

Japan's Videogames and Digital Cultures: Local and Global. A Report about the 6th PaJaKo Workshop between Ritsumeikan and Leipzig University

Kyohei Ito

Ritsumeikan University, i.tokyo.hey@gmail.com

Yasuo Kawasaki

Ritsumeikan University, sa54737@ba2.so-net.ne.jp

Luca Bruno

Leipzig University & Stuttgart Media University, bruno@hdm-stuttgart.de

Martin Roth

Ritsumeikan University & Stuttgart Media University, roth1003@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp

Introduction

In early 2017, the Graduate School of Core Ethics and Frontier Sciences and the Game Research Center at Ritsumeikan University (Kyoto, Japan), together with the Institute of East Asian Studies at Leipzig University (Leipzig, Germany), launched an exchange of graduate students and research staff, focusing on how to situate Japan's videogames in local and global contexts. Funded by the German Foreign Exchange Service (DAAD) as part of the PaJaKo program, the exchange offers 4-5 graduate students and 1-2 staff members per year the chance to visit and work at the partner institution. This initiative will continue until December 2020.

Despite the many challenges involved in such an endeavor, students and staff alike met this opportunity with great interest. Based on the experience of the first two years, the project was subsequently broadened in scope and currently includes games and digital media, as well as related aspects of media culture. The project has been successful largely due to the participants and their curiosity and willingness to support each other. It has been highly productive, both in terms of content and in the sense of creating a lasting network among the participants, thanks to a series of workshops we have organized at both universities every time a group of students has visited. These workshops have attracted students and researchers specializing in games and Japan's media culture, who

sometimes travel considerable distances to attend. This report covers a brief snapshot of the most recent workshop, held on November 18, 2019 at Ritsumeikan University.

The report describes the concept behind the workshops and summarizes the November 2019 workshop, providing a closer look at three of the presentations, which reveal the various topics discussed by the participants. Before turning to the event itself, we will review the character and intention underlying these workshops.

The workshops have always been as inclusive as possible. This means that while the participants are obliged to present their projects during the workshop, we always invite other students who are concerned with related topics (and even outside participants) to use it as a space for discourse and exchange. In order to make such exchange feasible at the most recent workshop, we asked all participants to offer their accounts in two languages (i.e., by speaking in Japanese and presenting slides and abstracts in English, or vice versa). Preference was given to discussions rather than extensive presentations, which usually sparked very interesting conversations that continued during coffee breaks and at dinner. Corresponding to the 13 students and staff members sent back and forth over the first three years, the workshops facilitated presentations by at least as many presenters who have not taken part in the exchange project itself. As such, the workshop created a space for encountering other researchers with similar interests.



The 6th workshop was held at Ritsumeikan University while Leipzig PhD student Konstantin Freybe was there for his research on videogames invented by the Japanese game designer Hideo Kojima, and the online fan culture surrounding these games. The workshop consisted of 8 presentations, ranging from a discussion of *Changing norms in the localization of Japanese videogames* by visiting scholar Matteo Fabbretti to an account of *Modern Japanese clothes during the early Taisho Showa period* by Ritsumeikan PhD student Taeko Edaki, among others.

While all presentations raised important questions linked to the project's theme, the following summaries of three papers given during the workshop highlight the diverse approaches to the theme, and relay some of the results of the exchange.

Cooperation or Competition: Report on the Gaming Workshop in Leipzig (Kyohei ITO)

Das Japanische Haus e.V. (DJH) is located on Eisenbahnstraße, supposedly the most dangerous street in Germany. I was a little uneasy when a man who worked for DJH offered to let me collaborate at an event. In his view, living life is killing time – if so, we'd better kill time in useful ways. Playing games might be considered one of the least obvious choices in that regard. However, that is all the more reason for inquiring into the value of games. With this intention, I organized a gaming workshop at DJH. The workshop took place on June 15, 2018, and was supported by the [j]Games Lab of Leipzig University. Before I turn to the main topic, I will introduce the project, “Thematic Gaming,” which served as inspiration for the workshop.

Thematic Gaming is the name of a series of events during which we played games selected on the basis of a specific theme, which the host of the event decided. Hiroshi Yoshida, a former professor at Ritsumeikan University, invented Thematic Gaming. He coordinated this gathering regularly from 2016 to 2018. The theme of the first Thematic Gaming was baseball, in correspondence with the research subject of the host, who was interested in media theories associated with the sport. We borrowed game consoles and software from the Ritsumeikan Center of Game Studies (RCGS). RCGS is a well-known pioneer in preserving games and offers an Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Yet thus far, it does not act as a library. In this sense, Thematic Gaming was an experimental project that connected preserving with utilizing. A future

challenge for this project is to open such events to the public.

