

Isolated Connectedness: Applying the Concept of Transinsularity to Japan's Game History

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Abstract

Japan's game history has been characterized by ostensibly contradictory dynamics: on the one hand, Japanese games have exerted significant influence on global gaming; on the other, Japan's domestic game market is quite different from its companies' international output and notoriously difficult for foreign studios to enter. Many internationally successful Japanese games contain few explicit references to Japanese culture, focusing instead on "culturally odorless" settings such as fantasy worlds; and yet, their aesthetics, narrative tropes, and genre conventions render them instantly recognizable as Japanese. Japanese games, thus, exist in a perpetual tension between the local and the global, the insular and the cosmopolitan. Drawing on Carlo Cubero's concept of transinsularity—the state of simultaneously being isolated and connected—this article argues that this tension should be seen as both productive and definitive of what Japanese games are as a cultural form. To support this argument, the article introduces various transinsular aspects from Japan's game history and makes a case for transinsularity as an analytical category that can connect the complex historical and cultural underpinnings of Japanese videogames to vernacular discourses surrounding them.

Introduction

When Japanese videogames are discussed—both in academic or popular discourse, both in and outside of Japan—there appears to exist a recurrent tension. On the one hand, it is broadly acknowledged that Japan has been a major driving force in gaming, shaping the imaginaries and preferences of both players and game developers around the world and firmly embedding itself in global videogame history. On the other hand, many believe that Japanese videogames possess a distinct and identifiable "cultural flavor"; moreover, there is a notion that, compared to Japan's global output, the island nation's domestic videogame market is a vastly different proposition in terms of players' preferences, shared cultural memory, and the overall gaming culture.

The various attributes that Western players tend to associate with Japanese games—such as the emphasis on dialogue and character-driven storytelling, large amounts of "grinding," linear gameplay, and anime aesthetics—are neither exclusive to Japanese titles nor consistently found there, and yet they persist in popular discourse. Some of these features are also perceived as Japanese by many

gamers in Japan itself, while others are not. An example of the latter is the profoundly Orientalist notion of Japanese games, and Japanese popular culture more broadly, being weird and bizarre (Hutchinson 2019, 23–24). Under this notion, the international appeal of games made in Japan as products of the nation's culture is directly linked to the othering of both the nation and the culture. But, while gamers in Japan may not find Japanese games to be bizarre, many will agree that they are unique, distinct, and strongly rooted in the country's culture—a perception that often feeds off self-othering discourses of Japan's uniqueness.

This dialectic tension between global embeddedness and local specificity is something many scholars have reflected on. Mia Consalvo (2009), commenting on the issue, pointed out that the Japanese game market remained "insular," with very few foreign games achieving commercial success there, while Japanese studios, faced with a rapidly aging domestic population, were forced to seek to recapture global markets after a period of decline in their international influence. They attempted to do so, Consalvo argued, in a characteristic way: by relying on the nation's established tradition of "media mix" storytelling, leveraging games' connections to other pop-cultural forms.



Martin Picard (2009), writing about Japanese horror games, discussed them as being transnational, that is, embedded in a complex network incorporating both geographically disparate production structures and competing cultural imaginaries; the same argument could be extended to Japanese videogames more broadly.

In his subsequent article on *geemu*, Picard (2013) lamented the fact that game studies as a field had, at the time of writing, almost exclusively examined Japanese games in an international context, without paying much attention to the specific features of the domestic market. Following up on this, Sara Liao (2016) sought to problematize the idea of a homogeneous “international context,” discussing how Japanese console titles were consumed and appropriated in 1980s–1990s China, where official console ownership was next to nonexistent, which did not preclude local gamers from finding ways to enjoy Japanese games by looking beyond official distribution channels. These appropriation practices, Liao demonstrated, were quite different from how the same games were experienced in North America or Western Europe. But, even as it sought to juxtapose the Chinese context to the more widely discussed “Western” one, Liao’s discussion implied another, familiar binary opposition: Japanese games abroad as opposed to Japanese games in their original cultural context.

