A Fantasy without a Dream: Japanese Role-Playing Games and the Absence of the Expressive Ideal

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical trajectory of Japanese role-playing games, in comparison to their western counterparts, and explores how these two distinct sub-genres of role-playing games have diverged in meaningful ways. Relying on interdisciplinary scholarship focusing on the study of genre in relation to literature and film, in addition to the study of genre within the field of game studies itself, an effort is made to map out relevant criteria relating to the differences between Japanese and Western role-playing games, constructing a methodological framework that allows researchers to study these subjects cross-culturally and across time. After dismantling the academic and popular genre definition of role-playing games into three distinct contributors: the thematic, systematic and expressive, the case is made that Japanese and Western role-playing games adhere non-conformably to these criteria, with Western developers to a more substantial degree attempting to advance the genre's expressive potentiality. The holy grail of such potentiality mainly being characterized by mythic agents, such as the holodeck and the aleph, describing an ideal, a dream that has both informed and regulated design practices regardless of their futility. Regarding the study at hand, this sentiment is dubbed the expressive ideal in relation to the study of role-playing games, wherein the development and reception of games is guided by an appeal to these myths. The paper concludes that for all their vibrancy and influence, Japanese role-playing games have gradually distanced themselves from the shared origin of role-playing games, operating to a significant degree in the absence of the expressive ideal that has consistently informed and shaped design practices in the West.

Introduction

The difference between Japanese and Western role-playing games has been the subject of much debate among game enthusiasts and has in recent years begun to gain some academic traction with the study of role-playing games becoming more established (Deterding et al. 2018, 11). Although the shared ancestry of these sub-genres is generally agreed upon, how they have come to differ or whether they differ at all has been a matter of controversy. Some have even argued that this distinction presents a false dichotomy as thinking about these genres as binary oppositions ignores fundamental similarities between them (Pelletier-Gagnon 2011, 87). At the opposite end of this spectrum, others have questioned whether Japanese and Western role-playing games belong to the same genre or whether they should be reconceptualized as something else entirely (Extra Credits 2012). For the purposes of this paper, the aim is, however, not to destabilize established genre conventions but rather to build on them, providing a methodological framework for analyzing the subjects at hand. Relying on interdisciplinary scholarship pertaining to the study of genre in relation to literature and film, in addition to the study of genre within the field of game studies itself, an effort is made to extract relevant criteria relating to the perceived differences between Japanese and Western role-playing games. By dismantling the academic and popular genre definition of role-playing games it becomes possible to break them down into three distinct contributors: the thematic, consisting of fictional motifs and themes traditionally associated with the genre, the systematic, the way in which rule-based systems are implemented, and finally the expressive, how players are afforded agency and to what extent they are encouraged to express themselves within the confines of particular games.

By ascertaining such criteria for the role-playing game genre, it becomes possible to map Japanese and Western role-playing games in relation to one another, allowing

researchers to track design trends as they unfold, not only cross-culturally but also across time. Applying this method, the paper examines the historical trajectory of Japanese role-playing games, in comparison to their Western counterparts, and explores how these two distinct sub-genres of role-playing games have diverged in meaningful ways. The case is made that Japanese and Western role-playing games have struck a different balance between these three contributors, both displaying an affinity for the thematic and the systematic, albeit in distinct ways, Japanese game designers having disavowed the expressive dimension to a more significant extent; in contrast to designers in the West that have conversely emphasized the advancement of the genre's expressive potentiality.

The end-goal of such a potentiality has previously been idealized by fictional agents such as the aleph, a limited object that expands into an infinity of spectacles, and the holodeck, a reference to a piece of technology from the Star Trek franchise that allows users to participate in immersive simulations. The notion of the Holodeck was popularized in game studies by Janet Murray's seminal work Hamlet on the holodeck wherein she envisioned the holodeck as the epitome of the new medium's narratological capacity (Murray 1997, 24). In this sense, players were able to participate in stories that acknowledged the way they expressed themselves and responded accordingly. However, as a framework for academic scholarship, the notion of the holodeck became the subject of much criticism as it was widely considered a utopian vision with little to no synergy with the actualities of the medium (Aarseth 2004).

