. Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Media Consumers in a Digital Age* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

9. Motti Regev, "Cultural Uniqueness and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism," *European Journal of Social Theory* 10 (1) (2007): 123–138.

10. John Urry, "The Global Media and Cosmopolitanism," Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK, 2000, accessed July 4, 2014, http://www.cabuenes.org/03/documentos/cursos/globalizacion/bloque2/glob_blq2_09.pdf, 5.

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12. Ibid., 9.

13. Zlatko Skrbis and Ian Woodward, "The Ambivalence of Ordinary Cosmopolitanism: Investigating the Limits of Cosmopolitan Openness," *Sociological Review* 55 (4) (2007): 730–747, 745.

14. Robert Halsall, "Towards a Phenomenological Critique of 'Mediated Cosmopolitanism,'" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Dresden International Congress Centre, Dresden, Germany, June 19–23, 2006, 15.

15. Jenkins; Constance Steinkuehler, "Virtual Worlds, Learning and the New Pop Cosmopolitanism," *Teacher's College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, November 17, 2006, accessed July 4, 2014, http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp ?contentid=12843.

16. Urry.

17. The term *gamers* is also somewhat loaded. Some players I talked with would not describe themselves as hardcore gamers, even if they played for many hours a day at a time.

18. Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Susan Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Antonia Levi, "The Americanization of Anime and Manga: Negotiating Popular Culture," in *Cinema Anime: Critical Engagements with Japanese Animation*, ed. Steven Brown, 43–63 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

19. Mizuko Ito, "Hypersociality, Otaku, and the Digital Media Mix," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Social Studies of Science, New Orleans, LA, 2002.

20. Recent research on the anime industry from both Marc Steinberg and Ian Condry has noted how anime and manga creators focus on characters and worlds, rather than stories, in their work. One reason for this is the portability of characters, which can easily be licensed for merchandise or spread across multiple media forms, such as manga, games, and films. The players I talked with consistently mentioned story as one of their favorite elements of Japanese videogames, although they intermingled some discussion of characters and the world of the game in their descriptions of what made stories compelling to them. The research that I did on players was some of the earliest work that I did for this book. It would be interesting to ask players the same questions now and probe for any distinctions they make between stories, characters, and worlds to see if player sentiments have changed or if interests have remained the same. Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Condry, 2013.

21. Steven Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games* (New York: Routlege, 2008).

22. Brian Ruh, "Conceptualizing Anime and the Database Fantasyscape," *Mechademia* 9 (2014): 164–175.

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24. Iwabuchi.

25. Anne Allison, *Millenial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

26. Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

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28. Urry.

29. Ibid.; Riefler and Diamontopoulos.

30. Urry, 7–8.

Chapter 2: Unintended Travel

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3. Ibid.

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7. Julian Kucklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *Fiberculture* 5 (2005), accessed May 25, 2015, http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry.

8. I am limiting this exploration to ROM hackers and fan translators who work to bring Japanese videogames to an English-speaking audience. Although certain efforts, such as those surrounding *Mother 3*, extend beyond an English-language patch for the game (and some projects happily support those working in multiple languages), to maintain the scope of this project I make that restriction. Japanese videogames are also regularly patched and hacked for play in Spanish, French, Portuguese, and many other languages, although the majority of the activity I chronicle here is limited to English-only versions.

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10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 99.

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23. Ibid., 426.

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32. Ibid.

33. *EarthBound Zero*, *Starmen.net*, 2011, accessed July 2, 2014, http://starmen.net/ mother1.

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36. *EarthBound* Central, "*EarthBound* Series Sales Figures," 2009, accessed July 2, 2014, http://earthboundcentral.com/2009/02/earthbound-series-sales-figures.

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41. Milner, 500.

42. "Usage Statistics for Starmen.net—April 2006," *Starmen.net*, April 2006, accessed July 4, 2014, http://starmen.net/devotion/smnetStatsApr06.png.

43. Ibid.

44. Reidman.

45. Milner, 497.

46. Hector Postigo, "The Socio-technical Architecture of Digital Labor: Converting Play into YouTube Money," *New Media & Society* (2014): 9. doi: 10.1177/ 1461444814541527.

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48. They also can fiddle with the actual gameplay, such as the Starmen's "easy ring" mod for *Mother 1 + 2*, to make it less frustrating for contemporary players to experience.

Chapter 3: Playing Japan's Games

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3. The UK studio Ninja Theory was hired by Capcom to develop *DmC*, the latest in its Devil May Cry franchise. That franchise was originally created by Capcom as a spinoff from its Resident Evil series of games. I wanted to include a game that had Japanese roots, was still overseen by a Japanese company, but was created elsewhere to see what might change as a result of that mixture.

4. My own game-playing history skipped over the heights of Mario and Zelda popularity and dominance. I was an Atari child, and after it went out of fashion, I stopped playing games for a long time. I played some PC games intermittently in graduate school and then began playing again in earnest in 2000, when I bought a PlayStation. Thus, I missed the NES, SNES, and early Nintendo games. I did not understand why male college friends were excited to play *Mortal Kombat*, and I wasted few quarters on *Donkey Kong* (although I did like *Centipede*). The platformer genre never appealed to me (and still does not), leaving the gap you will see here.

5. Games that I played but do not discuss here include *Tokyo Jungle*, a PS3 downloadable game that is set in a postapocalyptic Tokyo, where animals are the only creatures that survive. Starting as a small Pomeranian, the player must seek food, avoid predators, and find a mate to survive. In the PS3 game *Demon's Souls*, I spent time gathering souls, clicking on bloodstains, and generally being paranoid about my lack of progress in its dungeons. Finally, I played through another Level-5 title— the hit game *Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box*, which is a puzzle adventure for the DS and a loose sequel to *Professor Layton and the Curious Village*. Each of these games said something helpful to advancing game studies' analyses, but I omit further discussion of them here for space concerns.

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10. Taylor, 197.

11. Ibid., 198.

12. Ibid., 195.

13. Azuma, 79.

14. Ibid., 76.

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16. Ibid.

17. Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theater* (Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991), 53–54.

18. Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 144.

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Chapter 5: Localization

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Chapter 7: A Game's Building Blocks

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2. The data in this chapter are drawn from twenty-four qualitative, in-depth interviews conducted between February and June 2013. Most of the interviews were done in person at the annual Game Developers Conference held in March 2013 in San Francisco. Others were conducted via Skype or email either prior to or following the conference. In-person and Skype interviews took approximately thirty to seventy-five minutes each, depending on the experiences of the individuals questioned. All interviewees were asked a common set of questions related to two areas. The first set asked about formative influences on their own game design and development work, and the second set asked for their perspectives on the current state of the Japanese and global videogame industry from both design and business standpoints.

   In determining interview candidates, I wanted a diversity of voices, including female and male developers. Of the twenty-four developers discussed here, five are

women. I attempted to recruit more female developers to increase those numbers, but they did not respond to my requests. I also wanted developers from different generations—those who started making games before the rise of home console systems and those who grew up playing arcade games, Nintendo systems, and online games, including connected mainframes, BBS systems, and *Ultima Online* (I spoke with the developer who created *Ultima* as well). I looked for those who had experience developing commercially successful console games as well as those working in indie, serious, social, mobile, and alternative spaces. Some potential informants did not wish to participate, stating that they had not been influenced by Japanese games at all and thus had nothing to share. Others felt the same lack of influence but were happy to talk about why or what other influences they drew from. Despite those limitations, the two dozen interviews I conducted offer a wealth of knowledge and information and gave me valuable insights into how developers think, how they go about the process of game development, and what the influences and effects of games are and can be.

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