

The Japanese Influences on Cultural Gamification

Vincenzo, Idone Cassone
University of Turin, idonecassone@gmail.com

Abstract

Despite its global development and international recognition, the concept of *cultural gamification* (a progressive permeation of ludic dynamics, features and norms in society) has been generally discussed as an exclusively Western phenomenon. On the contrary, the Japanese culture and the history of play contributed in significant ways to the development of this contemporary phenomenon, through a series of processes of cultural integrations and overlapping between the Japanese and the global context over the last decades.

This paper is an introductory study on the main ways in which the Japanese culture of play contributed to the global cultural gamification. After a preliminary insight on gamification as a cultural phenomenon, and on the comparative approaches to the study of play, the work focuses on three main dimensions of this contribution: 1) the change in the contemporary spatial, temporal and contextual boundaries of play, which develops forms of autonomous play; 2) the diffusion of certain practices and norms (i.e. praxis) of play and the related diffusion of game genres connected to that praxis (JRPGs); 3) the pioneering integration of digital games and narratives into the media and cultural ecosystem (e.g. media mix).

0. Introduction.

Since its inception in 2010 circa, gamification has been known as “The use of game design elements in non-game context” (Deterding et al 2011): described by many as a specific design practice which takes inspiration from game mindset and models in order to keep daily activities more engaging. Typical examples are:

- *Duolingo*, a platform for language learning which follows a game-based progression via experience points, levels and trophies;
- *Foursquare*, a location-based app for hanging out with friends, which rewards badges for exploring specific places, and through challenge system (e.g. *mayorship*) for the most frequent visitors of shops;
- *Steam*, a store for digital games in which users gain experience points, levels and tradable items when buying games or participating to special challenges.

In Japan, gamification has been implemented in projects such as *Muji Life*, *Happyness Quest*, *Cinqsmile*, *#Denkimeter*, and many others (see Inoue 2012,2014; Ono 2012, Hooghiemstra 2016). Most gamified systems include typical elements (points, trophies, challenges, rewards) or

dynamics (progression, feedback, exploration, tutorials) inspired by game design, included in order to produce positive emotions and increase engagement (Zichermann and Cunningham 2011).

Yet, some scholars suggested that this practice should be considered as the tip of the iceberg of a deeper and more complex cultural process, which involves the progressive expansion, proliferation and mixing of Play in our societies:

- playfulness is nowadays diffused in “serious” contexts such as education, work or politics; it is also an integral part of internet culture (e.g. trolling, memes, fake profiles and parodies);
- game culture is more and more relevant in the mediascape, with game narratives recurring in pop culture and cosplay (even in the sex industry), and with the rise of game-based movie or TV series adaptations;
- games and economy are increasingly intertwined, with the rise of eSports circuit and leagues, or the intersection between digital goods and economics through micro-transactions, *lootboxes* and so on.
- Games are deeply connected to cutting-edge digital technologies, through the sharing of middleware (Unity, 3dMax) and joint technological innovations (Ray Tracing, procedural animation, AI);



This phenomenon has been labelled in different ways: *gamification* (Fuchs 2014), *ludification* (Frissens et al 2015), *Ludicisation* (Genvo 2014), *Ludic Century* (Ortoleva 2013), *Gameful world* (Walz and Deterding 2015); from now on I will refer to it as *cultural gamification*, so to distinguish it from the *gamification design* mentioned at the beginning.

Up to now, however, many scholars have been looking at cultural gamification as an exclusively Western process. Above all, they have neglected possible influences or drives deriving from Japan in particular, despite its key role in the establishment of game industry and in many contemporary playful trends (console video games, *cosplay*, game shows, *gacha* culture, playful *otaku* behaviour).

The aim of this paper is to provide a preliminary investigation to the Japanese contribution to cultural gamification, its influences and cultural overlapping. The paper will discuss three main dimensions through which the Japanese culture and society of play impacted on the global development, and will briefly delineate the processes of cultural transmission and interaction between the Japanese and the global landscape.

1. Play, Japan and the world.

Several scholars over the years tackled the cultural value of play and playfulness in Japan (Tada 1974, Linhart and Fruhstuck 1998, Hendry and Raveri 2003, Daliot-Bul 2014 etc), often in more or less direct comparison to Western societies. These comparisons, most of the times, led to different, contrasting and even controversial views about the understanding of play, games and related concepts (leisure, playfulness, arts) in Japan. For instance, for some time during the Seventies, the rhetoric of Japanese as “bad players” (Tada 1974) or the view of leisure/*reijā* as a phenomenon imported from the West (Linhart and Fruhstuck 1998) were still common.

The following pages will not chart or discuss in depth the similarities and differences between play culture in the two countries. On the contrary, they originate from the major assumption that the increasing globalised and cosmopolitan nature of contemporary play make it necessary to study these phenomena through a comparative perspective, in which cultural traditions are constantly renegotiated, adapted and perceived through many layers of cultural communication and hybridisation.

