

Taiko vs bongo: Taiko no Tatsujin, Donkey Konga, and Japaneseness in their European Distribution

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Abstract

Taiko no Tatsujin (henceforth *TnT*) is one of the most iconic series of Japanese games. Released in 2001 and with more than 60 instalments, it did not arrive in Europe until 2018, with *Drum'n'Fun!* and *Drum Session!* (henceforth *TnT18*). This was not the first attempt to bring the series to “the West”: in 2004, *Taiko: Drum Master* was released in North America and *Donkey Konga* (henceforth *DK*), a pseudo-spin-off, arrived in Europe and North America. Although *DK* was first released in Japan, its fictional universe, song selection, and distribution strategy show it was an international project.

This article first asks how the way to *TnT18* was paved in Europe and how these preceding games articulated Japaneseness. We first analyse the games themselves through theories of ludofiction and of Japaneseness, or identifiable cultural markers valued in reception, thus producing a genealogy of their contexts and marketing strategies. *TnT* is first studied as a distinctively Japanese series, then the article focuses on *Taiko Drum Master*, and lastly on the *DK* series. All games are studied through game analysis and paratexts including interviews, promotional materials, and discussions of Japaneseness in their Western reception.

Secondly, this article studies *TnT18* as a European release, mainly from its reception. We use promotional paratexts and the 16 European reviews available at Metacritic. We focus on whether the game’s perceived Japaneseness was a relevant factor for the reviewers and identify four main points in these reviews: the game’s status as a Japanese cult classic, the mechanics and the tatakon, the setlist, and the humour and visuals.

In studying these two phases, this article traces the commercial history and the evolution of the reception of *TnT* in Europe and its framing as a Japanese icon in the region, offering a local European perspective on a highly important gēmu.

Introduction: On (Gamic) Japaneseness

Rhythm games have been present in video games since the mid-1990s, first in amusement arcades and then in home consoles. *TnT*, released in 2001 by Namco, has maintained a strong following and a steady stream of releases since then, with new arcade versions released almost yearly and adaptations for PlayStation 2, PSP, Nintendo DS, Nintendo Wii, Nintendo 3DS, Nintendo Wii U, PlayStation Vita, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch, as well as for iOS and Android. Its success led to a collaboration with Nintendo for the *DK* (2003-2005) series for GameCube, a sort of spin-off set in the world of Donkey Kong. Both titles/series are gēmu –Japanese video

games, forming “a particular media ecology or system” (Picard 2013) – that have adapted and sold in different ways the idea of Japaneseness, a vaporous concept that, as will be shown, is connected to performance, Orientalism, and marketing rhetoric. We believe that Japanese games should be considered from that duality between gēmu and Japaneseness. From the perspective of game production studies (Sotamaa and Svelch 2021), calling them “gēmu” implies acknowledging the idiosyncrasies of their context, in the same way anime and manga are studied as distinct from Western animation and comic books. This does not mean they should comply with an essence that encloses them within creative limits just for being Japanese. On the contrary, by speaking of gēmu, as Picard and other



scholars do, we can articulate debates and analysis around production and reception. Studying them as *gēmu* considers the original contexts and creation and also the set of expectations that come with these; that is, the idea of Japaneseness that different groups of players are going to articulate to play them, appreciate them, and judge them.

For our analysis, we must first define and problematise Japaneseness. Japaneseness is the answer one specific individual or group would give to the question “What does it mean (for something) to be Japanese?”. John Lie (2001, 83) locates the problem of this concept in the *Nihonjinron*, or writings on the nature of the people of Japan, their culture and their society, something that is simultaneously “a variant of an almost universal discourse of modern nation-states”. For Lie (2001, 85), many of the descriptions of Japan that these writings provide are problematic simplifications, but that does not prevent them from being read by nationals in search of knowledge about themselves and their culture, producing a “cultural nationalism” of internal consumption (Yoshino 1992). National identity is not built on an idea of citizenship but rather on cultural unity, as Anderson (1983) suggests with his imagined communities. Perceptions of cultural homogeneity are also a social negotiation. To illustrate this, we may turn to the example provided by Mika Ko (2010), who analyses how the Okinawans are included in Japanese cinema as others. Thus, Japaneseness should not be understood as an ontological fact, but as a series of critical assumptions about class, culture, and ethnicity (Lie 2001, 69).