Japanese scholars, too, have reflected on this opposition. Akito Inoue (2018), for example, offered empirical evidence that Japanese games widely known in the Anglophone game culture are at times not attributed as much significance by Japanese players, and the other way around. (*Super Mario World*, for instance, was significantly more familiar to English-speaking players than their Japanese-speaking counterparts. Conversely, few English speakers had played *Dragon Quest 2* despite its being popular and influential with Japanese players.)

Considering, then, how recent years have witnessed the emergence of a truly international scholarly community brought together by its members’ shared interest in Japanese videogames, it is remarkable just how difficult the “Japaneseness” of Japanese games is to pinpoint, existing on multiple, sometimes contesting, planes. This difficulty has itself been a recurrent subject of discussion and reflection in the Japanese games studies community, with Consalvo (2016, 66) pointing out that “[a]t anything other than very broad levels, it becomes tricky to say what counts as a Japanese game in different situations, and those

situations are increasing in number and complexity.” For a case in point, consider the title of a series of workshops jointly organized by Ritsumeikan University and Leipzig University—“Japanese videogames between the local and the global”—where the emphasis needs perhaps to be on the *betweenness* rather than either end of the local–global spectrum.

This paper aims to contribute to the discussion by arguing that the ostensible contradictions underlying our understanding of Japanese games are in fact part of what defines them as an ontological category and a cultural form. Japanese games, in other words, exist in the dialectic tension between insularity and connectedness, and much of what makes them fascinating stems precisely from that inherent tension. To conceptualize of this duality, I introduce the term *transinsularity*, borrowed from Caribbean anthropologist Carlo Cubero and describing the state of simultaneously being isolated and connected, inward-looking and open to external influence. By exploring how the concept can be applied to the Japanese context, this article is intended to function as a position paper, laying the groundwork for an upcoming empirical study on the transinsular dynamics of Japan’s independent game production scene.

Where is Japan? Transnationalism, Glocalization, and Regional Game Studies

The tension between local specificity and global embeddedness in media production and use is certainly not unique to Japan. In 1990, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai mounted a critique of what he saw as a simplistic perception of globalization as a unilateral process moving from center to periphery and epitomized by the discourse of “Americanization.” Appadurai pointed to a broad “tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (1990, 295), discussing how there are multiple cultural hegemonies around the globe, exerting influence in their respective regions, and how “imported” cultural influences are indigenized by local populations, who creatively transform and adapt them to their own needs and cultural setting.

In a parallel development, Roland Robertson proposed the term “glocalization,” referring to the “interpenetration of universalizing and particularizing tendencies” in the globalized world (1998, 374). Robertson also pointed out that local identities and narratives are often co-constructed

from the outside rather than existing in self-contained, isolated bubbles.

Being a deeply transnational field, gaming epitomizes these complex dynamics between local and global media processes, which exist in many other creative industries as well (Cohendet et al. 2018). Yet, since its early days, game studies as a field has grappled with this complexity, often focusing more on the global aspects of gaming. In 2016, Liboriussen and Martin criticized this tendency to discuss gaming mainly through a “global” prism, which more often than not effectively means limiting oneself to Anglophone and/or North American perspectives. Instead, they suggested, scholars should pay attention to “regional game studies” as well. In a field dominated by North American and Western European researchers, that would mean venturing outside familiar contexts and engaging more systematically with non-Anglophone scholarship and game histories.

If this entire conversation is not specific to Japanese games, then what makes them an interesting case? There are several arguments to be made here. First, Japan is a setting where the co-existence of local and global pulls is particularly pronounced, since a large, if shrinking, domestic market coexists with some of the nation’s game studios exerting significant international influence. Nations such as the US may also produce myriads of games for both domestic and international consumption, but few major titles are intended *exclusively* for the American market, whereas in Japan exclusively domestic releases are still common. Conversely, gaming in such nations as China is strongly oriented towards the domestic market, with some companies also targeting the broader East/Southeast Asian region but few successfully competing on the global stage (Yang and Chen 2020). Japan may not be unique in combining these two dimensions (domestic and global), but it probably has the largest game industry among the nations that do.