In the inaugural issue of Game Studies, Marie-Laure Ryan argued against what she dubbed the myth of the holodeck and the myth of the aleph, deeming these concepts unfit for the academic study of games as ontological objects (Ryan 2001). However, by differentiating between games as ontological objects (to be understood) and artistic aspirations (to be actualized) the academic adoption of these concepts is justified, describing an ideal, a dream that has both informed and regulated design practices regardless of their futility. As Ryan herself notes, these myths serve the purpose of energizing the imagination of game enthusiasts by presenting them with an idealized version of specific genres (Ryan 2001). Regarding the study at hand, this sentiment has been dubbed the expressive ideal in relation to the study of role-playing games, wherein the development and reception of games is guided by an appeal to these myths. However, as

will be seen, developers in Japan have operated to a more significant extent in the absence of this expressive ideal.

As a disclaimer, the aim of this paper is not to comment on the quality of Japanese role-playing games as the question of the expressive dimension of games is mostly that of personal preference. Regardless of personal preferences, Japanese role-playing games have historically been vibrant, pushing thematic boundaries and expanding the vocabulary of the genre, innovative, introducing the lexicon of games to new forms of play, and last but not least expressive, told emotionally rich stories on the part of their designers that have resonated with players and shaped the perception of the narratological capacity of the medium as a whole (Kohler 2016, 107). It must, however, be noted that the direction of this expressivity has been somewhat one-sided, having little to do with the expressive ideal as it helps define the role-playing game genre itself.

1. Constructing the role-playing game genre

The concept of genre (from the French and originally Latin "genre," meaning "kind" or "sort") has been a prominent part of the production and consumption of cultural artifacts throughout the ages. The ancient-Greek philosopher Aristotle being credited with the oldest surviving, and perhaps the first, academic treatise pertaining to the study of genre, wherein he distinguished between the qualities of tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry (Aristotle c. 335 BC). It is, however, worth noting that these concepts were not originally conceived of by Aristotle since his work is predated by the Dionysia in Athens, wherein a contest was held annually to celebrate the most excellent work of each genre. The seniority of genres, in comparison to the academic scholarship surrounding them, is not only a testimony to the saliency of the concept but also a reminder that the emergence of genres is not reliant on the work of scholars. On the contrary, genres often arise spontaneously in discourse between those that engage with genre and seek to label a variety of different works in meaningful ways (Frow 2006, 12–13).

For a long time, the study of genre gravitated heavily towards the aesthetic qualities of individual genres, akin to the work of Aristotle, taking their validity for granted as opposed to questioning the nature of genres themselves and how they come to be. However, as scholarship started to challenge the self-imposed nature of genre the question that arose to the forefront was whether genres should be conceived of as natural or historical entities (Derrida 1980).

If genres were to be conceived of as natural entities, the implication was that they consisted of unchanging Platonic essences, only waiting to be discovered, whereas genres as historical constructions entailed genre as a part of culture and therefore in constant flux (Stam 2000, 14). As social constructs genres not only describe the works belonging to specific genres but also the society that constructed them. It has even been argued that the diversity of genres is demonstrative of the diversity present in the society wherein they are utilized (Miller 1984). As such, genres are not irrevocably interlinked with any given work of genre on account of a shared nature but rather genres shed particular light on a subject, situating those that engage with works of genre and defining the horizon of expectations (Frow 2006, 10).

However, the meaning and the implications of genres are not the subject of this paper but rather the way in which genre is constructed and how the building blocks of role-playing games might be distilled from the discourse surrounding them. It is therefore not a question of genre per se but instead genre studies are adopted in order to extract relevant criteria, common to both Japanese and Western role-playing games, that can then be used to map out the historical trajectories of each sub-genre respectively.