Japaneseness is a vaporous concept also in video games. Since games are a transnational industry, different notions of Japaneseness are used as heuristics by different groups in different countries. For Mia Consalvo (2017, 184), the concept acts more as a “signaling device”, a signifier deployed strategically in a multitude of ways. This is how we understand it: a set of cultural markers, or signifiers, deployed and articulated to create, promote, and receive a game. Consalvo’s views are in line with Andrew Dorman’s (2016, 206), for whom Japaneseness in cinema is related to a performance for foreign audiences. Dorman speaks of a “paradoxical Japaneseness” in the ambiguity in any work’s nationality and recalls that “the cultural presence of Japan, whether or not its cultural specificity is hidden, is inherent to all or the majority of products that the nation has successfully exported”. Dorman notices that

Japanese films can either perform or conceal Japaneseness when exported and discussed abroad, and does not value one strategy over the other. “Concealment” for Dorman refers to “a de-emphasis or, as in some cases, a removal of distinctive cultural features as part of a more culturally ambiguous and hybrid representation of Japan” (2016, 3) and is not presented as either more authentic or inauthentic, but a set of strategies deployed “in order to make cultural exports accessible to non-Japanese consumers” (ibid.). Concealment can be planned, such as the *kokusaika* governmental policy in the 80s (2016, 38), spontaneous, or anything in between.

Consalvo (2017, 215) writes that “Japaneseness [as used in gaming culture] is inflected with the ideologies of practices of Orientalism and techno-Orientalism but ultimately is not defined by them”, and that “Japan’s ‘cool Japan’ policy and economic initiatives position the country as a self-aware actor in the digital economy of culture”. Consalvo points out that “fans are identifying components that signal Japaneseness to them in some idiosyncratic way” (ibid., 216). These components are normally in language, culture, gameplay feel, or genre. Japaneseness is, perhaps more importantly, a tool for marketing rhetoric or an abstraction of what “Westerners see when they look for Japaneseness” (ibid., 217). Chris Goto-Jones (2015) has warned about the interpretive dangers of such practices through his idea of “gamic orientalism”, which adds an experiential layer to the ideological structure of orientalism.

The transnational character of *gēmu* thus exposes it to Dorman’s “paradoxical Japaneseness” and so in response to a diverse international audience, Japan’s cultural productions are flexible and represent not one but “multiple Japans”, some more culturally ambiguous than others, opting for cultural concealment in some cases and “cultural performance” in others, amplifying those cultural markers that the international public recognizes and expects. To use Iwabuchi’s (2002) words, *gēmu* can use either the “*mukokuseki*” style, that is, “without nationality”, “without aroma”, in a “*mukokuseki* game design” (Pelletier-Gagnon 2011), or reinforce its cultural aroma.

Pelletier-Gagnon (ibid.) warns, however, that Japaneseness in video games is an “always in motion” concept that can be “rearticulated in multiple ways by different designers” and is not “confined to Japan”. To reiterate, we argue, following Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon,

that “Japanese video games, that we can qualify by the Japanese term *geemu* [authors’ spelling], which underlines its local specificity, is not bound to any “essence” (national, mediatic, etc.), but to a market, or rather to markets” (2015). In other words, *gēmu* are defined by being made in Japan, not by their perceived Japanese-ness. While “*gēmu*” is a term related to production, “Japanese-ness” is a concept for cultural articulation. It implies a negotiation. Dorman agrees in saying that “Japanese-ness is very much fluid” and that there can even be “a distinctly Japanese method of appearing culturally ambiguous which, in turn, becomes something synonymous with Japanese exports” (2016, 45). Japanese-ness is a constantly renegotiated quality.

There is a fine balance in keeping local contexts of production in mind while paying attention to how Japanese-ness is valued in varied contexts. Studying the Japanese-ness of a game is not a matter of looking for an “essence”, but of understanding intention and perception, often in transnational contexts. Gaming cultures nowadays testify to the imbalances of *glocal* issues and highlight the shortcomings of analysing videogames as only international products, which often disregards the inquiry of more specific contexts of creation, production, and distribution. As Martin Picard (2013) affirms, *gēmu*, such as *DK* and *TnT*, must be studied as Japanese games, no matter their international trajectories. Situated analyses are thus key to understanding the complexities of games, but the increasingly hybrid nature of games themselves and their context must also be considered. Mia Consalvo (2006, 120) claims that “the contemporary console video game industry is a hybrid encompassing a mixture of Japanese and American businesses and (more importantly) cultures to a degree unseen in other media industries, especially in regard to US popular culture”. Consalvo’s assertion is indisputable, but it leaves Europe outside of these hybrid spaces when the European gaming region has been historically distinct from a technological, cultural, and market-based perspective (Navarro-Remesal and Pérez-Latorre 2021).

The following sections analyse *TnT* and *DK* through the game studies theories of ludofiction and explore their processes of production, distribution, and marketing. This shows the way in which the idea of Japanese-ness coalesces with transnational strategies that make them recognisable for wider audiences.