The island nation is also a compelling case in how it has been able to globally popularize its culture and, through it, a certain national brand. This is not a new development: the Japanese government sought to capitalize on foreign interest towards their nation’s traditional culture as early as the mid-19th century following the Meiji Restoration (Tamaki 2015). But following the postwar economic boom, the accompanying rise of the media mix, and Japan’s closer engagement with the Western world, international interest in Japan increasingly began to include its popular culture as

well as more traditional cultural forms. Embracing this interest (including in cultural forms previously stigmatized in mainstream public discourse, such as anime), the Japanese government began investing in such initiatives as Cool Japan, projecting a narrative of Japan as being unique, mysterious yet fun, simultaneously traditional and modern (Matsui 2014). Videogames form a key part of this process, and part of the broader media mix Japan is exporting globally, making it an interesting subject for reflection (Navarro Remesal and Loriguillo López 2015).

Even more curious is how the perceived uniqueness of Japanese culture at times results in self-exoticizing discourses, which are also reflected in games. Picard (2009) wrote about the issue of self-orientalism in Japanese gaming, whereby both the depictions of the nation’s cultural identity in games, and popular discourse around its game culture often contain undertones of *nihonjinron*, an ideology revolving around Japanese exceptionalism. Reflecting on this, Goto-Jones (2015; 2016) coined the term “gamic Orientalism,” connecting romanticized Orientalist discourses to futuristic technological imaginaries of Digital Asia, perpetuated in part by videogames and internalized by many in the region itself.

Rachael Hutchinson (2016; 2019) traced how Japan’s history as a colonial power in East Asia, as well as its national narrative of being a *shimaguni* (island nation) play into what she termed “virtual colonialism” displayed by many Japanese games, particularly focusing on the *SoulCalibur* franchise. In her 2019 book, Hutchinson also explored how problematic nationalist narratives are “repackaged” in such titles as the strategy game *Kantai Collection* (2013), which uses an alternate-universe setting and sexualized female characters instead of depicting warfare in a more literal way while echoing revisionist interpretations of World War II prevalent in right-wing populist discourse. These complex and problematic identity narratives did not escape the attention of scholars inside Japan either, with Masataka Okamoto (2010), among others, arguing against both the *shimaguni* discourse and the notion of Japan’s cultural homogeneity. This conversation, in addition to the complex nature of global and local processes in the videogame industry, points to equally complex and fluid identity discourses and perceptions around Japan’s role in these processes.

And this is where *glocal*, Robertson’s widely established conceptualization of the interconnected nature of global and local cultural processes, comes somewhat

short when employed to analyze Japanese games. “Glocal” does not necessarily take identities and self-image into account, focusing more on business and media flows. Furthermore, as Ritzer (2003) pointed out, many academic discussions of glocalization are prone to reproducing Western-centric discourses of cultural flows. That is to say, the focus is often on the tensions between the center and the manifold peripheries, which may resist and subvert the center’s hegemonic influence but whose status as peripheries frequently remains unquestioned, despite Appadurai already highlighting the limitations of this binary opposition in 1990. Moreover, as Liboriussen and Martin argued in their call for regional game studies (2016), the dichotomy of local vs. global does not fully account for the various intermediary scales between these two poles. And yet, media consumption, production, and exchange may vastly differ not only between nations, but also between prefectures and states, as well as regions and continents, and it is difficult to capture all of these layers using a portmanteau of global and local. In short, while a useful starting point, glocalization may not suffice as the sole term to account for Japanese videogaming maneuvering between different contexts and scales of cultural production.

