

Hands with Four Digits: An Issue in the Rating and Censorship of Video Games in Japan?

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Abstract

Drawing on research related to the production, rating and censorship of video games in Japan conducted over a period of several years, this paper attempts to understand the basis for a seemingly widespread aversion to depictions of hands with four digits in the context of video games and other popular forms of visual media in Japan, such as manga and animation. It is suggested - on the basis of dozens of formal interviews and informal conversations with representatives of the video games industry in Japan, including video game creators and producers, game localization specialists, representatives of CERO (the organization responsible for the rating of games in Japan), representatives of the video games media, as well as video game developers and localization specialists based in North America and Europe - that the avoidance of depictions of hands with four digits is based on its association with a derogatory, four-finger gesture formerly used to designate members of the historical underclass (the Burakumin) in Japan.

Unlucky Number Four: the problem of missing fingers

Within the realm of Japanese animation (and also manga), the problem of characters whose hands have only four digits is well-established. Although, outside Japan, the drawing of animated characters - including beloved Disney characters like Mickey Mouse, more recent global animated superstars such as the characters in *The Simpsons* and British favourites such as Bob the Builder and Postman Pat - with four digits has, for technical and aesthetic reasons, become standard, four-fingered animated characters in Japan are both unusual and, potentially problematic.¹ In one particularly illustrative example, Frederick Schodt recounts that whereas the great manga artist, Tezuka Osamu, creator of the Astro Boy series, adopting the convention pioneered in the United States, drew the main character, Atom, and most of the other characters in the story with four fingers, "throughout most of the life of the series...", he later shifted

to drawing his characters with five fingers amid, "...protests from groups that work to defend the rights of *burakumin*..." (Schodt 2007: 47).² In the case of *The Simpsons*, it is rumoured that, "...Japanese television buyers had requested the producers to have artists draw in an extra finger" (Dobson 2006, cited in Atarac 2007). Such concerns were also reflected in changes to the script, as illustrated through an example (Altarac 2007:199) from the episode, "I married Marge", in which Homer refers to the number of digits on Bart's hands and feet:

- ◆ *Homer (US): Hey, as long as he's got eight fingers and eight toes, he's fine by me*
- ◆ *Homer (Japan): Even if he's the devil, he's fine as long as he doesn't look like another man.*

Similarly, in video games, overt depictions of hands with four digits and, especially, representations of hands with missing digits as a result of mutilation and/or

¹ As reported by the BBC, both Bob the Builder (in 2000) and Postman Pat (in 1994), had to have their hands, literally, 'digitally remastered' - both onscreen and for all merchandizing - so that children would not be "alarmed" (BBC News, 20 April 2000).

² In one of his essays, Tezuka Osamu confirms that in originally depicting Atom with four fingers, he was simply mimicking Mickey Mouse (Tezuka Osamu 1996:94-5). Interestingly, Schodt also recounts that when Tezuka attempted to adapt the appearance of Atom from a cute, Disney-esque style to a more realistic look consistent with the

realism of the *gikiga* (action pictures) of the late 1960s, by making Atom, "...taller and more serious looking", the changes were not well-received. According to Tezuka (quoted in Schodt), "...the weird thing is, even though he was supposed to be 'cool', the taller [Atom] got, the less readers liked him. So right after that, I started drawing him like a cute kid again and sure enough his popularity went up. Why, I dunno." (ibid. 48)



dismemberment, are avoided. In one well-publicised example, the box cover art for the video game, *Left 4 Dead* (developed by Turtle Rock Studios and Valve Corporation, 2008), which featured a mutilated hand with four fingers, but thumb missing (apparently ripped or torn off), was amended for the Japanese market so that, in one version, the thumb appeared to be tucked behind the otherwise intact hand, whilst in the other, a marketing bubble/sticker was strategically placed to obscure the missing digit. In the localization of *Crash Bandicoot* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 1996), one of the most successful imported games ever in Japan, artwork for the four-fingered main character was altered to include a fifth digit (Adams 2014:189). More recently, in the adaptation for Japan of the (downloadable for PlayStation 3) game, *Fat Princess* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009), all characters with four digits in the original version of the game, were given an extra, fifth digit for Japan. Finally in the Japanese version of the American-made game, *Abe's Odyssey* (Oddworld Inhabitants, 1997), Abe, a Mudokon (=fictional humanoid species) butcher/meat-packer and the game's main character, was given three digits instead of the four digits he had in the original version.³ Although this adaptation was made in response to the particular sensitivities of the Japanese market, it became a permanent and globally-applicable design change for all subsequent games in the series.