Taiko no Tatsujin and (local) Japanese-ness

TnT was launched as an intrinsically Japanese product, with an emphasis on taiko, mascots, and a superflat aesthetic, full of references to the country’s *matsuri*. His creator, Nakadate Ken (2008), stated in an interview for the Western website Cubed 3 that his motivation was to create an accessible game with a recognizable instrument, popular songs, and kawaii characters. “Recognizable” is a key word: *TnT*’s intended audience would not necessarily play the taiko, but it was enough for it to be part of their social imaginary. Semiotic value was central, and its instrument was as much of a performance of Japanese-ness as its mascots. In his study of taiko, Bender (2012) argues that although many people do not play the instrument themselves in Japan, the launch of *TnT* evidences its popularity in the country. Blaine (2005) agrees: “developers attribute the game’s popularity to the fact that people are familiar with traditional Taiko drums, but rarely have the opportunity to play one.” Thus, *TnT* is defined by what Iwabuchi Koichi calls “cultural aroma”.

Traditionally associated with rural areas, rituals, Shinto and Buddhist cults, festivals such as Obon, and theatrical performances such as gagaku, noh and kabuki (Yoon 2001), taiko has established itself as a new form of entertainment away from the purely ritualistic (Konagaya 2007), gaining popularity during the last decades of the 20th century to the point of generating a “taiko boom”. Despite being an ancient instrument, its current form was recovered in the postwar period, soon becoming a strong national symbol and an icon of the tradition that separates both the participants and the public into nationals and foreigners, as well as local or non-local (Bender 2012).

Taiko combines percussion and dance, becoming a performance show that is designed to be “seen and felt and not just heard” (Konagaya 2007). The *TnT* arcade, with its physical wadaiko, partially maintains the spectacle and performance of the original show. It must be remembered that rhythm games are native to arcades, where performing before an audience is part of the subculture. Music selection is also central to *TnT*’s style. Despite its emphasis on (modernized) tradition, *TnT* uses music from Japanese popular culture with songs from manga, anime, and other *gēmu*. The inclusion of hits from the country’s popular culture seems key to its longevity, mirroring how Japanese festivals commonly display traditional music and

reinterpretations of pop themes, such is the case of the creative Eisa of Okinawa.

Although a fully ludomusicological reading is beyond the scope of this paper, it is useful to mention that musical performance has a strong cultural aroma in *TnT*. Oliva (2019, 2) points to this combination of popular music and tradition and argues that the game taps into two different kinds of musical literacies at the same time: a “musical media literacy” that is “situated in the media mix” and another “situated outside of media literacy and within the cultural practices of taiko performances”. Oliva explains that *TnT* “creates its authenticity or credibility not necessarily by featuring clearly recognizable musical compositions ascribable to a specific genre [but] by tapping into the larger musicking [or performing music] frame associated with taiko culture” (2019, 11). Oliva (2021, 154) concludes that “the literate player will be able to gather the larger musicking and cultural context associated with the taiko drum thanks to the presence of a plastic replica of the instrument, and the in-game visual elements”, such as the *matsuri* elements.

The taiko was deemed an accessible cultural reference for all audiences. Nakadate (2008) explained the appeal of the games as follows: “We believe that the reason many users, across generations and regardless of sex, enjoy the game is that the gameplay is unique and intuitive; just touching the face (“Men”) and edge (“Fuchi”) of the Taiko drum with the exclusive touch pen, “Bachi Pen.” It also contains a lot of hit songs, including J-POP and cartoon theme songs”. Variety is a central criterion for the franchise. Perhaps more importantly, gameplay is also considered when choosing songs for a new entry. Nakadate admitted that “[they] choose the songs based on requests from customers and data from CD sales rankings” (ibid.). *TnT* does not only mine tradition to appeal to its potential players, but it also has a close connection to contemporary pop culture in the country.

Interestingly, and contrary to what it may seem at first, the lack of distribution in Europe for the *TnT* franchise was not due to that cultural flavor, but to platform specificity. In a private communication¹ with producer Sato Hidetoshi and the Bandai Namco conducted in collaboration with Japan Foundation Madrid, Sato explained that:

¹ Private communication with Sato Hidetoshi and the *TnT* team at Bandai Namco, in collaboration with Japan Foundation Madrid.

The *Taiko no Tatsujin* game originated as an arcade game, which made it difficult to bring into Europe due to the nature of the business. The fact that the home console version was positioned just as a port from the arcade version also made it difficult to promote into Europe.

This might be the reason why the first *TnT*-adjacent game to reach Europe was a console-native production: *Donkey Konga*.

Journey to the West before *TnT18* (Part 1): *Donkey Konga*

Nintendo characters have almost universal dimensions, given the company's emphasis on its own, self-referential universes, and their “emphasis on recognizability” Reynolds (2016). Donkey Kong is one of the company's most iconic characters, starring in the eponymous 1981 arcade game. Its creator, Miyamoto Shigeru, cites two Western sources as inspiration for this character: King Kong and Beauty and the Beast (Kohler 2005). Thus, from its inception, Donkey Kong sits within the allure of hybridity and the transnational, which was only reinforced when the character and its ludofictional world —“a system of linked possible worlds that create a gaming space given by fictional content and closely related rules” (Planells 2017, 101)— were reinvented by British studio Rare with *Donkey Kong Country* (1994).