Enter Transinsularity

Reflecting on his early encounters with the island of Culebra off the east coast of Puerto Rican mainland, anthropologist Carlo Cubero remembers feeling confused by the island’s complex identity politics. The seemingly exclusive and oft-evoked category of *culebrense*, denoting those born on the island (despite most births actually taking place in a hospital on the main island of Puerto Rico), coexisted with a mobile, international community populating the island and with a large Culebran diaspora abroad. While being part of the Spanish Caribbean, Culebra shared both geographical and cultural proximity to English-speaking Virgin Islands and also, through its population of immigrants and its numerous emigrants, to many other parts of the world. The music played on the island creatively combined a range of discrepant influences without falling neatly into any given pigeonhole. Cubero, who was born on Puerto Rican mainland but got hired to coordinate the activities of a local community center on Culebra after finishing university, reminisces (2017, xiv):

I was getting frustrated that I was not able to come to terms with the idea of a ‘Culebra community’ when the concepts that I had learned in my anthropology courses – ethnicity, language, class, country of origin, reciprocity, ties to land, practices, etc. – were not consistent on the island.

When he sought answers from his anthropology professor Carlos Buitrago at the University of Puerto Rico, Buitrago’s response was to state that “Culebra is not an island.” He went on to challenge the assumption of the island being an isolated place, pointing to how its identity is constituted in a complex, fluid network of relationships and movements. This still left Cubero perplexed (p. xv):

If it’s not an island, then what is it? How do you design policy for an island that is not an island? What kind of programmes should be organised at a community centre where there is no stable community?

Exploring this paradox eventually became one of the foci of Cubero’s doctoral research at the University of Manchester. During this project, he reflected on the more general perception of islands as “isolated, inward-looking” spaces prone to “internally reproducing themselves” (ibid., 160) and defined by a pristine existence away from, and in opposition to, continental mainland (Cubero 2011, 5). This perception can be found in both islanders’ identity narratives and in continental perceptions of them, so deeply rooted in the popular imagination that we use metaphors like “No man is an *island*.” (In this sense, then, the *shimaguni* identity discourse of Japan is nothing unique.)

But for all their insularity, island cultures are also demonstrably mobile, fluid, and firmly embedded in broader cultural networks—so, as historian Carlo Ginzburg (2000) put it, no *island* is an island, either. Reflecting on this dialectic, Cubero suggested the term *transinsularity*, which he explained as islands’ inherent condition of being simultaneously “mobile and insular, open and closed, peculiar and common” (2007, 161). Transinsularity means that isolation and connectedness is not a binary opposition that must be resolved. Rather, constant “interplays between ... mobilities and insularities” is a quality that underlies much of the island experience (Cubero 2011, 5).

This brings us back to Japan and Japanese games. For a locale and an object of study so remote from Cubero’s own project, what are the implications of the transinsular

approach there? In the section below, I will selectively outline a number of features of Japan's videogame history that, in my view, the concept of transinsularity resonates with.

Tracing Transinsularity in Japan's Game History

There are multiple levels at which transinsular dynamics can be traced in Japanese gaming. One of these is the level of skill and capital flows. It may be generally uncontroversial to assume that Japanese games are produced by the Japanese and in Japan, yet a closer look reveals a somewhat more complex picture. Consider how Taito, the corporation that effectively put Japanese games on the map with *Western Gun* (1975) and *Space Invaders* (1978), was founded by Ukrainian-Jewish refugee Michael Kogan. (The circumstances under which Kogan, and thousands of other Jews, ended up in Japan are themselves fascinating; see Tokayer and Swartz 2004.)

Foreign talent, while accounting for only a small part of the game industry in Japan—a nation not historically known for embracing internationalization—has still made a significant contribution to the country's game history. A prominent example is Henk Rogers, a Dutch-Indonesian, American-educated game designer known for designing *The Black Onyx* (1984), one of the first commercially successful role-playing videogames released in Japan. Several years later, when role-playing games had begun to establish themselves as a genre in Japan and the conventions of what is now known as “Japanese-style” RPGs were forming, another foreigner, Iranian-American programmer Nasir Gebelli was a core member of the Square team that developed the first three installments in the globally popular *Final Fantasy* series. Gebelli was later involved in developing *Secret of Mana* (1993) and a number of other titles by Square.