Abe's Odyssey is an especially interesting example of the four-finger issue because of its wider narrative context and background story, which warrants further, brief elaboration. Inhabitants of the fictional game world, 'Oddworld', include the Mudokon, who are essentially labourers and the Glukkons, the capitalist class who dominate the Mudokon. Mudokon are further classified as either 'civilised', meaning enslaved and forced to work in dangerous, dirty and difficult forms of labour which involve degradation of the natural environment, such as working in Rupture Farms, the largest meat processing plant in Oddworld or the brewery and 'natives', who have never been slaves or who have been freed and who tend to work in jobs that nurture and cultivate the environment. Mudokon are something of a fallen group, having historically enjoyed

an equivalent status to the Glukkons and been associated with nobler religious and artistic pursuits and professions. Although Mudokon and Glukkons originally entered into business/industrial partnership, the Mudokon were eventually subjugated into slavery/labouring. When Abe accidentally discovers that, in response to falling profits caused in part by falling stocks of the creatures that serve as the main source of meat, the Glukkons are planning to launch a new line of tasty treats made from the flesh of Mudokon, he escapes from the plant and, following a mystical experience which occurs after bumping his head, makes it his mission to emancipate his civilised Mudokon brethren. As this brief narrative suggests, it is not only the four-digit hand of Mudokon characters which might have been suggestive of Japan's historical underclass, the *burakumin*, but also the relationship between their employment/enslavement – as butchers in a meat-packing factory or undertakers for example – and their subjugated status in Oddworld society. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that the management of Oddworld Inhabitants were strongly advised against attempting to sell a game with four-fingered characters in Japan, on the grounds that they might face legal challenges from groups such as the Burakumin Liberation League.⁴



Fig. 1 Mudokon 'civilised' and 'native' professions, including (left-to-right): scrub (lowest of the low), butcher and recycler/tree cutter (all civilised) and tree grower, water gatherer and undertaker (all native). Image reproduced with permission from Oddworld Inhabitants.

³ (Sources: <http://www.vgfacts.com/game/oddworldabesodyssey/> <http://dwellers-of-oddworld.deviantart.com/journal/Abe-returns-with-4-FINGERS-in-tact-248106555>)

⁴ (Source: http://oddworldlibrary.net/toe/FAQ#Why_did_Mudokons_lose_a_finger_between_Abe's_Oddysee_and_Abe's_Exoddus) According to Lorne Lanning, founder and CEO of Oddworld Inhabitants, the company which created and developed the Oddworld series, following a meeting with Softbank about the possibility of inclusion of Oddworld games in Gamebank, the newly proposed video game dimension to Softbank, Lanning was advised that game characters with four digits were likely to be problematic in Japan and that they should either be changed or, alternatively, Oddworld Inhabitants should be prepared to make

financial reparations (as Disney had purportedly done) in order to retain the original look of its characters (without adaptations) in the Japanese market. According to Lanning, a middleman, who was not Japanese, explained to him that a character with four fingers would be as offensive to the Japanese as a game character wearing a yellow arm band would be for the Jews. Lanning explained that whereas he understood a cultural sensitivity to depictions of characters with four fingers, what he could not understand was how, if such characters were so offensive, they could be tolerated in exchange for financial compensation, an arrangement which appeared to him as a kind of 'shakedown'. As a result, he agreed to change all controversial depictions, rather than pay (personal interview, 31 October 2014).

During the course of conducting research related to the production and consumption of video games in Japan over the last decade, focusing in recent years specifically on the rating and censorship of games, I have discussed this issue with several video game creators and producers who had encountered the issue first hand in the context of producing and/or marketing their games in Japan, with game localisation specialists in Tokyo who were familiar with the issue, with several non-Japanese video game producers/creators and game localisation specialists who were working in Japan or who were otherwise familiar with and/or had engaged with the Japanese market and with a senior representative of the Computer Entertainment and Rating Organisation (CERO). In most cases, it was not an easy subject to discuss, regardless of how delicately the topic was broached. In one case, when I asked a Japanese video game developer, who I was aware had encountered the issue in the context of one of his well-known games, about this, his initial response was that it was not a good topic to talk about. After following up with an email message, explaining the exact intentions of my research, I was granted a follow-up interview, during which we very briefly revisited the issue (personal interview, 23 September 2017). On another occasion, when I attempted to ask whether the issue was encompassed in the formal criteria for rating games in Japan, my interviewee became visibly uncomfortable, simply denying that it was a relevant issue (personal interview, 13 September 2017).⁵ Others were less reticent to discuss the issue, but on the understanding that I would not reveal their identities in publications. Two interviewees – both localisation specialists - advised against publishing about the issue in Japanese in Japan, suggesting that it should be alright to publish in English. When I questioned one interviewee, a game localisation specialist at a large and well-known Japanese video game producer, about why the issue seemed to be so sensitive, he confirmed that it was due to fear of the potentially hostile reaction of organisations protecting the rights of the Burakumin (personal interview, 26 September 2017). The reticence of some to engage with this issue explicitly meant that conducting research on the topic could, occasionally, be awkward and uncomfortable, if not ill-advised.