Donkey Kong soon became a transnational franchise and a transnational character that follows *mukokuseki* strategies, literally meaning “without nationality” and which, as Jennifer deWinter (2015, 6) explains, comes from “the ethnically generic character” of “manga aesthetic”. Moreover, and following Iwabuchi's exploration of “cultural odor” and “culturally odorless” products in Japanese culture, the design of Donkey Kong rejects any cultural aroma, bearing just some traces of the “cultural imprint of the producing country”, thus creating a transnational aesthetic. This made him an ideal candidate to star in a reinterpretation of *TnT* with transnational appeal.

DK was released for the GameCube in Japan in December 2003, reaching North America and Europe almost one year later. It is not considered a part of the *TnT* franchise by Namco (see previous footnote), but a spin-off made in collaboration with Nintendo. However, it plays like a slightly modified *TnT* game (Blaine 2005), with a

different controller (the “tarukonga” or “*DK Bongo*”) and a new mechanic (clapping). It also uses a different ludofictional world (that of Donkey Kong), and a track list that includes Western classical music, video game themes, and popular Latin music. The rationale behind the instrument choice is unclear, beyond the pun with “Kong” and “conga”, a single-headed drum from Cuba. Be that as it may, neither the instrument nor the setlist were dictated by the ludofictional world - on the contrary, as is the case with *TnT*, they bore little relation to it, with accessibility being put at the forefront.

Despite their Afro-Cuban origin, bongo drums were, at the time of the release of *DK*, more recognizable in the West than taikos. Moreover, the game dedicates some time to explaining it in its opening cutscene. The original Japanese tracklist followed *TnT* conventions, with the addition of a short “Latin” section tailored for the instrument and the game’s style. In the North American and European versions, released in September and October 2004, the setlists were changed for a selection of tracks by Western artists such as Martha Reeves and The Vandellas, Willie Nelson, The Kingsmen, Jamiroquai, and Jump 5 for North America and The Kinks, Nena, Supergrass, and Take That for Europe, among others. These setlists also shared classical compositions like Mozart’s “Turkish March” and Brahms’s “Hungarian Dance No. 5 in G Minor”. In addition, both included the theme of *The Legend of Zelda* and the theme from *Super Mario Bros*, thus retaining the self-referential nature of Nintendo’s universe. While the nature of Nintendo as a Japanese company and of *DK* as a *gēmu* is never downplayed, on a surface level few musical markers of Japaneseness are employed.

While *TnT* is a “native” arcade series, *DK* is exclusive to GameCube, and was intended to be played sitting down with the tarukonga between the knees. Television commercials emphasize the social aspect of the game: in the Japanese one we see a family playing together, and in the American one a group of friends. The game had a strong marketing push to make it popular in the West, with, for instance, a promotional stunt at the MTV Music Awards of 2004. Its marketing campaign ignored the *TnT* connection: nowhere, neither within the game nor in its paratexts, is *TnT* mentioned. Nevertheless, some press coverage made that connection: a piece at Spanish site Vandal.net entitled “New details on *Donkey Konga*” explained that “the game will be similar to *Taiko no*

Tatsujin by Namco, another music game” (Grandio 2003). A later review in NintendoLife by Peter Willington (2011), acknowledged “influences derived from Bemani”, and describes the role of the track selection in the following manner:

The track list too reads like one found in your typical Mania title [...] Covers of popular tunes of each region feature, taken from across a deep cut of genres. [...] it's all here and it's all music that even the meanest spirited music critic would label “instantly recognisable”

DK was read mainly as a rhythm game, taking the genre as a whole regardless of origin. Raussi (2017) warns against studying rhythm games from general views of Japanese and Western gaming cultures: “rhythm games have their own nature which attracts players, and musical aspects play a key part within all of this which is why they cannot be left ignored”.

In general, as stated, *DK* eschews clear markers of Japaneseness, even those central to *TnT*. The easily recognisable instruments and setlists parallel Reynold’s (2016) argument on Nintendo’s general “emphasis on recognizability” of its characters mentioned at the beginning of this section. The setlists for international markets are adapted through the inclusion of easily recognised Western music as well as songs from the self-contained Nintendo universe, which through characters such as Donkey Kong as well as Mario and Kirby confirm the culturally odorlessness, to recall Iwabuchi’s terms, of *DK*. In similar terms, *DK* may be said to undergo a process of cultural concealment in its North American and European versions, not to hide anything but to cater to (perceived) specific local tastes. A similar concealment can be found in the experiment with hybridity in the first attempt to bring the mainline *TnT* series to the West.

Journey to the West before *TnT18* (Part 2): *Taiko: Drum Master*

Taiko: Drum Master was released in North America in October 2004, a month after the first *DK* game. The game, developed directly by Namco, keeps the *TnT* aesthetic, controllers, and interfaces, but presents a wholly new tracklist heavily reliant on “Pop and rock” tracks by Western artists such as The Jackson Five, Queen, Madonna, Britney Spears, or Katrina and the Waves.