There is a plethora of factors to consider when it comes to the way different genres are conceptualized, although some are more prevalent than others. Some examples of prominent genre criteria would be theme or story (war films, crime thrillers), style (German expressionist films), period or country (American films from the 1930s) and intended audience (chick flicks) (Bordwell 1989, 148, Stam 2000, 14). Other examples of genres might be defined by the kind of emotions they are intended to elicit. In this category are genres such as horror, pornography, and melodrama (weepies), sometimes referred to as the body genres due to the physical effect they are meant to realize in the body; fear, arousal and the shedding of tears (Williams 1991). It is important to note that these criteria do not all constitute a neat and mutually exclusive taxonomy. On the contrary, there is generally significant overlap between genres based on different criteria employed or by virtue of works appealing to more than one genre label within the same set of criteria. For example, *Nosferatu* (1922) is simultaneously a horror film and a German expressionist film while the Star Wars franchise walks the line between the themes of science-fiction and fantasy, fusing futuristic technology with mystical abilities. Another point, relevant to the discussion of genre and games, is the mobility of

genres across media platforms. Some genres, such as comedy and melodrama, are employed communally across different media such as film and literature. In other cases, such as snuff films and R&B music, genres are, however, isolated to a particular medium.

When it comes to the study of genre within the field of game studies itself, scholars have attempted to address the question of how the uniqueness of the medium should factor into the analysis of genres. In this regard, Mark J.P. Wolf has subscribed to a prescriptive view of genre, objecting to the use of iconography common to literature and film, instead attempting to generate a taxonomy of genres based on the notion of interactivity (Wolf 2002). Thomas H. Apperley argues in a similar vein that there is a need to rectify market-based categories of genres since they obscure the defining features of games that would otherwise help distinguish them from other forms of media (Apperley 2006, 6). Apperley, however, argued that strictly game-centric approaches to genre analysis are too limiting and would benefit from narratological concerns, but only in a subsidiary role.

These sentiments echo the influential ludology vs. narratology debate, as a faction within early game studies scholarship adamantly sought to distance the medium from most if not all prior forms of mediation. What these approaches have in common is that they imagine a hypothetical proper classification system that is synonymous with the essential nature of the medium, something that other academic fields have been breaking away from. David A. Clearwater, however, stressed the importance of implementing interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches, not overlooking essential contributions made by other fields that are applicable to the study of games (Clearwater 2011, 37). As such it might be a worthwhile endeavor to distance the study of genre and games from the academic fervor that characterized the field's nativity in order to capitalize on the richness of thought provided by more established disciplines, such as the study of literature and film.

Given the lack of consensus about game genres, it might not be surprising that the concept of the role-playing game genre, in particular, is possibly equally, if not more problematic. Role-playing games as they are commonly understood come in a wide variety ranging from tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), played together with a group of people, to massive-multiplayer online role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-), wherein servers

are employed to allow a massive number of players to occupy the same game world. Other notable forms of role-playing games are LARP (live-action role-playing games), free form role-playing games, and finally, computer role-playing games, such as Japanese and Western role-playing games as they are discussed herein. These distinct forms, unified by a single genre label, are often so different that some groups might dismiss the inclusion of other types, such as pen and paper role-players rejecting the inclusion of computer role-playing games into the pantheon of role-playing games (Dormans 2006).

In their article, "Definition of Role-playing Games", José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding argue for a pragmatist position that invites a plurality of definitions to emerge, allowing researchers to ask not what role-playing games are but rather what can be learned by viewing them as something in particular (Zagal et al. 2018, 21, 48). Much like later genre study scholarship they dismiss the essentialist claim that genres reflect some intrinsic nature and subscribe to the theory of genres as social constructs, not only shedding light on certain aspects of games but also revealing the circumstances of their construction and reception. In this sense, they do not offer a rigid genre definition, that is possible to reverse engineer, but rather a framework for thinking about genre in the descriptive sense as opposed to the prescriptive. What matters then is not how a particular genre should be conceptualized but instead how a particular work is actually recognized as belonging to a specific genre.