⁵ This was countered in a subsequent interview with a game localization specialist, who claimed that, in fact, the issue was encompassed in the formal criteria for the rating of games in Japan (personal interview, 26 September 2017). Since it was not possible to access these criteria directly, independent verification was not possible.

⁶ In an essay on game design by Endo Masanobu, it is noted that “four fingers is a discriminatory expression and should not be used. (Endo Masanobu 2012:99)

Nevertheless, a few general observations on the basis of preliminary research in the context of video games can be made. First, although there is a consensus with regard to an aversion of depictions of hands with four digits⁶, it is not clear that this is a blanket prohibition and there do seem to be exceptions, including Disney characters and characters in selected other video game titles, such as *Cuphead* (2017). These may sometimes be due to the fact that the characters depicted are not sufficiently humanoid and are thus exempt from the general rule. Although, in the case of Disney, the reason for the exemption has not been verified by the author, there is a long-standing rumour (unconfirmed) in circulation in online publications, in discussion forums and social media and mentioned by several interviewees, that Disney pays an annual fee in lieu of making changes to the appearance of its flagship characters. This seeming variation has led to the adoption of a case-by-case approach to this research, exploring how individual companies have encountered and, where necessary, engaged with this issue.

There are, in fact, multiple explanations in circulation for why hands with four digits are problematic in Japanese popular culture and popular media and for the specific association between four fingers and the *burakumin*. Perhaps the most ubiquitous of these – well documented in academic literature from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives pertaining to Japan - is that holding the hand with four fingers (usually pointing down) and the thumb tucked back across the palm is a well-known gesture used to connote the *burakumin* or, *yotsu* or *yottsū* (four), a derogatory term for the *burakumin*.⁷ Although most commentators agree that the gesture signifies four-legged creatures or animals, signifying the association between the *burakumin* and animals through employment such as butchery or leather tanning (or even implying that *burakumin* are animals or are like animals via association), it has also been suggested that *yotsu/yottsū* refers to the fourth class or caste in what was historically a three class/caste system, the implication being that the *burakumin* are therefore outside the system, literally ‘unclassified’.⁸ Others have suggested that the four finger gesture is suggestive of the fact that *burakumin* were, as a result of kind of labour they engaged in, more likely to lose fingers accidentally. Within the context of discussions pertaining

⁷ In his *Discriminatory and offensive words*, Kobayashi Kenji notes that whereas “yotsu” was once a typical discriminatory word, it is now just an example of excessive regulation (2011:136-7)

⁸ In his 1924 article, ‘The Eta Movement, published in *The Communist International*, Katayama Sen includes the following footnote in reference to the four-fingered gesture: “Before the bourgeois revolution of 1868, there were three recognised classes in Japan. The Eta were not included in any of these classes. Hence, holding up four fingers to an Eta is a popular form of insult. (Katayama 1924: 128).

particularly to the avoidance of four-finger characters in popular culture, the association between missing digits and the *yakuza* has been mentioned, for example with reference to the adaptation of Postman Pat and Bob the Builder for the Japanese market.⁹ Finally the alliterative association between four and death (both of which can be rendered as *shi*), which is often cited for example to account for the absence of (labelling of) a fourth floor in buildings in Japan, has also been noted.

Whilst all of these explanations are ‘alive’ (in circulation) in society and may be, to a greater or lesser degree, relevant in understanding the specific association between four (*yotsu/yottsu*) or four fingers and the *burakumin* and, more generally, the negative (or at least problematic) perception of the number four, they are not sufficient, in themselves, to account for the acute sensitivity to the depiction of four fingers in the context of videogames, animation and in the wider mass/print media in Japan. Although there was nearly complete consensus among the many video game industry representatives with whom I spoke, that dismemberment and, specifically, the display of hands with four digits was problematic, the exact justification for this sensitivity are either non-existent, incomplete or altogether unconvincing. For example, the explanation that animation viewers and video game players in Japan, especially the young, may find characters with four fingers scary and gangster-like has been challenged by critics/commentators who doubt that children react in this way, suggesting that producers were being too sensitive. The explanation probably raises more questions than it resolves. Why would the depiction of an animation or video game character with four digits automatically suggest *yakuza* or derogatory reference to the *burakumin*, regardless of the wider narrative context? Does this association really exist in the minds of Japanese children and, if so, what is the evidence? The comments of video game players and Japanese popular culture enthusiasts alluded to above – about the seeming incongruity of the prohibition against depictions of dismemberment, including hands with four