Drawing on this experience, I named the workshop in Leipzig “Eine kleine Videospielnacht.” This title is a parody of Mozart's “Eine kleine Nachtmusik.” I arrived at it only after someone pointed out that my original choice prompted the association of an erotic situation – I did not know the difference in nuance between the German “Nachtspiel” and “Spielenacht.” Anyway, I wanted to avoid attracting people seeking a romantic partner to the event.

I borrowed the following game consoles and game software (all Japanese language editions) from the [j]Games Lab.

Consoles: Nintendo Wii, Sony PlayStation 3 (PS3), Sony PlayStation 4 VR (PSVR).

Software: Mario Party 8 (Wii), Momotaro Dentetsu 16 (Wii), Street Fighter 4 (PS3), Puyo Puyo Tetris (PS3), Astro Bot (PSVR).

It was fortunate that I could borrow them and carry them outside of the university based on the personal judgment of Professor Martin Roth, who managed the [j]Games Lab at the time.

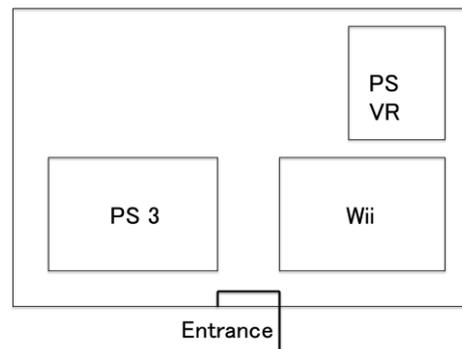


Figure 1. Layout (Top View)

Founded in 2011, the venue for the workshop, DJH in Leipzig, has acted as a bridge between international exchanges and local events. It was founded mainly by immigrants in order to strengthen social cohesion in eastern Leipzig and offers various events, as well as a weekly “kitchen for all,” during which anyone is welcome to help with cooking and eating. The gaming workshop would be counted as one of these events. Fig. 1 shows the layout of the game consoles in the 15m² space. The sections were not separated by walls. This caused some sound interference,

interference, but I decided it was within bearable limits during a rehearsal.



Figure 2. Around the PS3



Figure 3. Around the Wii



Figure 4. Around the PSVR

The event drew more than 100 participants. All software was in Japanese, but many people did not have any Japanese language proficiency.

Fig. 2, 3, and 4 show participants gathered around each console. There were a lot of participants around the PS3, which offered competitive games centered on physical movement and action, rather than text. The participants arranged tournaments for these games on the spot. We might call this Instant e-Sports. In contrast, there were few participants at the Wii and PSVR. In order to play the Wii

game titles, which were rather text-heavy, the participants needed to help each other to understand Japanese, so they tended to remain in the audience or stand back as spectators. As a result, there was only a small audience or number of spectators. Furthermore, there was peculiar kind of communication between players and other participants at the PSVR. As shown in Fig.4, the person on the left side is taking a picture of his girlfriend. While playing the PSVR, the players could not directly share what happened in the virtual environment with the other participants. This may be one reason why the PSVR drew only a few participants.

This gaming workshop was not part of my academic research, but I was interested in discerning how the participants would play the games and communicate with each other. In sum, I suggest distinguishing between games based on these initial observations. Roughly speaking, the Wii titles were considered cooperative games and the PS3 titles competitive ones. The PSVR title is difficult to characterize. As mentioned earlier, playing the Wii titles required the participants to help each other to understand the Japanese. At the same time, the Wii titles invited the players to collaborate in order to compete with other high-ranking players. For this reason, I noticed a miniature rivalry for supremacy among the males. The PS3 titles, in contrast, displayed aspects of fierce competition, like real sports. This is why these games are compatible with e-sports.

I will not decide which type of game is better. Rather, I assert that the essential worth of multiplayer games is to provide us with “moderate competitiveness.” In this way, any kind of game is within a tolerable level. This means that games (which include gamified society) can castrate us and lead to self-domestication. We can see this from pessimistic angle as left-wing media researchers, and at the same time from an optimistic perspective because “moderate competitiveness” – which is caused by games – might eliminate our fundamental inclination toward violence. After all, games have both good and bad aspects, and they are enough because we now know that researching them is meaningful in comprehending human society and human nature.

These impressions were made possible thanks to all of the people who supported and participated this gaming workshop. The workshop took place while I stayed in Leipzig as part of the DAAD program (“Japan’s Video Games: Between the Local and the Global”).

The Possibility and Challenges of Using

Magazines as Research Material (Yasuo KAWASAKI)

This paper clarifies why and how game magazines can be useful as materials in gaming research. Magazines have been used or investigated in prior gaming studies.¹ This paper asks how useful such materials are in the context of my current project on Japanese game arcades (later called “game centers”).