Raussi, in his discussion of the reception of the *TnT* series in the West up to 2017, concludes that *Drum Master* failed due to an ambiguous track selection with little relationship to an (at the time) unknown instrument: “the video game players of the time might have asked why should they use this weird drum [...] to play these Western songs. Before moving to the question of localizing song list there might be a need to consider the question of localization of taiko in general” (2017, 58). However, Raussi concludes that because of the existing rhythm game culture, “the game is still recognized as a rhythm game and what one is supposed to do in a rhythm game is understood” (ibid.). Blaine (2005), on her part, sees *Drum Master*’s setlist as an attempt at hybridity: “Although most Americans may be unfamiliar with Taiko drumming, Namco gambled on strong interest in Japanese culture and the broad-based appeal of anime inspired characters in gameplay in an attempt to surmount this cultural divide”.

Given the lack of distribution of the series in the West until 2018, *Drum Master* can be seen as a misguided exploitation of hybridity, keeping the taiko and the aesthetics in an attempt to win over fans of Japanese pop culture (thus, performing Japaneseness for that audience), while at the same time concealing Japaneseness with an English-language, too familiar setlist. The results of Raussi’s surveys show that adapting a rhythm game’s setlist to fit local tastes does not sit well with fans of the genre: “While the use of licensed music was not disapproved in any way with how strong support the more traditional genres of music had, the use of Western music in Japanese rhythm games was not viewed favorably” (2017, 58). Raussi concludes that “the most successful localizations of Japanese rhythm games used a lesser amount of localization for the rhythm game’s song list [...] the music used in a rhythm game plays a key factor with original music composed specifically for the game gathering strong support across all three surveys” (ibid.).

Drum Master performed Japaneseness on its surface while depriving North American Japanophiles of its more important component. At first glance, the releases of *DK* and *Drum Master* seem to illustrate the two very different distribution strategies described by Dorman (2016): on the one hand, “cultural concealment” of the markers of local identity in *DK* and, on the other, the “cultural performance” of said markers as selling points in *Drum Master*. However, as argued above, *DK* followed the style of hybridity of *TnT* even if it changed setlists (the

franchise has always incorporated Western songs such as Disney themes or classical music, which could be argued to be seen as a more “universal” category), and its particular style of concealment was still sometimes recognised as coming from Japan, whereas *Drum Master* got rid of a central piece of Japaneseness, the music. This removed half the literacy articulated by the game, as explained by Oliva. More interestingly, the game was later released in 2005 in Japan as *Taiko no Tatsujin: Taiko Drum Master* with a modified setlist, but one still focused on Western hits. This version offers something unique in the franchise: an American-centric setlist aimed at Japanese players, another form of hybridity, a cultural syncretism that resonates with the influence and integration of popular American culture in Japan in general and in the origin and history of *gēmu* in particular.

The divide between Western and Japanese markets might be obvious, but the reality is more nuanced. There is a stable audience for Japanese games in Western countries, as shown by Raussi, and a Western *TnT* fandom organized around online communities such as Taiko Time, founded in July 2010 and self-described as “1st English *Taiko no Tatsujin* fansite”. There was always a player base waiting for *TnT* to be officially released in the West. In the aforementioned 2008 interview for Cubed3, Nakadate admitted: “We want the customers in Europe and US to enjoy the Japanese Taiko drum. The schedule for US or European releases is undecided but we would release them if we receive a lot of requests from US and European customers!”

***TnT18* reaches Europe: reception and discussion of its Japaneseness**

The Switch and PlayStation 4 versions of *TnT*, *TnT: Drum’n’Fun!* and *TnT: Drum Session!* respectively, were distributed globally in 2018 and with them, the series arrived for the first time in Europe. Unlike *Drum Master*, the only relevant change was the addition of more languages for the interface. Even the packaging and the advertising campaign, which for Tosca (2003) are creators of a “symbolic meaning” interconnected with reception and production, maintained the keys of the Japanese launch. The official site of Bandai Namco in Europe emphasized this ground-breaking launch, with a press note on July 31 2018 headlined “TAIKO NO TATSUJIN comes to Europe for the first time” which described the game as a “celebrated cult classic” and “hugely popular Japanese

rhythm game”.

TnT18 even maintains the traditional Japanese *kuchi shōga* notation system, as well as the original Japanese voice acting. It is more “authentic”. In today's context, where players have tools to find out about foreign releases and compare locations, and where familiarity with foreign productions is greater, “authenticity” becomes a commodity. On the official PlayStation Europe blog (Ferdjani 2018), a *TnT* introduction text included this message from the development team: “After 18 years later, I wish that everyone in the world enjoy this series as one of the representing Japanese games”. The official Nintendo website describes the game like this: “Enjoy the classic Japanese arcade rhythm game from the comfort of your home! Use motion controls and enjoy the drum like never before!”.