It is easy to show how the contemporary sphere of play is increasingly globalised: players and fans live in a cosmopolitan context (Consalvo 2017), in which games are developed and played in different countries simultaneously, often taking inspiration from narratives and myths from other countries, merging or mixing them together, and presenting them to an international audience. On the one hand, this makes even more important the understanding of the different cultural influences which contributes to the global landscape; on the other, this should not result in the attempt to endorse forms of Westernization, nor to replicate ideals of Japaneseness or Orientalism-based views (Sahid 1978).

How is thus possible to discuss of a Japanese influence on the global phenomenon of cultural gamification? I will try to show how specific issues in the debate on gamification may be meaningfully explained by taking into proper account specific Japan-related phenomena, connected to play culture and society. These contribution focus on three domains:

- 1) the change in the contemporary spatial, temporal and contextual boundaries of play, which are connected to the idea of pervasive play;
- 2) the diffusion of certain practices and norms (i.e. praxis) of play and the related diffusion of game design elements belonging to genres connected to that praxis (JRPG);
- 3) the difficult integration of games, ludic features and game narratives into the media ecosystem (e.g. media mix), and the subsequent influence of games on other media.

2. Play boundaries.

In the last decade researchers discussed the rise of play as a pervasive and interstitial phenomenon, less dependent on traditional social rules which limited the activity of playing according to certain context, spaces and times. For instance, Montola, Stenros and Waern (2009) or Taylor (2006) wrote about the rise of pervasive games, online MMOGs and critical play; all these play forms do not feature typical spatial or temporal boundaries, do not “end” in a traditional way, and can be played without explicit arenas or defined game time. Similarly, Poremba (2007) and Thibault (2017) discussed the new forms of interstitial play represented by social games or smartphone games; moments of play that are designed to fill the gaps between

other activities (school, commuting, working) but often overlap with them, also sharing the technology and tools used for “serious” tasks (PC, smartphone).

The sociocultural framing of play, thus, is the result of the ways in which certain mindsets, phenomena and objects influence the perception of the typical boundaries of play in space, time and contexts. The weakening of traditional play boundaries and the overlapping between playfulness and seriousness in time, space and context is a fundamental change for a society that considered play a separate, bounded and unproductive activity (Idone Cassone 2019).

However, the relatively fast change from a state of bounded play to another state of pervasive play has never been properly explained nor described: by looking at the Japanese cultural landscape, it is possible to witness important historical and sociocultural processes that may help to understand these changes in the global framing of Play. Specifically, many events taking place since the *rejā bumu* shows how (before becoming pervasive and interstitial) forms of autonomisation and self-sufficiency of play developed, which can be seen as an important step towards the global pervasiveness of play.

2.1 Spatial autonomy: the *asobiba* effect.

Dalio-Bul (2009, 2014) discusses the frames of play in the Japanese culture, analysing both the contexts through which leisure activities takes place, and the discourses through which they are evaluated in society.

She suggests looking at these phenomena through the historical transformation of *sakariba* to *asobiba* in the city of Tokyo. Once at the intersection of market, temples and pleasure zones, many *sakariba* transformed into the modern entertainment districts (Akihabara, Ikebukuro, Roppongi). The entertainment districts developed during the post-war era in Japan represents an important form of demarcation and autonomy of play in the social space: as part of the increasingly important business of leisure, quarters become specialised, self-sufficient spaces.

The vast majority of forms of demarcation of ludic spaces results from what Turner (1982) calls *liminoid* function of play: in modern societies, play and games are confined and limited to a marginal position, secluded in space and time. Entertainment districts, on the other hand, show the transformation from un-framed leisure space to officially recognised and autonomous spaces for play, a preliminary form of cultural acceptance.

Furthermore, in those exact places this preliminary autonomy of play will make it possible to develop new forms of radical playful behaviour, which will later pervade other parts in societies. It's exactly in entertainment districts that forms of *fashion play* will emerge since the post-war era (e.g. *fruits*, *ganguro* and *cosplay*). Initially accepted in those playful spaces, these forms of behaviour could later invade other spaces, mixing together their transgressive message with the use of play for radical subversion of the *status quo*, as described by Bakhtin (1941) idea of *carnavalesque* as a playful symbolic hierarchical overturning of the world.

2.2 Temporal autonomy: theme parks and Tokyo Disneyland

A specular process is linked to the change in the temporal framings of play. Many traditional forms of play have always been controlled over with specific temporal limits, often defining moments for leisure activities. The time of festivities, from carnival to *matsuri*, was administered by the social structure in order not to overlap with other “serious” time frames. Similarly, the *paidiaic* activity of children play, which could last for hours and hours in itself, has to be limited and contained during the day by “external” forces (parents, school time, societal rules).