digits and the tolerance of much more extreme content – prompt the question of how this particular category of content is related to other categories of content and what, if any, the wider principles and/or criteria for such judgements may be. In order to begin to address these questions and elucidate the prohibition of depictions of hands with four digits, it is necessary to explore the intersection between the politics of censorship and the politics of the *burakumin* in Japan, with particular reference to the four-fingered gesture.

Social Life of a Gesture

According to Orbaugh, use of the term, *yotsu* or *yottsu* as an epithet for the *burakumin* has a long history, dating to as far back as the thirteenth century. The persistence of discrimination against the *burakumin* following the legal dissolution of the caste system in the Meiji period led to the politicization of the *burakumin* issue and emergence of organizations for the protection of *burakumin* rights, such as the *Suiheisha*, which was established in 1922 and which was particularly active in the 1920s and 1930s¹⁰, and its postwar replacement, the National Committee for Buraku Liberation which later became the Buraku Liberation League (BLL). Almost immediately following its formation, the *Suiheisha* began to take concerted action against insulting and derogatory terms of reference for the *burakumin*, including *eta*, *doetta* and *yottsu* (four), the latter of which might be accompanied by the derisive holding up of four fingers. Protests usually involved lodging complaints – sometimes collectively, vocally and publicly – in a bid to solicit an apology, which normally settled the matter or, in more severe cases, a public retraction in print (Gottlieb 2006:57).

During the peak of its political activity during the 1920s and 1930s, the *Suiheisha* was extremely active in cataloguing incidences of discrimination, especially the use of insulting and derogatory language¹¹, and in applying collective political pressure to publicise transgressions and, where possible, to extract an apology or, in more severe cases, a public retraction in print, from the offender (Gottlieb 2006: 57) in a strategy known as *kyūdan* (denunciation).¹²

⁹ See for example Martinez 1998:9 and BBC News, 20 April 2000. Although the basis for the four-finger issue is not exactly the same for the *yakuza* and the *burakumin* – *yubitsume* (voluntary cutting off of part of a finger as atonement for mistakes made and/or offences committed) in the case of the former and association with animals in the case of the latter – the close historical association between these groups (e.g. disproportionate *burakumin* membership in the *yakuza*) suggests that their concerns are not necessarily entirely mutually exclusive. West (2006) cites an interesting and illustrative example of when comedian Yasushi Yokoyama displayed four fingers (with his pinky bent) to indicate *yakuza* in a conversation about underworld loans on an NTV programme, triggering a protest from the Burakumin Liberation League on the grounds that the gesture suggested *yottsu*, which prompted an apology from the network.

¹⁰ The number of campaigns peaked in 1923 (1,462) and continued at a rate of 500 (or more) per year until the late 1930s (Neary 1989, cited in Gottlieb 2006).

¹¹ Gottlieb mentions in particular use of the words, *eta*, *doetta* and *yottsu*, as well as the derisive holding up of four fingers. (2006: 57)

¹² One notorious and well-documented (Katayama 1924; Neary 1989; Siniawer 2008) example was the so-called Shimo-Mizu incident, which occurred in Nara Prefecture in March, 1917. The incident was triggered when Mr. Kumakichi Morita, a member of *Kokusuikai*, a nationalist organization, insulted Mr. Katsujiro Minaraitso, a *burakumin* and member of *Suiheisha* by raising four fingers in derision at a wedding procession. When an apology was demanded and refused, several hundred members of *Suiheisha* staged a protest near the offender’s residence. *Kokusuikai* responded by arming and amassing hundreds of its own members, which in turn resulted in an escalated response from