Many reasons can justify this change in focus. As this article shows, the interest for the series in the West exists since its early days and it has been growing steadily (as the creation of *Taiko Time* illustrates), while at the same time rhythm games, be them Western or Japanese, have had their own stable niche audience for years. The growing internationalization of the video game industry, with digital markets and region-free imports between countries, might have helped. Another Japanese franchise, *Ryū ga gotoku*, had slowly become popular in the West as *Yakuza*, and the fifth entry, released in Japan in 2015 and distributed in 2015 worldwide, featured a limited but playable version of *TnT* as a minigame, making it the actual first time the series reached Europe.

TnT18 was introduced to Europe with a strategy almost opposed to that of *DK* and *Drum Master*. Not only was the game unchanged, but the cultural specificity of the franchise was also emphasised. Going back to Dorman's work, we can see that the content was styled for local audiences, while the context (the distribution in Europe) exploited a “cultural performance” of Japaneseness. For Dorman, “cultural performance”, an emphasis on local aspects of a culture, is always related to external industrial and commercial contexts, such as the use of marketing labels or international co-production. It is about interpreting one's own culture for a foreign audience or context. The case of *TnT18* 2018 is significant because its marketing recognizes an audience that wants to play “a great Japanese classic” that represents the culture of the country, both in their most traditional identity markers and the most modern ones.

The analysis of the game's content, its paratexts, and its immediate contexts of play reflect a change in the distribution and European reception of the *TnT* series. A more detailed study of the game's reception helps us to better understand this change. In this section, we analyse European reviews of both the Switch and PS4 versions, looking for what they highlight, what they have in common, and especially if/how they discuss the Japaneseness of *TnT* as a series and *TnT18* as a game. Our sampling is taken from the review aggregator Metacritic, which includes 22 reviews of the Switch's *Drum 'n' Fun!* and 13 of the PS4's *Drum Session!*. Out of these, 12 European outlets reviewed the Switch version and only 4 the PS4 one. These sites are: for the Switch version, TheSixthAxis, GodIsAGeek, Trusted Reviews, and Cubed3 from the UK, Nintenderos, Meristation, 3D Juegos, Vandal, IGN Spain, and Hobby Consolas from Spain, EveryEye.it and SpazioGames from Italy, and 4players from Germany; for the PS4 version, PushSquare, Cubed3, and GodIsAGeek from the UK and 4players from Germany. We do not include the aggregated “metascore” on our analysis nor individual scores but focus on their content. We have found the reviews tend to gravitate towards 4 items: a) the game's status as a Japanese cult classic; b) explaining how it works, especially the controls and the *tatakoni*; c) the setlist; d) the game's visuals and humour. These items are explored in the following subsections:

a) The game's status as a Japanese cult classic

Many reviewers show their surprise at getting a *TnT* released in Europe and celebrate it: “I never thought I'd be reviewing a *Taiko no Tatsujin* localised release, but here we are” (Madnani 2018). It is common for them to prove their familiarity with *TnT*, while lamenting the long time waiting: “*Taiko no Tatsujin* is one of those video game sagas that have been triumphing in Japan for years and that, unfortunately, have never been too lavish in western lands. [...] at last we can celebrate in style the arrival of this great Japanese madness to Europe” (Leiva 2018); “For a long time, we sad, dull, and deaf Westerners were prevented from tapping the drums madly [...] Fortunately, a sound comes to the ears of us otaku that awakens us from the torpor of sadness” (Arace 2018). Some even tell of their previous personal history with the franchise: “I discovered this franchise through the Vita entry when I was looking at buying more rhythm games for the best

handheld and ended up importing it” (Madnani 2018). Import is mentioned more than once: “Taiko has been extremely limited for those outside of Japan, and especially so for Europe, which has waited patiently (or imported expensively) for a bit of drum-banging fun” (Hurley 2018).

The reviewers often include didactic comments on the origins and importance of the series, usually highlighting the Japanese element. Hobby Consolas calls it “a legend of music games” (Martínez 2018) and explains that it was born in the arcade and adapted to many platforms, including smartphones. Meristation argues that rhythm games “no longer have the pull of yesteryear” but “in Japan they are still one of the most played arcade games, surely more than one of you will have seen videos on YouTube of Japanese people hitting the taiko hard” (Fernández 2018). *TnT* has been “confined to Japan” (Bicego 2018) and it is associated with visiting the country: “If you have been lucky enough to visit Japan, surely you have been in its arcades. Here, there is always a giant drum arcade, usually busy.” (García 2018).