The rise of *theme parks* in Japan in the post-war era (Hamilton-Oehrl 1998) testifies a first moment in which the traditional temporal frames of play begin to be replaced with forms of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Among those, Tokyo Disneyland represent the most striking example. In her paper, Aviad Raz (2005) reflects on the reactions surrounding the opening of Disneyland Tokyo in 1983, and the (negative) judgements of the Japanese Play Association members. These reflections show a transition from *asobi* to *rejā*, showing how the modern Japanese society developed significant forms of *autonomisation* of play in relation to temporal constraints. Tokyo Disneyland was considered by the JIPA members a completely artificial and controlled environment, which “sold off the spirit of the *matsuri*” and replaced *carnavalesque* with the predictable and pre-established, being based on specific visiting patterns and forms of social control. Yet, despite the JIPA reactions, *Disneyland Tokyo* soon becomes the most successful theme park in the world, leading toward their multiplication since the Eighties.

The key element of this narrative does not lie in the positive or negative evaluation towards Disneyland, but in the development of spaces/places for *endless play*: theme parks, as well as entertainment districts, are unbounded by the traditional societal control over play time. The development of places such as Disneyland, arcade games, karaoke represent another part of the autonomisation of Play in modern society, which is less bounded by external drives and more by its ability to continue, sustain and develop itself. A process which will be further developed by the change in the technologies and tools for play.

2.3 The technological reframing of play context.

A further element in the reframing of play boundary is connected to play tools and technologies. It is easy to agree that the above-mentioned technological development of smartphones (de Lange 2010), the casual revolution brought by consoles such as the Wii and DS (Juul 2010) and, in general, the whole technological convergence part of the *convergence culture* (Jenkins 2006) made available new devices which were simultaneously able to support “serious” and “playful” tasks. Furthermore, the development of widespread internet connection made it possible to remove the necessity for co-presence of players, thus extending the requirements of proximity for play, both in space and in time through asynchronous multiplayer dynamics, persistent worlds etc.

However, these recent phenomena, which have been connected to the pervasive and interstitial nature of play, have not been connected to the long-term technological changes happening in the context of digital play activities since the '80 at least, especially in Japan.

Significant changes took place from the late 70' (arcade golden era) to the mid 80' (the Famicom era), and the evolution and interaction between different digital game platforms may show a complex transformation in the boundaries and contexts of play. The first generation of arcades (1971-78ca) all over the world embodies a context for play which is public (not private), social but mainly inhabited by single-player games. The other tool for digital play, the PC, is from the beginning a device which make it possible both serious and playful activities. The release of the Famicom (1983) open up the possibility for private and collective experience of play. Through home consoles, a specialised device for both single and social play activities enter the private home space. The name of the device suggests the importance of this reframing: it is the family

computer, in opposition both to the arcade than to the personal computer (personal vs familiar, production vs leisure); it should be noted that the Japanese Famicom had two controllers in Japan, (while the NES had only one in the USA and EU). By inviting friends and by reducing the cost of playing in the long run, the Famicom represents one of the first moments in which the digital play activity is not only social, but internalised and mixed with the family space and time.

This process is strengthened by the inception of portable consoles: initially through the *game and watch* devices (1980-91), but in a proper way with the *Game boy* (1989). Through the combination of arcades, home consoles and (later) portable ones, the digital forms of play underwent a process of autonomisation which later made it possible many future developments and, in general, forms of pervasiveness of play. In a retrospective way, it is because digital games have already an established, autonomous space both within the public space (arcades) and the private one (consoles) that they can later be brought “outside”.

2.4. Summary: the autonomy and self-sufficiency of play.

The above-mentioned examples challenge the idea that pervasiveness of play could take place in a vacuum, without prior change in the dynamics of play. The excessive Western focus on the recent rise of the game medium resulted in an underestimation of the deeper and older processes which anticipated this success and made play as self-sufficient and autonomous in time and space, preparing the ground for successive developments.

If this happens, it is also as a result of a complex reframing of the traditional boundaries of play: for many typical leisure activities, this means the development of a society in which the existence of play is recognised, grounded in space and given a specific autonomy. In relation to the previous remarks, it is significant how in the very same year in which USA experienced the game crash (1983), Japan experienced both the opening of Disneyland Tokyo and the release of Famicom.

3. Praxis and modes of play.

Play and games are not simply framed through their tangible boundaries; through rhetoric, mindsets and discourses societies produce further framings of their activities, play included (Lotman 1967, Thibault 2016). By

comparing play to other activities, they evaluate and define the role of play in society, thus shaping the correct behaviour for players: the social praxis of play.

In particular, many sources on gamification suggest that the recent cultural landscape is the result of the quick weakening of the Work-Play dichotomy in the Western culture (Fuchs 2014, Ortoleva 2012). This phenomenon has been tied to the decline of industry and the increasing importance of the third sector, together with the increased flexibility of working conditions/hours. This explanation, however, does not fully account for the re-evaluation of games. That is, how games started to be considered by many (McGonigal 2011, Zichermann and Cunningham 2012) as a paradigmatic example of hard work, leading to the correlate idea that work could be inspired by game themselves. Furthermore, it does not explain how certain forms of games (MMOGs, RPGs) were considered compatible with work dynamics.

In the following paragraphs I will suggest how certain characteristics of the Japanese praxis of play may help explaining this process: namely, how a long-term praxis grounded on the importance on the attitude/behaviour (and not on the discrimination between activities) translated into game genre (JRPG) which helped to solve and shape the Western dichotomy between seriousness and playfulness.