As the title implies, Japanese role-playing games are in part classified as cultural artifacts from Japan. Much like in the case of Bollywood films and German expressionist films, the genre title references the physical location of production as a meaningful entity. This is partly an external factor since on the surface, and in an increasingly globalized media ecology, physical location seems mostly irrelevant to the internal form and function of a particular artifact (Consalvo 2006). However, much like scholars have drawn parallels between German expressionism in film and the state of Germany in the wake of World War I (Reimar et al. 2017, 2). Japanese games have been thought of as embodying a certain level of "Japaneseness." The notion of Japaneseness has nevertheless been heavily criticized within academia for referring to a set of untainted cultural values that have very limited historical basis due to global movements (Consalvo 2007, 737). Regardless of the validity of such claims, in regard to the way game genres are identified the notion of Japaneseness remains relevant

for many players, often playing them explicitly to experience Japanese culture in one form or another (Consalvo 2016, 36). However, seeing as this dimension is unique to Japan, as opposed to being one of the fundamental tenets of role-playing games in general, it will be excluded from the final round-up of role-playing game criteria. That is not to say that the mapping of the historical trajectory of cultural representation in Japanese games is not a worthwhile pursuit but simply that it lies outside the scope of the current paper.

Going back to the origin of role-playing games most will think of Dungeons & Dragons; however, even the quintessential role-playing game did not emerge from a void but instead drew inspiration from already established forms of wargaming (Peterson 2018). Part of what set it apart was the adoption of fantasy as opposed to historical war simulation, drawing heavily on the works of Tolkien and other likeminded authors (Tresca 2011). As role-playing games became more established, they emulated different genres and fictional settings, most notably science-fiction (White et al. 2018). Regardless of this thematic expansion, the medieval fantasy still seems to lie at the heart of the genre while other motifs occupy varying fringe positions. What matters here is that role-playing games have in part been discernable by thematic factors. However, one problem with defining role-playing games by theme is that fantasy and science-fiction settings have also become common-place in games that are not traditionally thought of as role-playing games, with titles such as *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017) and *Civilization: Beyond Earth* (Firaxis Games 2014).

Role-playing games did, however, not only diverge from wargaming by changing up the story but also by introducing systematic innovation in the form of character progression and leveling systems (Peterson 2012). It is along this axis that game-centric approaches, such as Wolf's taxonomy of video game genres based on interactivity (Wolf 2002), choose to focus on games at the expense of alternative perspectives. The appeal is understandable, not only by referencing developments within the field of game studies itself but also due to the centrality of these mechanics to the genre. These systems have been iconic for the genre, perhaps epitomized by character sheets in tabletop role-playing games and dice to determine the outcomes of various encounters. Even though they were introduced by role-playing games, these systems have also been adopted by different genres much

like thematic factors. Regardless, the systematic remains a part of how role-playing games are recognized, and as a testimony to that, the inclusion of these mechanics in other genres is often referred to as "role-playing game elements" (Dormans 2006).

Lastly, role-playing games have been recognized as such by their approach to the concept of role-playing itself, that is to say in what manner players are encouraged and allowed to express themselves in particular games. In the earliest versions of Dungeons and Dragons, as it was envisioned by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, it was noted that "your time and imagination are about the only limiting factors." (Gygax, 1974, 6) This sentiment echoes the expressive ideal outlined in the introduction, even though in this case, it does not refer to a digital medium. However, although this freedom was expressed, the player was nonetheless steered into a particular thematic route as the framework was mainly set up for fantastic-medieval campaigns. This is still the case today, although, in more recent iterations such as the fifth edition, thematic concerns have been expanded in part to accommodate more diverse setups, such as science fiction (Mearls 2014, 268), although the medieval fantasy is still in the foreground. Regardless of thematic concerns, however, the main focus is on freedom and meaningful agency wherein players are encouraged to play out innumerable scenarios relying on the customizable ruleset of the game. The systematic framework is therefore technically interchangeable – players being encouraged to bend the rules to serve the original goal of fantasy and "role-play."

It has been argued, that since role-playing is not limited to role-playing games, also being present in activities such as rituals and therapy, that it is not a useful category for separating role-playing games from other types of games, showing similar overlap as the other two proposed criteria (Hitchens and Drachen 2009). However, even though it cannot be said to be a deciding factor in and of itself, it is difficult to deny its centrality to the genre, being both embedded in its authorial intent, dating back to the original rulebooks of Dungeons & Dragons, as well as being prominently featured in the genre title itself. It will, therefore, be employed here, regardless of its inherent limitations.