The assault on use of discriminatory language, gestures and other references was not limited to individuals, but encompassed both public and private organizations - departments of government, schools and other public offices - and the mass media, including the print/news media and publishing. Gottlieb mentions, as an early illustrative example from literary publishing, the writer Tôson's 1906 novel, *Hakai* (The Broken Commandment), which is the story of a teacher in rural Japan who struggles with the psychological consequences of having hidden his Burakumin origins. Although the novel might have been construed as highlighting, through the experience of its protagonist, the plight of the Burakumin in Japanese society, it was instead condemned by *Suiheisha* for perpetuating what the organization viewed as, "discrimination against Burakumin by exposing them to public curiosity" (Gottlieb 2006:34). In 1926, the novel was included on the agenda of the *Suiheisha* Fifth National Conference with the view to determining whether denunciation should be carried out against its author, but the motion was not upheld, in spite of it containing 71 references to 'eta', 38 references to 'shinheimin' and six references to 'chôri', all derogatory terms denoting outcaste status. Nevertheless, in 1929, Tôson voluntarily withdrew *Hakai* from publication following an attempt by a breakaway Kantô *Suiheisha* group to extort money, leading to threats against the publisher, *Shinhôsha*. When the novel was re-published ten years later, in 1939, Tôson had removed potentially controversial terms of reference to the Burakumin, including 'eta', 'shinheimin', 'senmin', 'kâto jinshu' (inferior race), 'chôri', 'yubi wa yon hon' (four fingers) and 'yotsuashi' (four legs), replacing them with generic, 'bukaku no mono', 'onaji mibun' (of same status) or other, similar neutral terms (Gottlieb 2006: 34).

The example highlights several persistent and characteristic features of the engagement between *Suiheisha* and subsequent buraku rights organisations and the problem of Buraku discrimination, particularly in the context of publishing and the print media. First, the approach towards references to the Burakumin deemed derogatory or offensive, even in the context of a fictional narrative which may be attempting to realistically render, without condoning, social discrimination, is nonetheless censorious, seeking omission of any terminology which could be construed as offensive, regardless of its narrative context or the intentions of the

author. This orientation is reflected in a 1957 report to the Buraku Liberation League's national meeting, which clarifies the organization's position that, "many literary works did no more than entrench existing stereotypes about Burakumin" (ibid). Secondly, the example highlights the role and influence of *Suiheisha* and, in the contemporary context, its descendant organizations, in defining the parameters of what constitutes discrimination with reference to the Burakumin and reflects the uncompromising and sometimes even aggressive tactics employed in the enforcement of transgressions. Finally, the case is suggestive of the effectiveness of *Suiheisha* protest campaigns and tactics in forcing capitulation by those accused of discrimination. Following a period of active suppression of *Suiheisha* and its activities in the years preceding and during the war, activity resumed with the establishment of the National Committee of Buraku Liberation in 1946. In 1951, the organisation's strategy of denunciation was consolidated in a report to the national meeting, in which both the frequency of incidences of discrimination and the role of journalism (and its attendant social influence) were noted. In the absence of what was deemed adequate legal protection against acts of discrimination, denunciation became a principle strategic tool and means of resistance, allowing,

...Buraku people to accuse persons who discriminate against them. It seeks to have them reflect and apologise. Through this process, both the discriminating person and the Buraku people discover the background in society which produces discrimination. The ultimate aim of denunciation is to educate the person who was discriminated against, to help probe why discrimination still exists and to awaken the dignity of humanity. (quoted in Gottlieb 2006: 59).

During the summer of 1951, articles deemed to be discriminatory against the Burakumin were published in all three of the Japan's major newspapers (*Asahi*, *Mainichi* and *Yomiuri*), as well as in leading magazines such as *Bungei Shunju*. Gottlieb reports that usage of the term 'tokushu buraku' seven times by *Asahi* employees or in *Asahi* publications in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in a full-scale denunciation of the company by the headquarters of the Buraku Liberation League in November, 1967, making the point that,

Suiheisha. Following bloody skirmishes between the two sides and repeated, unsuccessful attempts to mediate a settlement, the issue was finally resolved when Mr. Morita agreed to an apology, to the relief of a frightened and terrorised citizens. Another incident, recounted by Neary (1989), involved Dr. Funagi, a police surgeon and local worthy who,

when he used the four-finger gesture to refer to *burakumin* patients in a meeting of local doctors, sparked a collective protest of *Suiheisha* members which was only diffused when the doctor made a public apology and agreed to distribute 7,000 leaflets.