3.1 Serious play and self-improvement.

Rupert Cox (2005) endorsed the idea that it is possible to define some peculiarities in the Japanese way of playing, in comparison to the Western one. For him, the Western cultural tradition tends to perceive play as something spontaneous, unstructured (and unproductive); while on the other hand, in the evolution of the concept of *asobi* through Japanese culture, there was no clear distinction between creativity and order, sacred and secular, aesthetic and ascetic. For Cox: “Play could for the Japanese be an activity involving concentration and hard work, infused by a deep sense of religious experience, of self-obligation and of enlightenment”. This statement partially reflects the opinions expressed time ago by Tada himself (1975), who considered play and work in Japan as strongly connected, in contrast to the dichotomy of Western cultures.

Cox suggests that, despite the shifts in terms and in the meaning of Play, some common roots of this connection can be identified since the end of the Heian period (794-1185), in which the Buddhist theory of self-cultivation and its techniques of concentration were incorporated into the

practice of the arts. Play became a spiritual ‘path’ (*do-*) of high intellectual sophistication, in which the ideal condition of aesthetic appreciation was sought in an analogy with the experience of enlightenment. During the Tokugawa period there was a huge expansion in the number and classes of people practising the arts. The ‘arts’ included activities of entertainment (*yu-gei*) and self-cultivation (*bugei*, martial arts), but the distinction was soon eroded to the point where all these activities were known as *geido-* (artistic ways).

The *iemoto* system – continues Cox – emerged after the Genroku era (1688–1704), replacing the *do-* metaphor and reinventing its religio-aesthetic tradition by treating the transmission of the way as ‘filiation’. Through the metaphor of kinship, the ‘playing’ of arts became constrained within the institutional matrices of power and authority. The new system stressed the politico-economic dimensions of the art. The realm of ‘culture/general education’ (*kyo-yo-/ keikogoto*) in the Tokugawa period overlapped with ‘play/entertainment’ (*asobi/yu-gei*) for the notion of play presupposed the learning of an art. This very positive attitude towards entertaining pastimes was, however, considered immoral by the Meiji intellectuals and pedagogues: to study the arts as a form of play was against the ‘authentic Japanese spirit’ which was then reinvented and mythicised. The term *yu-gei* took on a vulgar meaning.

However, with the emergence of a consumer society in the post-war era, significant changes appeared. Arts began to be regarded as items of mass culture, something that may be possessed by achievement and certification within a hierarchical system, rather than a matter of skill and taste. As a consequence of the ‘leisure boom’ of the 1980s, the arts became more and more the product of a pervading industry of entertainment, formed by large media organizations and, last but not least, by the *karuchā sentā* (the Japanese public cultural centres). The rigid hierarchical social structure and the exclusivity of the *iemoto* system somehow relaxed in favour of a ‘culture industry’ which transformed arts into leisure, open to a wider social market, a less refined taste, and lighter practice. Despite that, the traditional unity in the seriousness of the practice itself, without discriminating between productive and unproductive activities, will still endure in more or less indirect ways.

3.2 Praxis of play in the information society.

These reflections mirror the ones of Dalot-Bul (2014) on the Japanese contemporary *praxis of play*, who mentions

two main characteristics in the contemporary Japanese play culture:

- 1) “an emphasis on highly detailed, prescribed and aestheticized forms and patterns of play”;
- 2) “the prerequisite of a great amount of information and know-how in order to play well”.

For the researcher, these praxes reflect the societal processes taking place during the post-war period: namely, the successful implementation of institutional planning for a modern leisure culture; and the production of an information society (*jōhō shakai*) which influenced the performance of play.

Both Daliot-Bul and Cox, through different perspectives, agree on the role of *karuchā sentā* as a re-enactment of cultural traditions and an appropriation of traditional ideas and practices: the centrality of a *sensei* as a transmitter of knowledge (a variation on the *iemoto* system); the positioning of leisure activities as venues for achieving spiritual growth, for self-improvement, and for finding purpose (a variation on *dō*); the concept of learning or practicing a hobby by way of imitating a teacher (a variation on the *kata kara hairu* didactic method). For Daliot-Bul, it is thus that education and entertainment merge into “edutainment.” The primary criterion in deciding whether a leisure activity is significant for personal growth has come to be not what it is but how it is practiced.

Furthermore, whereas from the Seventies several leisure-time activities were marketed and legitimized as educational ones, during the same years an emerging information culture became another key element in shaping the praxis of play in Japan. The foundation of an information consumption society (*jōhō shōhi shakai*) was the result of the shift from practical goods to symbolic ones (Bourdieu 1979), which were strongly connected to the acquisition of information and know-how about their sociocultural values and their norms of use.

This transformation invested leisure activities, with the production of magazines, guides and clubs, including the recently born video-game industry (as part of the already mentioned media mix strategies). For some avid players, particularly in certain leisure types such as videogames, the accumulation of information has gradually become a ludic activity in its own. The reciprocity between Japan’s information consumption society and the production of knowledge for play activities since the 1970 has been used to explain some of the characteristics of the *otaku* culture.