Employing an interdisciplinary framework, examining how role-playing games have diverged and maintained their identity has revealed three functional criteria: the thematic, systematic and expressive. Much has been said about the fluidity of genre as a social construct but even

though the original framework allows for a plurality of definitions to emerge, this does not make it exempt from the question of hierarchy once a claim has been staked and criteria established. The nature of the anchor and the criteria not being superfluous or subject to happenstance but instead relating to its own form of deliberate justifications dealing with its utility. In the case of the factors at hand, it is clear that the last criteria, labeled the expressive, occupies a privileged position, at least in the case of Dungeons and Dragons and the genre title, as the other two are at times subject to its whims. It could, therefore, be argued not only that the expressive is particularly vital to the role-playing game genre but also that the expressive ideal is paramount to the traditional understanding of these kinds of games. How this pertains to Japanese and Western role-playing games has, however, yet to be established.

2. Japanese Role-playing games and the expressive ideal

Having established relevant criteria for the categorization of role-playing games, it becomes possible to analyze Japanese role-playing games in relation to how they can be said to reflect said criteria. Therefore, by exploring in what way Japanese and Western role-playing games have positioned themselves in relation to the thematic, systematic, and expressive, it becomes possible to map out their historical trajectories. As a disclaimer, it is worth noting that this approach assuredly blinds the history of games from critical nuances and points of contact between Japanese and Western role-playing games. The reason being that thinking with genre mainly deals with generalities. Therefore, franchises and individual games that are conceived of as being particularly indicative of the genre might overshadow niche properties that might otherwise disrupt the narrative being presented. Examples of key franchises might be the Final Fantasy series and Dragon Quest, in relation to Japanese role-playing games and the Ultima series and the Elder Scrolls series, in the case of Western role-playing games. These franchises have been genre-defining due to their popularity, even to the point of becoming synonymous with the genre and will, therefore, be afforded added weight.

2.1. Thematic

As has been established the thematic ancestry of the role-playing game genre harkens back to fantasy literature,

especially the works of Tolkien. It was not long however until the thematic dimension in the case of tabletop role-playing games was expanded. This development was mirrored in the case of computer role-playing games, such as those of the Japanese and Western variety. However, how these changes were brought about significantly varied, resulting in a schism between Japanese and Western role-playing games at the level of the thematic, although there is still a significant overlap.

Both genres have expanded into science fiction and even further. Japan embraced the science fiction expansion fairly early on with titles such as *Phantasy Star* (1988) while The Mother series symbolizes a departure from the established tropes of the role-playing game genre, representing a borderline case in regard to thematic representations with the internal factors alluding to the genre mainly being systematic. Western role-playing games have also embraced science-fiction elements as such elements have, for example, been present in the otherwise fantasy inspired Might and Magic series and games such as those belonging to the Mass Effect series being predominantly science-fiction inspired.

However, even though these games can roughly be classified as either fantasy or science-fiction, how these genres have been portrayed in Japanese and Western role-playing games has differed significantly. Western role-playing games are mainly inspired by fantasy and science-fiction literature such as Tolkien while Japanese role-playing games have been deeply integrated into the media ecology of Japan, in some sense becoming synonymous with anime and manga, Japanese animation and comics. This merger was in part instigated by a collaboration between Enix and renowned manga artist Akira Toriyama as Toriyama was contracted to design the original Dragon Quest game, a series that has since then been hugely influential in Japan, even though it has not garnered a comparable following abroad. The manga and anime aesthetic has become very common not only in Japanese role-playing games but Japanese games in general. Japanese role-playing games such as the Dragon Quest franchise, the Tales series, Pokémon and many more have fully embraced not only the visual aesthetic of Japanese animation but also many motifs associated with the genre. Final Fantasy, being another flagship series of the Japanese role-playing game sub-genre has not subscribed to this aesthetic to the same degree. The imagery is, however, often more than skin deep, carrying with it an approach to

fantasy and science fiction that is typical of the Japanese media landscape.