This last outlet considers the game so Japanese that it lists that as a “con”: “too Japanese”. That mention is an exception: normally, Japaneseness is presented as a plus, and some go as far as explaining the taiko, a “very big drum” from “the country of Japan, so adored by many of those who frequent this site” (Nintenderos 2018). The “boom of the internet, anime, and many other elements that a decade ago we couldn’t have imagined” is signaled as a reason for the European release (ibid.). 3D Juegos calls *TnT* a “genuine japonesada [a Spanish neologism that refers to stereotypical Japanese pop works]” and considers its European release “a blessing”, celebrating that it came with no changes: “When Bandai Namco confirmed [*TnT*] would (finally) arrive in Europe, I was reminded of Elite Beat Agents. What changes would the publisher make to its hit list from Japan? It didn’t take long for us to know the answer: none” (Piedrabuena 2018).

b) Explaining the mechanics and the tatakon

Expanding on the didactic comments outlined in the previous section, many reviewers include detailed descriptions of how the game is played. IGN Spain compares it to dance games and Hobby Consolas explains that the mechanics have not changed and “it is still about playing the drum” (Martínez 2018). A few outlets use *Donkey Konga* as a reference. For 4Players, the layout

“corresponds exactly to the one we know from *Donkey Konga*, the notes move on a horizontal line from right to left across the screen and must be struck at the right time. The clear parallels are no coincidence: Bandai Namco was also responsible for *Donkey Konga* and it was based on the Taiko model” (Krosta 2018). Cubed3 makes the same connection: “Remember *Donkey Konga* on GameCube? A joint collaboration between Namco and Nintendo, [*DK*] was effectively a *Taiko no Tatsujin* spin-off. Replace the drum with the bongos, and it’s more or less the same game as the one Namco is so famed for” (Hurley 2018).

In that regard, the Cubed3 review laments that the tatakon was not distributed in Europe for the PS4 version, a complaint shared by 4Players and especially PushSquare: “The decision not to release the drum controller in the West is a baffling one, as it robs *Taiko no Tatsujin: Drum Session* of its identity” (Krosta 2018). GodIsAGeek also highlights the lack of the tatakon, but in a less determinant manner: “There’s definitely something to be said about the game really truly shining when you’re playing it on a drum controller as intended, but all things considered the experience does not suffer for its absence” (Madnani 2018). Whatever the tone and approach, the tatakon is often discussed as a central piece of *TnT*.

c) Setlist

The setlist is generally the most detailed section in the reviews, which often celebrate the selection, explaining it to newcomers and Japanophiles, and showing their knowledge of Japanese music and the franchise. Meristation argues that the two keys to the series’ success are the tatakon and the setlist and compares the games favourably to another “beloved” rhythm game, *Samba de Amigo*. GodIsAGeek says that “song selection is important in rhythm games” and *TnT* “has loads of big name licensed music from games, anime, and even pop in addition to originals, classic music, and even vocaloid music”, and the reviewer shows his familiarity by commenting on some omissions: “It’s a shame there’s a lack of BABYMETAL since Gimme Chocolate was in the Vita and PS4 games but isn’t here” (Madnani 2018).

Nintenderos (2018) calls the setlist “a great repertoire of very varied musical themes” that “stands out for not having differences with respect to the Japanese version of this game”. This, however, “can turn out to be a problem for certain buyers, since their songs have a marked Japanese character”. IGN Spain makes the same remark:

“It could be said that it is varied, but everything is very Japanese, so it is clear that it is not a game for all audiences” (García 2018). The delimitation of the potential audience is important, warning those who are not “in” in what is perceived to be a niche.

Specific tracks are often mentioned, especially those used in popular anime or Japanese games: Vandal lists “iconic songs such as “Cha-La Head Cha-La” from *Dragon Ball Z*, “A Cruel Angel's Thesis” from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, [...] “Jump Up, Super Star!” from *Super Mario Odyssey*, a Kirby medley, “Zenzenzense” from the movie “Your name” and more” (Leiva 2018). They are surprised that even Disney songs such as “How Far I’ll Go”, from *Moana*, come in Japanese. *Dragon Ball Z*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Super Mario Odyssey*, *Your Name*, *My Neighbour Totoro*, *One Piece*, *Pokemon* are spotlighted frequently, as in the reviews by EveryEye, Hobby Consolas, SpazioGames, and 3D Juegos. This shows a remarkable familiarity with Japanese pop culture in the countries of reception and places the game within a wider Japanophile context.

Lastly, Hobby Consolas complains about the lack of “traditional Japanese music”: “We only put one downside to this musical catalog; but it is important. It does not have traditional Japanese songs in which only taikos are heard - in the style of groups like Yamato” (Martínez 2018). This points to a potential rift in Western Japanophiles between “traditional Japan” and “pop Japan”, between Oliva’s two kinds of literacies, or at least to a distinction between both.

d) Humour and visuals

This is an area where Japaneseness is often highly valued. Hobby Consolas comments on the minigames found in the Switch version, explaining that they “are minigames based on slurping the ramen noodles, fighting with the steps of the processions, hitting the daruma (those heads that grant wishes) or performing kabuki theater” (Martínez 2018). 3D Juegos argues that the game “oozes Japanese music and good humour” and that “Bandai Namco introduces it to us as it arrived in Japan”, with a “markedly Japanese humour and a laugh-out-loud design” (Piedrabuena 2018).