First, I will cover the three main types of magazines related to arcade games published in Japan. Magazines for game players, such as *Gamest* (Shinseisha, 1986-1999), discuss gaming and review games. They are usually sold in bookstores and are easy to purchase. Most magazines belong to this category. Magazines for stores and companies, such as *Game Machine* (Amusement Press Inc., 1974-1997), specialize in topics relevant to the gaming industry, such as industry conditions, as well as relevant news and information. These magazines are not generally available in bookstores. The third kind consists of related articles published in newspapers and magazines of other genres, such as the *Asahi Newspaper*, distributed nationwide by major publishers.

Why are magazines useful for my research? Simply put, magazine articles can shed light on aspects that statistical material or previous studies do not address. My project focuses on the various forms of game centers and their development in Japan. A particularly important facet of this research is the transition of the different forms that game centers have taken on. Game centers, as I demonstrate, can exist in a corner of any shop, such as cafés or Japanese penny candy shops (*dagashiya*). Therefore, it is necessary to analyze a great variety of stores nationwide.

One possible method that might be employed to this end is to interview the staff of current stores. However, very few stores that existed when game centers expanded their market nationwide in the 1970s and 1980s remain today, and their number has been declining. In addition, the amount of people who have experienced or know about those days will shrink in the future. Accessing first-hand stories will become increasingly difficult.

Against this background, magazines have become an important resource. In my project, I mainly use magazines meant for stores and companies that contain information about the business conditions of each store at the time of publication, as well as pertinent articles published in general newspapers.

Industry magazines outline the business conditions of current stores and the sales of game products. In addition, they present instructive news and articles on topics pertinent to game centers, which are helpful in understanding the historical transition of the industry and the stores. In my research, I relied primarily on the “monthly business condition report,” “articles on interviews with each shop owner,”² and “special articles about the appearance of the store’s form,”³ which appeared in *Coin Journal* (A Create, Inc., 1976-2001) from April 1981 to April 2001. These articles describe the conditions and topics of game centers every month based on interviews. Therefore, I was able to get an idea of the circumstances of that time in various ways. Moreover, articles about video games in general magazines and newspapers emerge whenever video games become a related topic in society. This is an important context for my research on game centers.

Concretely, I use these materials to analyze the historical transition occurring in the different forms of game centers, before conducting interviews with people on these kinds of game centers.

From the above-mentioned articles, I was able to obtain qualitative information, such as the management situation in those days and the measures taken by stores, and to some extent details on the game titles that actually made money in these stores. These preliminary findings helped me to formulate questions for my interviews, and allowed me to confirm whether the information found in the magazine articles was accurate.

As shown above, magazines can be useful in examining historical aspects of the gaming industry and culture that have not been studied previously. I believe that player-oriented magazines are equally helpful in exploring player culture.

¹ For example, in gaming research, in Vol. 1 of this magazine, Iang Yuxi (2019) examined whether it is possible to confirm the social change caused by video games through evaluating magazines, specifically by taking a “cross review” article from the weekly *Famitsu* as an object.

² For example, the interview “Re-examination of single markets” (同行取材 シングルマーケット再点検), *Coin Journal*, 1983.4, pp. 27-30

³ For example, “Flowers OPEN? Single markets for adults” (特集 花開くか? 大人のシングルマーケット) *Coin Journal*, 1977.7, pp. 9-18

However, several issues remain when using magazines as research material. Firstly, we need to be aware of the biases in each magazine. Given their target audience, these magazines naturally consist of articles favorable for their readership, whether it consists of players, the public, or, in the case I illustrated above, the gaming industry and relevant stores. In some cases I scrutinized, the opinions expressed in a magazine did not accurately reflect the social context. Hence, it is necessary to conduct double and triple checks with interviews, preceding studies, and other magazines. This point can also be made in terms of so-called personal memoirs.

Another obstacle is that finding these magazines is challenging. I was fortunate to have had access to many issues of magazines from the early period, such as the *Coin Journal*, but there were still some issues missing. Even at public institutions such as the National Diet Library of Japan, the only complete industry magazine available is *Game Machine* (Amusement Press Inc. 1974-2001). Other industry magazines have only been collected since the late 1980s and 1990s. Due to this problem, researchers may need to gather magazines if they intend to use them for research. On this point, I think it is necessary to create a centralized archive for the academic use of magazines, considering that it will become more difficult to research the past in the future.

Character Intimacy Games and the Principle of Minimum Distance (Luca BRUNO)

This portion of my research is concerned with narrative distance and its implications in establishing intimate engagements with characters inhabiting so-called “character intimacy games.” I employ this term as a wide-ranging descriptor to refer to video games whose primary interactive experience is focused on creating an intimate relationship between the user and one or more characters, designed based on specific systems of conventions. One such video game features so-called *bishōjo* and *bishōnen* characters, who each mobilize a unique system of conventions articulated through character design elements, each of which has a particular intended audience (male in the case of *bishōjo* and female in the case of *bishōnen*). The character’s identity is articulated via a system of character design elements that follows a hierarchical fashion. This system regulates a character’s visual aspect, demeanor toward other characters and the user, and the kinds of narrative situations that can be created around the character.