Despite only representing a minority of the Japanese society, the transcultural expansion of the phenomenon seems interesting in relation to the development and spreading of certain praxis of play. The international development of the *otaku* culture made many of those patterns globally available. Whether in cosplay, in *gacha* games or in other activities, the acquisition and collection of body of knowledge seems to be a peculiar characteristics of *otaku* culture.

Coupled with the above-mentioned seriousness of play and its self-improving attitude, those new forms of play embodied a desire to understand and collect information about the world, as an act of patient and scrupulous collection.

3.3 Play praxis and game dynamics.

The above-mentioned play mindsets and praxis may seem unrelated to tangible influence on the global gamification of culture. Yet, there is a significant connection between the former and certain game genres which were selected as ideal types of gamification design: JRPG.

A key element of JRPGs is the presence of *grinding dynamics*. Grinding is the process for which players progress through the game by repeating the same core set of actions in order to gain the specific requirements to access to the next step: in JRPG, this means going through many random battles in order to be able to reach the minimum power level expected to fight the boss of the section, and to gain better understanding of the complex game systems which are linked in the combat of the game. This dynamic can be observed by looking at classic JRPGs series, from *Dragon Quest* to *Final Fantasy*, and so on.

In light of what said above, JRPG represent a type of game in which the continuous repetition of a core set of actions is not simply the result of a tight gameplay loop, or a way to artificially extend the length of the game. It is, on the contrary, a way to progressively gain proficiency in the challenges the player has to face, and simultaneously a way to master the complexity of the systems involved. The experience of JRPG for many players requires a serious and time-consuming effort, which demand the player to go through endless cycles in order to gain after time a full understanding of the system itself.

This idea is even more significant if they are compared to the western “equivalent”, the WRPGs, which in the last decade have been pursuing the idea of rule systems as a way

for players to communicate their identity, and a general simplification of the complexity of the ruleset. It could be said, simplifying a bit, that, whereas WRPGs have been focusing on a choice-based progression, JRPGs mostly focus on an effort-based progression. They could be said to embody a praxis of play grounded on the idea of self-improvement and maturation, as described above.

A further element is connected to their relationship with knowledge; JRPGs often include secrets, exploration and collection in a specific way, which is not simply linked to the surprise-driven pleasure. It is, on the contrary, more akin to an encyclopaedic drive for understanding, previously described as a praxis of play in the information society.

The amount of secrets, *easter eggs*, hidden objects and characters included in many JRPG is such that many of them required the use of game guides or community collaboration in order to be discovered. Furthermore, many JRPGs are entirely based on dynamics of collections intended as forms of discovery and intellectual understanding: for instance, videogames such as Pokémon or Digimon, trading card games such as *Yu-Gi-Oh*, *gacha* vending machines and smartphone games. Safe from considering this as a simple pleasure for the accumulation of things, this seems to be related to the post-modern tendency of gathering knowledge and information as a way to make sense/order into the world, an analogue of the above-mentioned praxis of acquiring knowledge in contemporary information society.

It does not seem casual that many of these games revolve around the possibility to collect and establish fragments of a world, a coherent but dispersed narrative/ecosystem which is simultaneously a process of acquisition of objects and knowledge. These narratives and worlds are, in different ways, open and endless. They may be continuously expanded, its lore may be updated and filled almost indefinitely (Otsuka 1989, Allison 2006).

3.4 Summary: from JRPG to gamification.

While still hypothetical, this connection between a Japanese praxis of play, a game genre (JRPGs) and the development of gamified systems may prove significant. It is significant because the vast majority of gamified applications rely on examples and game dynamics typically derived from MMOGS and JRPG progression systems, using them as models and sources for progress systems (see Werbach and Hunter (2012).

It represents an example of a cultural process in which a specific regional attitude toward Play has been translated into a set of game dynamics, which have been exported into different cultures, adapted, and recently translated into elements of gamified systems, which could have helped in bridging the (western) gap between the domains of play and seriousness, production, learning.

4. Media Gamification

The final dimension is linked to the key role of games in the mediascape, and the influence of the Japanese media system and media culture in the rise of play. Many authors (Raessens 2014, Frissens 2015, Deterding and Walz 2015, Idone Cassone 2017) discuss the increasingly important role of play in the system of media, both economically, culturally and in its relationships with other media. Games are now leading entertainment industry, with an increasing number of transmedia adaptations; furthermore, the medium of digital games is influencing the other media, producing game-like features in movies, literature and music (see below).

While the importance of games is difficult to deny, it is not easy to explain how and in which ways they started to get accepted into the media system. For decades in the Western media context games were considered a secondary medium, often criticised and believed to be simple past-times or entertainment forms. While influenced by cinematographic aesthetics or evaluated by the literary standards, they were still “competing” for the entertainment and leisure time with other media.