...no matter how pure the intentions of the writers or how socially affirmative the text surrounding the words 'tokushu buraku' might be... persistent use of the term contributed to increasing and perpetuating discrimination against the Burakumin. (Gottlieb 2006: 58)

According to Gottlieb, it was during this period (1950s and 1960s) that,

...the League's attitude towards discriminatory language in public discourse, always stern since the 1920s levellers days, hardened into the unyielding stance which was to bring media organizations to heel. (ibid: 64)

It was not just the print media, but also television which was the target of censure by Buraku rights organizations. When, in April 1973, Terebi Nishi Nihon broadcast the film, *Ukigawa* (The Floating Weed), in which the son of the film's hero, a wandering performer, is advised not to marry a woman in the troupe since he and she were, 'of different races' (*jinshu ga chigau*), the Buraku Liberation League took exception to the reference to 'travelling player', which was traditionally a Burakumin or *hinin* occupation, and the expression 'of different races', arguing that it contravened a 1969 Law on Special Measures for Doowa Projects'. In response to the television company's defence that the film was an artistic work from an earlier era and that therefore a complaint on the grounds of discrimination was inappropriate, the BLL launched a massive and sustained campaign of complaints until the channel finally capitulated. (Gottlieb 2006:60)

In an interesting case of self-censorship at another Tokyo television network, a sequence depicting the floor manager counting down – both verbally and visually using the fingers of his hand – to the start of the network's news hour was amended so that the word 'four' could not be heard and the accompanying display of four fingers was blurred out using the same techniques usually associated with the blurring of the pubic area. (West 2006:158) In another incident, when comedian Yasushi Yokoyama displayed four fingers, with his pinky finger bent back, to indicate the *yakuza*, in the context of a conversation about underground loans on a program broadcast on NTV, it triggered a protest from the BBL – on the grounds that the gesture suggested *yotsu* (four) – which resulted in the network issuing a formal, written apology (West 2006:159). Finally, Gottlieb cites the example of a television

advertisement from 1973 for Ripobitan D, in which the expression, ヨツ! お疲れさん! (*Yotsu! Otsukaresan!*), which translates roughly as, "calling all who are tired" was amended to ヨお! おつかれさん! (*Yo-o! Otsukaresan!*) in order to avoid utterance of *yotsu*, even though its meaning in this context is different from 'four', and thus to circumvent any possibility of its being misunderstood for the derogatory term for the Burakumin (2006:67). As such incidences illustrate, it was not only overt references to the Burakumin which were deemed problematic, but also gestures and/or utterances which could be construed, however obliquely, as suggestive of the Burakumin, regardless of their particular context.

It was not only print and broadcast media companies which were implicated for alleged discrimination by the Buraku Liberation League and related groups. The denunciation of the city of Kyoto in 1951 after one of its employees wrote a story deemed to be derogatory to the Burakumin inaugurated, "...what was to become the Buraku community's new strategy of focusing denunciations nationwide not on individuals...", as had been the practice of the *Suiheisha* in the 1920s and 1930s, "...but on institutions, with the interest of influencing policy" (Fowler 2000:24, cited in Gottlieb 2006:58). Japanese companies, some of which were known for (or suspected of) hiring/employment practices which were discriminatory towards the Burakumin, were also targeted. Gottlieb cites, as an example of such practices, the annotation of personal history documents provided by private investigators as part of the job application process:

*The symbol * near someone's address meant the address had been identified as being Buraku; the numeral 4 inside a circle on the paper meant that the person was of Burakumin descent. (Gottlieb 2006:55)*

As Gottlieb further clarifies, "Once the symbol * was noted, no further investigation as to the suitability of the applicant for employment was considered; they were automatically excluded" (ibid.). Finally, commenting on denunciation in the context of schools, West quotes one teacher's perspective on the procedure of dealing with such incidences,

*At every High School, anytime something happens, the Burakumin Liberation League calls it a discriminatory incident and does a thorough investigation. Depending on the local branch, the principal or the person in charge of anti-discrimination education (*dōwa kyōiku*) is called to give testimony and soon the*

whole school is asked to prepare a “summary”. Teachers work themselves to death over it, have to take the next day off to rest, and the students suffer. After many hours, a report of several hundred pages is submitted. Then on the day of the ‘denunciation lesson’, every single teacher had better show up. (West 2006: 157-8)

This brief overview of the emergence, evolution and politicization of organizations representing the rights of the Burakumin and their engagement with both Japanese individuals and institutions suggests several key characteristics of efforts to negotiate the issue of discrimination against the Burakumin in Japan.

The first is the vigilance with which incidences of discrimination (or suspected discrimination) have historically been and continue to be pursued by organizations representing the interests of the Burakumin (or, perhaps more accurately, descendants of the former Burakumin). Organizations such as the *Suiheisha* in the 1920s and 1930s and, after the second world war, the Buraku Liberation League (amongst others) have been meticulous in cataloguing¹³ and publicly denouncing incidences (or suspected/alleged incidences) of discrimination against the Burakumin and campaigns aimed at identifying, embarrassing and extracting an apology from perpetrators of discrimination have been extremely effective.