Neither is Japanese videogame production geopolitically limited to Japan. Large Japanese videogame corporations, such as Nintendo, Bandai Namco, Konami, Square Enix, Sony Interactive Entertainment, and Capcom, all have overseas offices, mainly (but not exclusively) in North America and Europe. Minako O'Hagan (2012) has written about these foreign offices' responsibility as co-creators, rather than merely translators, of localized game content aimed at their respective markets, adapting it to local preferences and sensibilities in a process she referred to as transcreation. But overseas offices' role is not limited

to localizing titles developed in Japan. Consider, for example, Nintendo's overseas branches. Nintendo Software Technology, based in the US, has developed numerous original titles, including for the Japanese market, most notably the *Mario vs Donkey Kong* series. These games would be recognized by many as “Japanese”—yet they were produced outside of the country, mainly by non-Japanese talent. Then there is Nintendo European Research & Development, located in Paris, which has been behind some of the technology employed in Nintendo games, including the Mobiclip video codec used by most in-game cinematics on the Nintendo Wii, DS, and 3DS.

Similar observations can, of course, be made of most transnational entertainment companies, including those outside of both gaming and Japan. Yet, to reiterate, it is the persistent discursive essentialization of “Japanese games” as a category that accounts for the “insular” part of “transinsular” here, making for a curious case study.

Transinsular dynamics in Japanese gaming are certainly not limited to skill and capital flows either. They also extend to game content and the creative processes behind it. Many of these can be difficult to pinpoint: as Consalvo (2016, 180) noted, creative influences and inspirations in gaming are often elusive due to the complex, interpersonal, and multifaceted nature of game development. Yet some transinsular dynamics are plain to see. McKenzie Wark (1994), for example, discusses how the iconic Mario character—initially named Jumpman—got his eventual name in the US when Nintendo of America was working on localizing *Donkey Kong* (1981); it was only then that he became known as Mario in his “native” Japan with the release of *Mario Bros* (1983). At the more elusive level of creative influence, both Hideo Kojima, known for the *Metal Gear Solid* series and *Death Stranding* (2019), and Fumito Ueda, the designer behind *Ico* (2001) and *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005), have cited French game designer's Eric Chahi 1992 game *Another World* as an influence and inspiration. Twenty years later, Western game designers such as Ricky Cambier, who worked on *The Last of Us* (2013), would in turn cite Japanese games such as *Ico* and *Resident Evil 4* (2005) among their inspirations. Upon reflection, there is, again, nothing unusual about this constant flow of ideas—that is how creativity generally works, as it recognizes no national or ethnic bounds. That, however, is easy to overlook when discussing Japanese games in terms of their perceived Japaneseness.

The formation of videogame genres and conventions, too, displays attributes of transinsularity. The genre known today as the visual novel has evolved from earlier “Japanese-style” adventure games such as *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* (1983), which in turn had been influenced by early Western adventure games such as Sierra On-Line’s *Mystery House* (1980). While often being considered a “Japanese” game genre (if even classified as a type of game at all), visual novels have found increasing popularity outside Japan, with numerous Western visual novels being developed in recent years, including *Fatal Hearts* (2007), *VA-11 HALL-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action* (2016), and *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017). Furthermore, visual novels have gone on to influence a new type of “Western” choice-based adventure games, exemplified by such titles as the US-developed *The Walking Dead* and the French *Life Is Strange* series.

So-called Japanese-style role-playing games are another example, having originally been inspired by Western games such as *Wizardry* and *Ultima*, as well as translated gamebooks such as the *Sorcery!* and *Fighting Fantasy* series. The characteristic conventions we have come to associate with JRPGs have formed over time, with their emphasis on text narrative and world-building at least partly being influenced by gamebooks. The label “Japanese-style,” and the perception of JRPG as a distinct subgenre originating from the Japanese cultural space, did not in fact come about until the around the turn of the century following the release of *Final Fantasy VII* in 1997 (Pelletier-Gagnon 2018). Moreover, the exact characteristics associated with this label have “change[d] and fluctuate[d] over the years” (ibid, 146). (Symptomatically, the label is rarely used in Japan, where the gameplay elements that Western players associate with the JRPG subgenre are largely expected from role-playing games by default. When the term “JRPG” is explicitly invoked, it mostly relates to Western perceptions of Japanese games.)