On the contrary, the Japanese media system depicts an interesting relationship taking place between games and other media, under the concept of *media mix* (Steinberg 2012). The term describes the cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises which takes place in the post-war period. Through the analysis of the role of games in the Japanese media mix, it is possible to observe two main processes which will later develop and spread globally, contributing to a new structure of media relationship which could help explaining the new sociocultural status of play.

4.1 The role of games in the media mix.

The notion of media mix may help understanding the dynamics which lead to the prevalent role of digital games in the media system. Steinberg (2012), however, suggests that the key role in the media mix was performed by anime:

“The emergence of Japanese television animation, or *anime*, in the 1960s as a system of interconnected media and commodity forms was major turning point and inspiration for the development of what would later be called the media mix.”

Yet, the very author discusses the possibility for game-centred media mix in his recent paper on the “gameic media mix” (2015). There, he looks at the more recent historical phase of the *Kadokawa* brand, in which the new strategy of media mix was including the (at the time recently popular) video games in their strategy, supporting them through specific game-focused fandom magazines like *THE TELEVISION* and *COMPTIQ* (1983). Through these magazines we witness the first interactions and hybridisation between the different media narratives.

The most significant development in that period was probably represented by the manga *Mōryō Senki MADARA*, created by Otsuka Eiji, the leading critic of manga culture in the ‘80s, author of the *Monogatari Shohiron (A theory of media consumption, 1989)*. Madara is an original story instead of a game adaptation, but was created following the author’s theory of world-based narrative: fictional worlds which are not focused on specific characters, but more on a coherent environmental storytelling, in which many different stories can take place and merge.

Most of all, Madara was created according to the model of JRPG: first, the world was created “as a game designer would do,” with implicit rules lying in the background of the narrative; furthermore, with 8-bit text inserts displaying narrative information and character statistics; last, through a set of paratextual marketing taglines, such as “The RPG Comic that feels 100% like a game”.

The increase in importance of games in the Japanese media system extend well beyond Madara: in the following years, the interaction between manga and games will be developed by different projects. For instance, *Record of Lodoss War*, which was initially a D&D setting, then translated into a novel, then in a series of games. Or with the notable examples of Yu-Gi-Oh (1996): its narrative universe is initially released as a manga whose main focus are games; a card game (*Duel monsters*) is introduced into its story, later developed and marketed as a collectible card game. After its success, the original manga is reframed/reimagined as derived adaptation of the card game itself. In a similar way, *Fate/Stay night* (2004) was initially marketed as a visual novel in a world-based setting; it was later being developed into light novel, manga, anime,

obtaining a huge success which lead, once again, to the creation of new and diversified genres of digital games.

These examples show how games, initially marginal in the system of anime media mix, started to integrate and to assume an increasingly important role in it. Game worlds and narratives were particularly suited to embody the ideal of world-based narratives, creating complex and meaningful world in which the users could actively participate.

By inheriting the features for successful media mix defined by Otsuka Eiji, games could shift from a passive and subaltern role into a leading and paradigmatic one in the Japanese (and later Western) mediascape, helping to bridge the conflict/gap between different media universes and media systems.

4.2 Contemporary game narratives: simulations, worlds and game-like rules.

A further process is related to the above-mentioned importance of game narratives and world-building. Several scholars showed how movies, tv series and other media have been taking inspiration from games, developing game-like features and elements (Elsaesser 2009, Idone Cassone 2018 and forthcoming).

This phenomenon has been connected to a more general introduction of certain tropes and themes, which connected games, simulation and world-based fictions. The most significant Western example is *Matrix* (1999-2003), which mixes and translates numerous references to philosophical ideas (Plato's allegory of the Cave, Baudrillard's concept of *Simulacra and Simulations* (1994)) and recurring key representations of the imaginary (Lewis Carroll's paradoxical worlds, the cyberpunk representation of hackers, the trope of life as a deception and so on). The very trope is well attested in movies as *The Game* (1997) or *Vanilla Sky* (2001) or *Shutter Island* (2010), in young adult movies (*Hunger Games* etc), or to TV series (*Lost* or *Westworld*) and also in digital games (*Assassin's Creed*, *The Talos Principle*, *NieR:automata*).

Unsurprisingly, this narrative trope, connecting life to simulations and narratives, is extremely developed in the Japanese media systems, and typically involved in media mix strategies.

First of all, many popular multimedia franchises such as *Gantz .Hack//*, *Sword Art Online*, *Overlord*, *All you need is Kill* and *No game No Life* are based on the overlapping and mixing between reality, MMOG, paradoxical planes of

existence. While apparently following to the traditional topos of the “bridge between worlds”, these narratives reframe the boundaries of Play, and present the overlapping between digital life and simulation as a problematic reality, and not as a temporary accident which can be reversed.

This trope also developed into a stereotypical fantasy sub-genre labelled *isekai* (literally: other world), in which the main characters are not projected in other realities as much as in other game-like digital worlds, which are close representations of videogames the users play, usually with comical and paradoxical plots involved (*Tate no Yuusha no Nariagari*, *Isekai Cheat Magician*, *Berserk of Gluttony*, *Kumo desu ga, nanika?*, *Tensei shitara slime datta ken*, and many others). Alongside, many comics such feature contemporary settings colliding with mysterious and all-encompassing games, which completely change the lives of some people, their abilities and their understanding of life, as they need to follow and respect the rules of specific games while continuing to live their ordinary lives.