In fact, as West suggests, tactics employed by the Buraku Liberation League and their predecessors in identifying, defining, denouncing and prosecuting incidences of discrimination have proven so effective as to have instilled a fear of being accused of discrimination:

Harbouring fears like these, some people and businesses go out of the way to avoid dealing with burakumin, a strategic pattern of prejudice designed to avoid backlash. Similarly, the elite media and most of the non-elite media, avoid the topic altogether, placing it on the same taboo platter with “the emperor”, right-wingers, the Korean problem, porno and privacy. (West 2006:158)

According to this author,

Burakumin are so frightening to some people that claiming to be burakumin is a favorite gangster

extortion tactic (apparently being a gangster alone is less effective). (ibid.)

In terms of general public perception, West suggests that, “many people in Japan believe that burakumin ...react strongly to perceived slights”, including, “the rare news reports about them” (2006:157).

The thoroughness and persistence of burakumin rights organizations in identifying and prosecuting incidences of discrimination wherever they may occur in Japanese society and the fear of the burakumin (or fear of offending the burakumin) which, according to West, has developed as a result may explain one of the most interesting aspects of the treatment of the *burakumin* issue in Japan – its “unspeakability”. As Gottlieb suggests, “...mention of the Burakumin remains by and large an unspoken taboo in polite Japanese society. It is not unusual to find Japanese who profess never to have heard of the Burakumin.” (p. 56). Gottlieb suggests that this silence extends to the highest levels, citing the example of the United Nations rapporteur who commented, with reference to the Japanese government’s first and second periodic reports to UNCERD (United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination) in 2001, that the report was silent on important issues such as that of the Burakumin. Similarly, as Mark West notes with reference to minority scandals in Japan,

...thoughtful public conversations about minorities rarely occur in Japan. Stories about minorities are strictly controlled by the elite media, whose theory is twofold. First, calling attention to minority problems just exacerbates the problem of being a minority; the theory is that being labelled as different in Japan is itself a form of discrimination. (West 2006:157)

Noguchi identifies “invisibility” as, “an important feature of most minority issues in Japan”, suggesting that the use of four fingers serves as a euphemism which implies that, “even to speak aloud of someone’s Buraku status is to risk defilement” (Noguchi 1989:77).

This ‘erasure’ of overt mention of the Burakumin from private, public, and media discourses in Japan, as well as from artistic and literary works, suggests a model of negotiating social discrimination based almost entirely on omission and the absence of discourse. However, as West clarifies with regard to engagement with discrimination

¹³ West alludes to this meticulousness as follows: “The Buraku Liberation League publishes accounts of discriminatory incidents in its newspapers, including what seems to be a recounting of every single

incident of anti-burakumin graffiti ever to appear on a bathroom stall.” (2006:160)

against the burakumin in Japan, it is based less on general principle (e.g. concerning discriminatory behaviour per se) than on the power of burakumin interests to enforce their agenda through vigilant monitoring of anti-burakumin discrimination, powerful collective opposition to perpetrators of discrimination and, according to some, blatant intimidation of individuals, organizations and the general public¹⁴.

Analysis and Conclusions

Returning to the specific context of video games, this paper raises a number of issues and questions regarding the relationship between the rating and censorship of game content and the body, and, in particular, the incomplete body, whether as a result of violent dismemberment in the context of game play or, as is usually the case in the prohibition of depictions of hands with four digits, by design. Although the two cases (prohibition of depictions of hands with four fingers and sensitivity to images of violent dismemberment) may occasionally overlap – as in the previously mentioned example of the box cover art for the game, *Left 4 Dead* (developed by Valve Corporation; published by Electronic Arts, 2008) – the two issues are, for the most part, distinct.

As regards the widely acknowledged sensitivity to issues of violent dismemberment in the rating and censorship of games in Japan, there are at least several possible explanations. The first, suggested in academic literature related to conceptions of the body (Lock 2002, 1993; Deguchi 1999), is a belief in the body as ‘inalienable’, reflecting the idea that parts of the body symbolise the person, that, “...hair or nails, even after their detachment, still contain some attribute of the owner” (Deguchi 1999:122). In this sense, separation of the body may not be distinguishable from the disaggregation of the identity of the person. Cultural views on death as a process, rather than a discreet moment may also be relevant since the medically-defined death of the body does not necessarily equate with perceptions of the death of the individual per se, which, as Lock suggests, tends to be socially, rather than scientifically determined: “Death in Japan... is above all a familial and social occasion. Even when medically determined, death becomes final only when the family accepts it as such...” (2002:8). As has been proposed elsewhere (Kelly 2010), cultural perceptions and practices regarding death,

including beliefs regarding the appropriate treatment of the corpse following death (especially in the case of untimely and/or violent death) may, at least in part, account for particular sensitivities and prohibitions with regard to the treatment of dead bodies in the rating and censorship of videogames, including issues related to bodily dismemberment.¹⁵