It is apparent that when it comes to thematic concerns, Japanese and Western role-playing games differ significantly. However, they do not differ in the sense that both sub-genres have expanded the thematic vocabulary of the genre, while still retaining a strong relation to the original medieval fantasy. The historical trajectories of Japanese and Western role-playing games can, therefore, be said to diverge considerably while still maintaining their thematic roots by which they continue to be identified.

2.2. Systematic

With the move to the computer, the rules and systems of role-playing games evolved substantially as relegating the task of calculating to the computer introduced new possibilities and challenges. Japanese and Western role-playing games have generally tackled these issues differently, one of the genre distinctions made by players and the media between Japanese and Western role-playing games being that of sandbox vs. confinement; i.e., open-world vs. linearity (Schules 2015, 54). The combat systems have also differed significantly with Western games favoring a more action-oriented style while Japanese games have more often included turn-based combat systems. Although the expressive is not strictly limited to any of these approaches, it might be said that some conform more readily to the expressive ideal as it is characterized by the aleph and the holodeck, the open-world being reminiscent of the aleph while the action-oriented combat is more in tune with the phenomenological understanding of reality and the holodeck that is meant to simulate it.

Yuji Horii, the creator of Dragon Quest, was heavily inspired by Western games such as those belonging to the Wizardry and Ultima franchises, although the game system was streamlined considerably for the original Dragon Quest game, adding to the mainstream appeal of the otherwise esoteric role-playing game genre (Haywald 2018). *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft 1986) featured a relatively open-world; the player's exploration mainly limited by the strength of enemy monsters in certain areas. With an added emphasis on narrative in subsequent installments, however, players were increasingly required to trigger linear events in order to progress. Later installments of Japanese role-playing games, such as *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix 2009) have continued this trend of linearity (Quijano-Cruz 2011). In comparison, in Western role-playing games such as *The*

Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Bethesda Game Studios 2006) the player is free to explore the game world relatively early on as well as consistently throughout the game.

In terms of combat, turn-based combat systems are most reminiscent of the genre's historical origins and the development of table-top role-playing games that still run parallel to computer games. There are both early examples of Western and Japanese role-playing games featuring turn-based combat as in *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* (Sir-Tech 1981) and *Final Fantasy* (Square 1987). Later on, Western role-playing games principally adopted more action-oriented systems while Japanese role-playing games have mainly featured turn-based combat. There are however notable exceptions such as the Y's series and the Kingdom Hearts franchise, both being action-oriented Japanese role-playing game series. The global appeal of turn-based combat has, however, come into question in the last decade, following receding sales in the local market, prompting Japanese game developers to adapt and tackle foreign markets with more tact (Kitami et al. 2011, 285). The Final Fantasy series has been grappling with this brave new world at least since the development of *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix 2009), seeing more action-oriented combat systems emerging in subsequent installments, *Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix 2016) being a full-fledged action role-playing game.

Much like with thematic concerns Japanese and Western role-playing games have differed significantly but not in the sense that either of them has foregone the systematic legacy of the role-playing game genre. Both still retain dedicated leveling systems. However, due to increased globalization, the historical trajectory of the systematic has partly started to reconverge as Japanese developers have begun to adopt more action-oriented systems of play in order to appease a broader market. Furthermore, acknowledging that certain systematic traits, such as open-world and real-time combat, align more neatly with the expressive ideal, underlines that the proposed criteria are not mutually exclusive, at the same time a picture of the expressive limitations of Japanese role-playing game begins to emerge.

2.3. Expressive

The migration of the role-playing game genre to computers came with the need for significant overhauls as designers were not able to emulate the notably human interactions that define tabletop role-playing games

(Schules et al. 2018, 108). However, that is not to say that designers have necessarily embraced these limitations wholeheartedly, resigning the fate of the genre to difficulties with transcribing the concept of role-playing to the digital medium. Instead, designers have often pushed boundaries, experimenting with new ways to expand the expressive dimension of computer role-playing games. In the introduction, this sentiment was dubbed the expressive ideal, wherein designers aspire to replicate experiences available through fictional agents such as the aleph and the holodeck. While the mythological status of these entities has deemed them unfit as academic frameworks for the study of games, they nonetheless exist as artistic aspirations as designers attempt to create more evocative and reactive experiences. In the case of role-playing games, this is accomplished with various mechanics and motifs such as the silent protagonist, character customization, and meaningful choices and actions. How these elements have been implemented cross-culturally and across time in the case of Japanese and Western role-playing games should, therefore, shed light on the way in which these two distinct sub-genres differ in relation to the expressive.