Moreover, many of these narratives (e.g. *Battle Royale*, *Doubt*, *Werewolf*, *Kakegurui*, *Tomodachi Game*, *Dead Tube*) do not involve any kind of supernatural game-reality, but the sudden use of game contexts and models in order to show the true nature of societal dynamics and people's nature. Far from safe and entertaining, these games involve treason, conspiracy, risk and dangers and generally act as an arena in which people realise the harshness and falsity of societal dynamics.

Some of these plots translate already existing games into life or death situations: what is apparently a simple game is in reality a *deep game*, in the sense defined by Geertz (1973), a game with real consequences in daily life, which may take place at different level of the social domain, but always involving important effects for the life of individuals and community. It is through these tropes that games become something more than a “simple medium” for cultures, translating into deep cultural metaphors and analogies, point of views into society itself (Lotman 1978).

4.3 Summary: Game in the mediascape.

The analysis of the Japanese system of media mix, and the game-based narratives, help understanding the process which lead to the increasingly important role of game in the global mediascape.

On the one hand, games intercepted the values connected with the new trends of narrative consumption: they make it possible to create complex and coherent

worlds, in a “ecological way”, where characters and narratives can be narrated (or invented by fans. On the other hand, games begin to be a fitting metaphor to describe those world-based transmedia narratives, since their focus on rules, alternative developments, progression and effort seems particularly suited to convey the social and cultural values behind these narratives.

Through the global spread of Japanese narratives via manga and otaku culture and consoles, both those phenomena begin to be experienced worldwide, leading to a different relationship between digital games and other media. This will contribute to level and transform the dichotomies in the western mediascape, in which the video game medium will struggle for many decades competing with the movie industry both economically and symbolically.

It is only through the help and shared effort of the development of manga and anime culture in the West that, slowly and progressively, the gamified narratives and patterns (which were already present in the '90) will then develop and diffuse in the mediascape.

5. Preliminary Findings.

In the previous pages I presented three aspects of the Japanese contribution to the global phenomenon of cultural gamification:

- 1) the change in the contemporary spatial, temporal and interface boundaries of play, which develops forms of autonomous and self-sufficient play.
- 2) the diffusion of certain practices and norms (i.e. praxis) of play and the related diffusion of game genres connected to that praxis (JRPG), in relation to the “serious use” of games.
- 3) the pioneering integration of digital games and narratives into the media and cultural ecosystem (e.g. media mix), leading to a new game-based mediascape.

These three aspects highlight the importance of the Japanese culture in the inception of contemporary ludification/gamification of culture. Safe from being a western-centred phenomenon, cultural gamification needs to be understood through a global and cosmopolitan perspective, involving a better understanding of the Japanese contribution to the global game culture; furthermore, it needs a better understanding of cultural

translation, mixing and globalised historical processes that originated it.

As previously said, the present study is merely an introduction/overview on the Japanese contribution to the development of cultural gamification: much has to be discussed, investigated and written, in order to progress towards a better understanding of the cultural dynamics of gamification, and its inception in the 21st century.

Acknowledgement

The paper is the result of a three-month visiting research period in Tokyo, awarded by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Sciences (Postdoctoral Fellowship Program). A special thanks to Anna Giulia, Hiroshi and Matteo, for their support, kindness and friendship.