However, there are several potential limitations to such an explanation in accounting for the particular sensitivity towards bodily dismemberment in the rating and censorship of video games in Japan. First, such an explanation does not adequately account for differences in the treatment of bodily dismemberment in video games versus manga, alluded to by so many video gamers in online blogs and discussion forums¹⁶. If the basis for the problematic nature of bodily dismemberment in video games in Japan is related to cultural perceptions/conceptions of the body, why the apparent greater tolerance of images of violent bodily dismemberment in manga, as reflected in a story such as *Elfin Lied*? The interactivity of video games, and the fact that the video game user is the active participant in acts of dismemberment (either as perpetrator or victim) is, as already noted, one possibility. However, a second explanation, may lay in differences between the two industries and, specifically, differences in perceptions of the two industries amongst the Japanese public. According to this explanation, whereas manga, as the product of a long-established, more mature and mainstream popular culture industry, is relatively familiar to most Japanese people, video games, as the product of a much more recent industry are, relatively speaking, less familiar and therefore perceived as potentially more threatening to the welfare of and development of (especially younger) Japanese people. Furthermore, in terms of public perception, whereas the more experienced manga industry is assumed to have become adept at managing its public image and finessing any issues which may occasionally arise with regard to manga content, the much younger video game industry has only in the last decade or so (through its creation of CERO), begun to monitor and assess video game content with potentially detrimental effects on users, especially young users, and to advise and inform consumers through the labelling of all video games with age ratings. In short, due to the relative youth of the video games industry, video games are less familiar to

¹⁴ West suggests that, “Protesting groups usually bring claims only on behalf of their group, not based on wider principles”. (2006:161)

¹⁵ Such ‘culturalist’ explanations were not always accepted when proposed to those working in the Japanese video games industry, perhaps reflecting the tendency, noted by Lock, of the majority of

Japanese with whom she talked about brain death to, “...dismiss arguments that reify Japanese tradition” (2002:59)

¹⁶ The difference was also confirmed by a prominent Japanese video game localization specialist with whom I discussed the matter (personal communication, 22 February 2015).

many Japanese than manga and are therefore treated as potentially more risky and suspicious, a view which has almost certainly been reinforced by critical coverage of video games in the mass media since at least the mid-1990s. In this sense, the creation of CERO and development of a system for the rating and censorship of games in Japan involved a coalescence of at least two factors: (1) an international consensus (or consensus in a number of different video game markets simultaneously) - precipitated by advances in computer graphics technology resulting in increasingly realistic renderings of violent and sexual content – that a system for assessing and labelling video games on the basis of content was both necessary and desirable, and, (2) as Leheny suggests, a general sense of crisis and social malaise in the 1990s, nourished, in part, by a belief in the growing problem of “out-of-control youth”, which urgently needed to be addressed.

With specific reference to the prohibition against the depiction of a human hand with only four digits, whether the result of mutilation or design, this can only be fully elucidated with reference to the historical problem of social discrimination against the burakumin and, as I hope this paper has at least hinted, the problem probably has much more to do with loss of face on behalf of organizations and individuals at risk of being labelled as discriminatory by burakumin rights organizations and criticized in the mass media than it does with loss of fingers. More broadly, an exploration of the prohibition against depictions of hands with four digits in the Japanese entertainment media also contributes to an understanding of the asymmetry of the system for the rating and censorship of videogames in Japan and, more specifically, the fact that some issues in the assessment of video game content matter much more than others. With reference to the depiction four-digit hands, as West suggests, the basis for the prohibition is primarily political, stemming from the fact that such imagery would likely become the target of powerful protest from the Buraku Liberation League and related organizations. It is also, for West, the existence of such a powerful political lobby which accounts for the stark differences in the treatment of discrimination against the burakumin versus other groups. As West comments - with reference to a recent court decision, upon reissuance of *Little Black Sambo*, that stereotypically racist pictures of a dark-skinned boy being chased by a tiger (which were the basis for cessation of publication in 1988) were “not discriminatory” – “Well of course not, for what powerful Japanese group would protest such a thing?” (2006:161). As a final observation, as I hope this paper has

demonstrated, the basis for the prohibition against the depiction of four-digit hands in the context of video game rating and censorship is, essentially, the same as the initial impetus for the creation of a system for the rating and censorship of videogames: fear of negative criticism in the mass media and public loss of face.

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