The motif of the silent protagonist details a protagonist that is to some degree intended to be a stand-in for the player, a vessel that the player can embody, their silence making it easier for players to project themselves onto the character. This motif is found both in Japanese and Western role-playing games. The word silent might, however, be misleading seeing as these characters are not necessarily mute as they often engage in dialogue with other characters. In such cases, the silent protagonist either absorbs information, or the players are given choices to how they want the character to react. The "silent" therefore mostly refers to the protagonist not having a concrete personality of their own, although dialogue choices often limit choices and hint at a set number of possible personalities for the protagonist.

Makoto Yoshizumi, one of the producers of the Tales series of Japanese role-playing games, stated in an interview with Satoru Iwata, the former president of Nintendo, that he did not think the games he produced were role-playing games but chose instead to think of them as "character-playing games." The reason being that players were not meant to enjoy taking on a role but rather to take on a character that is not to be viewed as a stand-in for the player in any way. According to Yoshizumi, the designation of role-playing game has become customary even though it is not always an accurate description

(Nintendo 2011). This shows that the foreign nature of the genre title, and the privileged position of expressivity it seemingly demands, is not totally absent from the mindset of Japanese developers even though they do not necessarily choose to adhere to it.

Looking back over the history of Japanese role-playing games, it is evident that not all designers have shared Yoshizumi's sentiment at all times. In the original Dragon Quest trilogy, for example, the player is encouraged to identify with the character by virtue of his silence. The ending of the original game detailing how "thou hast" restored peace to the world (Dragon Warrior, Chunsoft 1989). On the box art for *Dragon Quest II*, there is also a mention of "you" being the main character of the game, present for both the Japanese and the English releases (Chunsoft 1987). Another example of this can be found in the opening lines of the Japanese action role-playing games *Arabian Dorīmu Sherazādo* (Culture Brain 1987), wherein it reads: "This is your story".

The silent protagonist is still a mainstay of the Dragon Quest series, although as the stories have become more elaborate, it could be argued that the focus on the player as the protagonist has at the very least taken a backseat to narratological concerns. Other franchises, such as the Final Fantasy series, have however moved away from this motif, choosing instead to fully flesh out their protagonists and their place in the world. The first Final Fantasy game to feature voice acting, namely *Final Fantasy X* (Squaresoft 2001), features a stark contrast to the opening of *Arabian Dorīmu Sherazādo* as the protagonist proclaims: "Listen to my story" as opposed to inviting players to forge their own path. Although the silent protagonist is a prominent feature of many Japanese role-playing games these two points in time hint at how this motif has fallen out of favor, especially as it is presented to Western audiences, seeing as the international fame of Dragon Quest is outweighed by that of Final Fantasy. One of the reasons perhaps being that as Japanese role-playing games have leaned harder into linear and rich narratives the presence of a mute protagonist has become more jarring than ever.

The way the silent protagonist is typically portrayed in Western role-playing games, such as the Elder Scrolls series, circumvents this dilemma by offering a more open world wherein players have to worry less about disrupting the structured narrative. Looking at the marketing for some of the games in the Elder Scrolls series also reveals how the notion of the player as the protagonist is foregrounded as every piece of box art, aside from the multiplayer game *The Elder Scrolls Online* (ZeniMax Online Studios 2014-), has a reference to "you" as the direct protagonist of the game.

Another point that harkens back to the shared ancestry of Japanese and Western role-playing games is the mechanic of character customization introduced in tabletop role-playing games. Such customization mainly deals with the appearance of a character and to what extent players can influence the stats of the characters they are playing as. One way to accomplish this is to let players name their characters, something that was customary for most early computer role-playing games and easy to implement due to its strictly textual nature. With the advent of voice acting in games, however, designers had to choose between nameable characters and having their names voiced. Again, the Final Fantasy series has done away with nameable characters while this practice is maintained in Dragon Quest and Persona games, albeit with the caveat that it is usually only the main protagonist that is nameable while the rest of the playable party has definitive names.