Character intimacy games represent a majority of the PC games market within Japan (cf. Kōyama 2016: 217) and also constitute a particular node in the wider panorama of Japanese pop culture production. They can mechanically range from visual novels to role-playing games and real-time strategy, but all of them share a focus on presenting the user with idealized experiences, taking the user from an initial depicted state of little to no intimacy with the character to increasingly deeper levels of intimate interaction as the character’s storyline progresses. More profound levels of intimate engagement could potentially lead to pornographic depictions of stylized sexual intercourse between the user and the character, especially in games featuring *bishōjo* and homoerotically-inclined *bishōnen*.

My working hypothesis is that character intimacy games rely on the explicitation of conventional systems to the extent that they counteract Marie-Laure Ryan’s principle of minimal departure (2011) in key domains (inter-character relationships, user-character relationships, character mental states, etc.), especially when explicitation is not provided. The principle of minimal departure assumes that “the real world serves as a model for the mental construction of fictional storyworlds” (ibid.). However, this does not reduce fiction to an exclusive imitation of reality. Fiction is “free to construct fictional worlds that differ from AW [Actual or Real World], but the baseline from which the world is imagined still lies in the actual world. Readers imagine fictional worlds as the closest possible to AW, and they only make changes that are mandated by the text” (Ibid.).

I argue that the players of character intimacy games use this system of imaginary conventions (rather than their everyday lives) as a reference when engaging with the fictional world. Intimate relationships with *bishōjo/bishōnen* in character intimacy games represent a powerful example of this tendency: In mobilizing the metafictional imagination as a mental model, a fictional world is reconstructed first and foremost based on metafictional conventionality. The connection with the real world is inverted: The worlds inhabited by *bishōjo/bishōnen* characters are not “based on the real world until proven otherwise,” but are rather grounded in “the metafictional imagination until proven otherwise.” Character-based conventions become akin to psychic laws that regulate the emotional relationship with the user, setting the fictional world apart from the real one.

Within character intimacy games containing *bishōjo* and *bishōnen*, the principle of minimal departure is counteracted by the characters' presence, along with the systems of conventions that they mobilize. These conventions, articulated through the character's design, go on to influence the world inhabited by the character before genre specificities or authorial perspectives are applied to the story (Bruno 2019:54). According to cultural critic Azuma Hiroki (2007), characters such as *bishōjo* and *bishōnen* constitute "a node whose simple presence is enough to open a metafictional imagination" (125-127, cit. in Kacsuk 2016: 278).

Bishōjo/bishōnen characters love, fight, and sometimes die on the basis of metafiction, rather than reality, in what Azuma Hiroki defines as "game-like realism" (140). Azuma argues that characters' metafictional quality ultimately undoes the identity-setting potential of narrative (142). This allows freedom in character (re)contextualization within different narrative and non-narrative contexts that exist within, without and in between narratives (133-134). Shunsuke Nozawa adds one corollary: The character must remain recognizable enough before and after recontextualization (cf. Nozawa 2013: np). Conventional character design elements (the bedrock for character recognizability) also refer to a specific visual baseline whose successful reproduction is a condition for character recognizability. The presence of re-stylizations (such as super-deformed graphics) add a layer onto the existing metafictional model, which is not the real world. Aesthetic representation in the vein of *bishōjo/bishōnen* is thus not a stylization of reality, but rather refers to a particular mental model located at a distance from the real world, the conventionality of which serves as a marker of such narrative distance.

Inverting the principle of minimal departure, I will propose the principle of minimal distance in the approach to metafictional imaginations, such as those mobilized by *bishōjo/bishōnen* characters. The principle of minimal departure assumes that, in the case of *bishōjo/bishōnen* characters, the metafictional imagination acts as a model for the mental construction of fictional storyworlds. *Bishōjo/bishōnen* fiction is free to construct worlds that differ from metafictional imagination. Users imagine *bishōjo/bishōnen* fiction as close as possible to metafictional imagination, and make changes that are mandated by the text.

On the basis of this principle, I will ask the following open-ended questions: Is there still a connection with the

real world in fiction that operates grounded in the principle of minimal departure? What regulates the metafictional imagination? On what basis is it iterated? How does the character serve as a marker for the mobilization of metafictional imagination?

Afterthoughts

As these summaries suggest, the range of topics discussed during our workshops is quite broad, with substantial time devoted to discussions. This made participating a challenging – but we hope, also rewarding – process. The workshops have brought many scholars together and helped us to think through questions related to the position of "Japan" between the local and the global. Moreover, they have forged a community across national and research area boundaries. We aspire to continue our collaboration in this spirit and invite anyone interested in joining the game to share their thoughts at future events.

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