The artistic style is equally valued: for IGN Spain, it “radiates charisma and sympathy and, if we agree with the highly Japanese visual style that it presents, *Taiko no Tatsujin: Drum 'n' Fun* will conquer you even with its visuals” (García 2018). The characters are a common

“pro” in these reviews: for GodIsAGeek, “the Don characters are cute and dressing them how you like certainly gives you a degree of ownership on them and your online presence within the game” (Madnani 2018). SpazioGames highlights that there are “There are many characters to unlock, all irresistibly cute as long as you like the anime style of the game. Among others there are also some Nintendo stars: we can in fact also select Kirby and the Splatoon squid” (Bicego 2018). For this outlet, in summary, “Aesthetically, the title is extremely enjoyable in its simplicity thanks to its exuberant colours and the sympathy of the characters that fill the game screens, elements that give *Taiko no Tatsujin* a strong personality, clearly distinguishing it from the rhythm game we are used to” (ibid.).

Conclusions

This article has traced the genealogy of *TnT* and analysed the specific contexts of release and the cultural entanglements of production, distribution, and reception. The long history of the coming of *TnT* to Europe thus shows how “the West” is not a single unit, with a single market defined by common tastes and gaming habits, and how the exchanges between Japan and Europe are complex and culturally situated. The study of contemporary paratexts of *TnT*, *Taiko Drum Master*, and *DK* offers a new historical understanding of the internationalisation of the *TnT* franchise and its evolving reception in the European region.

As for *TnT18* and its study as a European release, it gives new perspectives on the reception of key *gêmu* in the region. European critics and players seem to value Japanese productions in their original form, and are able to recognise cultural traits and discuss Japaneseness. *TnT* was celebrated as a “cult Japanese game” and read from a context rich in cultural references from anime, cinema, and tradition, with a taste for local specificities such as humour and visual styles.

Japan, the United States, and Europe form a historical circulation triangle within a hybrid industry defined by transnational spaces (Consalvo 2006) and what Byung Chul-Han (2018) has called “hyperculturality”, in reference to the juxtaposition of multiple cultures that then cease to be easily located in a single point. Understanding video games from this double perspective, as international products and as locally-situated productions, requires a fine balance. This hybrid, international, and hypermodern

nature of the gaming industry comes as much from players as from industrial agents. Players can even be “ahead” of the industry: *TnT18* arrived at European gaming circles able to analyse the nuances of these versions and discuss their place within the franchise. Not only were there fan communities such as Taiko Time (and import practices that are beyond the scope of this paper), but European reviewers were also familiar enough with the franchise to not see it as a novelty or a gimmick. It still needed to be explained for some audiences, but there were plenty of reviewers capable of acting as intercultural curators, thus creating a circulation between aficionados with insider knowledge and newcomers.

Since the release of *TnT18*, two spin-off RPG games made for the 3DS were ported for the Switch and were distributed in Europe both separately and in a bundle titled *Taiko no Tatsujin: Rhythmic Adventure Pack*, a new version was launched for Apple Arcade, *Taiko no Tatsujin: Pop Tap Beat* (2021), and another one was announced for PC and Xbox, therefore showing that the market for *TnT* in the region is still growing. Nintendo has also announced the launch of *Taiko no Tatsujin: Rhythm Festival*, which will expand musical selection, game modes, and even include a subscription service.

As for the future of the franchise, there are two pieces of news that point towards the continuation of the juxtaposition of cultures as well as to the tensions between the concepts of concealment and performance: first, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the series, Bandai Namco (2021) published an interview where they discussed their plans for the future of *TnT* and which included a section titled “From Japanese drums to world drums” (“Nippon no taiko” kara” sekai no taiko” e”). Here, they acknowledge the game is enjoyed all over the world and talk of “worldwide online play”, although their view is still centered on Japanese players (“I want to aim for Japanese drum entertainment that blends into the daily lives of people in Japan”; “The point of home video games is that you can play games with users all over the world, not just in Japan”); second, a post on Taiko Time published in September 2021 discussed the global expansion strategy of the franchise: “A big part of the 2021 “season” of *Taiko no Tatsujin* (March 2020/Nijihiro ver.) is about the globalization of arcade *Taiko no Tatsujin*, breaking out of the comfort zone of being a purely Japanese experience”. The transnational and hybrid nature of *TnT* will predictably continue to expand and with that, the meaning

and performance of this *multilayered Japaneseeness* will change, redefined by (and redefining) how *gēmu* are understood in a hypercultural reality.

In our private communication with producer Sato, he discussed the team’s plans for the future of *TnT* by talking of providing “the world with a game experience that includes Japanese culture and a place to encounter new music”. Japaneseeness is part of the conversation with *TnT*, but that conversation is always open, always in motion, and since 2018, it is even more global by including the European region.

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