However, even though this practice has partly endured in Japan, it has flourished in the West with the advancement of character creators. Seeing as Japanese role-playing games have increasingly featured heavily scripted narratives with fleshed-out characters, it is not surprising that the focus on character creators, wherein players can customize the appearance of the characters they wish to play as has been mostly absent. This might also reflect cultural expectations between Japan and the West as one of the complaints of Western players, in regard to games such as *Persona 5* (Atlus 2016), *Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel* (Nihon Falcom 2013) and *Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel II* (Nihon Falcom 2014), was that they were unable to customize their character and play a female role (Brückner et al. 2018). Character creators do exist in Japanese role-playing games but only in a niche capacity. The way character creators have become a staple of Western role-playing games, and how designers had sought to advance them, points toward a divergence between them and the Japanese variant.

The last point of analysis is how these two sub-genres approach the concept of meaningful choices and actions. Richard Garriott, the creator of Ultima, noted that stories he could be proud of telling would be those that acknowledge the being of players, observing their behaviors and reacting to their choices in order to enhance their experiences (Harman 2014). In order to stand up to these lofty aspirations, Garriott implemented a code of conduct in *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Origin Systems

1985), wherein the player would have their moral fiber tested at various intervals (King and Borland 2003, 72-75). This feature persisted throughout later Ultimas and has been implemented in various forms by other developers, such as in the case of Fallout 3 (Bethesda Game Studios 2008). As previously mentioned, Horii was inspired by the Ultima games when it came to the development of *Dragon Quest*, although the game was streamlined substantially in order to increase its mainstream appeal. This meant that many of the intricacies introduced by games such as Ultima were done away with. When it comes to meaningful choices, Dragon Quest made a parody of the concept by offering the illusion of choice, with unacceptable choices resulting in a feedback loop that only the right choice could undo. In comparison, the design of Western role-playing games has strived for meaningful choices, with options available to the player not only on the surface but also that have consequences.

That is not to say that these moments are absent from Japanese role-playing games. In *Dragon Quest V* (Chunsoft 1992), for example, players are offered a choice between bridal material. Unlike the majority of choices in Dragon Quest games, this one has a real effect on the progression of the game. In *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997), the actions that players take can affect a date sequence wherein the protagonist spends an evening with a member of the party. As memorable as these moments can be in Japanese role-playing games they are often few and far between. In Western role-playing games such as *Fallout 3*, these choices are, however, the backbone of the experience, reminiscent of Garriott's Ultima series and keeping in line with the expressive ideal.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to map out the historical trajectories of Japanese and Western role-playing games in conjunction with the study of genre in an interdisciplinary context. This endeavor has simultaneously been empowered and problematized by this methodological approach since the conceptualization of genre reveals certain generalities while masking others. Arriving at the relevant criteria for the categorization of role-playing games; the thematic, systematic and expressive, is therefore not merely an act of discovery but rather construction, as this framework privileges certain works while disenfranchising others.

By comparing the different ways in which representative examples of these sub-genres conform to the chosen criteria, discernable differences emerge along all three tracks. Concerning the thematic, Japanese and Western role-playing games have both expanded their iconographic lexicon, albeit in different ways with Japanese games being assimilated for the most part by the Japanese media ecology. When it comes to the systematic, these sub-genres diverged early on, with Japanese designers traditionally favoring turn-based combat and linearity while Western designers have adopted a more action-oriented and open-world approach. Due to the increasingly global context of the game industry, coupled with a contraction in the local market in Japan, systematic elements have however started to reconverge as Japanese companies attempt to appeal to a broader market. Lastly, Japanese role-playing games have gradually distanced themselves from the shared origin of role-playing games by foregoing motifs and mechanics associated with the expressive, operating to a significant degree in the absence of the expressive ideal that has consistently informed and shaped design practices in the West.

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