References

- Allison, Anne. 2006. *Millennial monsters: Japanese toys and the global imagination*. Vol. 13. University of California Press, 2006.
- Bachtin, Mihail. 1941. *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan press.
- Consalvo, Mia. 2017. *Atari to Zelda: Japanese games in a global context*. MIT Press.
- Covatta, Alice. 2017. "Tokyo Playground: The Interplay Between Infrastructure and Collective Space." *Sociology* 7, no. 4 (2017): 205-211.
- Cox, Rupert. 2005. "Is there a Japanese way of playing?" *Japan at play: The ludic and the logic of power* (2005): 169.
- Daliot-Bul, Michal. 2014. *License to Play: The Ludic in Japanese Culture*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Daliot-Bul, Michal. "ASOBI in action: Contesting the cultural meanings and cultural boundaries of play in Tokyo from the 1970s to the present." *Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2009): 355-380.
- de Lange, Michiel ML. 2010. *Moving circles: Mobile media and playful identities*.
- Deterding, Sebastian, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled, and Lennart Nacke. 2011. "From game design elements to gamefulness: defining gamification." In *Proceedings of the 15th international academic MindTrek conference: Envisioning future media environments*, pp. 9-15. ACM, 2011.
- Deterding, Sebastian and Stephen Walz. 2015, Eds. *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*. MIT Press.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "The mind-game film." *Puzzle films: Complex storytelling in contemporary cinema* (2009): 13-41.
- Frissen, Valerie, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul, and Joost Raessens, eds. 2015 *Playful identities: The ludification of digital media cultures*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Fuchs, Mathias. 2014. "Gamification as twenty-first-century ideology." *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 6, no. 2: 143-157.
- Genvo, Sébastien. 2014. "Looking at the history of video games through the prism of ludicisation processes." In *History of Games International Conference Proceedings*.
- Hamilton-Oehrl, Angelika. 1998. "Leisure Parks in Japan", in Linhart, Sepp and Sabine Fruhstuck (eds) *The Culture of Japan As Seen Through Its Leisure*, SUNY Series in Japan in Transition.
- Hendry, Joy, and Massimo Raveri, eds. 2005. *Japan at play. The ludic and the logic of power*. Routledge.
- Hooghiemstra, Dave. 2017. "Gamification in Japan: a critical analysis." Master's thesis, Leiden University.
- Hutchinson, Rachel. 2011. *Japanese culture through videogames*. Routledge.
- Idone Cassone, Vincenzo. 2017. "Through the ludic glass: a cultural genealogy of gamification." In *Proceedings of the 21st International Academic MindTrek Conference*, pp. 54-62. ACM, 2017.
- Idone Cassone, Vincenzo. 2018 "'IT'S OVER 9000.'" *Apeiron Narrative Configurations in contemporary Mediascape*. *Digital Age in Semiotics & Communication* 1, no. 1 (2018): 79-94.
- Idone Cassone, Vincenzo. 2019. *Sub specie ludi. Gamification, Ludification and the boundaries of Play*. PhD Dissertation, University of Turin.
- Idone Cassone, Vincenzo. Forthcoming. "Secret Games, Puzzle Narratives and Playful Decrypting: Gamified Dissimulation in Contemporary Media Culture", in *VERSUS*, n.130
- Inoue, A. 2012. "Gamification—< Geemu> ga bijinesu wo kaeru (Gamification—"Games" are Changing Business)." Tokyo, NHK Shuppan.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide*. New York: New York UP.
- Juul, Jesper. 2010. *A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players*. MIT press.

- Linhart, Sepp and Sabine Fruhstuck (eds) *The Culture of Japan As Seen Through Its Leisure*, SUNY Series in Japan in Transition.
- Lotman, Yuri M. "The place of art among other modelling systems." (2011). Original edition: *Σημειωτική-Sign Systems Studies* 39, no. 2-4 (1967): 249-270.
- Lotman, Yuri M. "The theme of card and card game in Russian literature of the nineteenth century. *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature*, 3(3): 455-492.
- McGonigal, Jane. 2011. *Reality is broken. Why games make us better and how they can change the world*, Jonathan Cape.
- Montola, Markus, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern. 2009. *Pervasive games: theory and design*. CRC Press.
- Ono, Kenji (2012) Current situation of gamification in Japan, conference at the International Game Developer Association, https://www.kocca.kr/knowledge/seminar/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2012/09/07/b0gmyBO53ffN.pdf
- Ortoleva, Peppino. 2012. *Dal sesso al gioco. Un'ossessione per il XXI secolo?*. Vol. 1. Espress Edizioni.
- Otsuka, Eiji. 1989. *Teihon monogatari shōhiron* (A theory of narrative consumption) Tokyo: Kadokawa.
- Picard, Martin, and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon. 2015. "Introduction: Geemu, media mix, and the state of Japanese video game studies." *Kinephanos: Journal of media studies and popular culture* 5, no. 1 (2015): 1-19.
- Poremba, Cindy. 2007. "Critical potential on the brink of the magic circle.": 772-778.
- Raessens, Joost. 2014. "The ludification of culture", in M. Fuchs, S. Fizek, P. Ruffino, N. Schrape, (Eds.). *Rethinking gamification*, Meson Press.
- Raz, Aviad E. 2005 "Japan at play in TDL (Tokyo Disneyland): The dialectics of asobi and rejā." In *Japan at Play*, pp. 303-317. Routledge.
- Steinberg, Marc. 2012. *Anime's media mix: Franchising toys and characters in Japan*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Steinberg, Marc. 2015. "8-Bit Manga: Kadokawa's Madara, or, The Gameic Media Mix.": 40-52.
- Tada Michitaro. 1974. *Asobi to nihonjin*. Tokyo: Chikuma shobo.
- Taylor, Tina L. 2009. *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture*. MIT Press.
- Thibault, Mattia. 2016. "Lotman and Play: for a theory of playfulness based on semiotics of culture", in *Sign System Studies*, 44 (3): 295-325.
- Turner, Victor. 1982. "From ritual to theatre: the seriousness of human play." New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.
- Walz, Steffen P., and Sebastian Deterding, eds. 2015. *The gameful world: Approaches, issues, applications*. MIT Press.
- Werbach, Kevin, and Dan Hunter. 2012. *For the win: How game thinking can revolutionize your business*. Philadelphia: Wharton Digital.
- Zichermann, Gabe and Cunningham Christopher. 2011. *Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps*, O'Reilly.