The formation of the open world game genre is another example. Exemplified by such series as Rockstar Games’ *Grand Theft Auto* and Ubisoft’s *Watch Dogs*, many features found in today’s 3D “open city” games can be traced to Yū Suzuki’s *Shenmue* (1999), which was among the first attempts at recreating a realistic urban environment populated by autonomous non-player characters. Yet Suzuki, in turn, was building on conventions established by earlier games—both Japanese and Western—that enabled

the player to freely navigate the game world, including the aforementioned *Ultima* and *Portopia* games. *Shenmue* also popularized the quick-time event mechanic seen in such Western games as *Fahrenheit* (2005) and *Mass Effect 2* (2011).

Transinsular Hybridities

The examples above illustrate how gaming conventions and genres, including those commonly associated with Japan, have resulted from evolutionary, dialogical, transnational developments and cannot be squarely placed in any given locale of origin. This entanglement of mutual influences has resulted in various ostensible paradoxes pointing to the hybridized nature of Japanese gaming. Consider, for example, Koichi Iwabuchi’s (2002) argument that internationally popular Japanese games such as *Pokémon*, *Legend of Zelda*, and *Final Fantasy* are “culturally odorless,” that is, contain little content that directly features tropes and symbols specific to Japanese culture. This lack of culture-specific content, the argument goes, helps make these games more accessible and appealing to international audiences.

Still, many players both in and outside of Japan perceive these games as quintessentially Japanese in terms of how they look, how they play, and how they feel. As much of Japan’s popular culture, Japanese games often appear to be “distinctly indistinct” (Dorman 2016, 35). This perception exists in scholarship on Japanese games as well, exemplified, among many other works, by a 2020 article by de Wildt and Aupers on how the history of religions in Japan has affected the religious symbolism in such games as *Final Fantasy*. Indeed, as Hutchinson (2019) convincingly demonstrates, there is much one can learn about Japan and its culture from playing Japanese videogames, including those that do contain few signifiers recognizable as distinctly Japanese. At the same time, one would do well to heed Consalvo’s (2016, 4) warning against the temptation “to reify cultural origins” and “downplay other factors, including industrial histories, funding structures, fan activities, and the changing political and social contexts in which games are made, sold, and played” when analyzing Japanese games.

In addition to reflecting on the cultural odorlessness of much of Japan’s popular culture, Iwabuchi also comments on its *strategic hybridism*: its capacity for assimilating external inspirations, which speaks more widely to Japan’s perceived propensity for indigenizing and building on

foreign influences. Iwabuchi points out that, while the idea of strategic hybridism is often essentialized and internalized as an identity narrative by many in Japan, it is on many levels problematic. For one thing, it reinforces the binary opposition between Japan and the outside world, conceptualizing of the island nation as “a porous, yet stable, unchanging entity” (2002, 59), as well as supporting a nationalist agenda of “decontamination” of external influences (ibid., 60). Laurence Herfs (2020) builds on this in her account of the 2017 hit *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, illustrating how the game simultaneously reproduces and challenges the ideologies of Orientalism and Occidentalism, the Self and the Other, and so on.

This is not to say that cultural hybridity is not an essential part of Japanese game history—it is, but not all of it is “strategic.” A case in point is Yuhsuke Koyama’s (2018) discussion of how *Dragon Quest IX* was panned by many players in Japan for being, in their view, not “Japanese” enough—having little emphasis on character dialogue, for example—despite actually being faithful in that regard to the series’ original installments. This is ironic, considering that *Dragon Quest* was one of the series that gave rise to JRPGs as we know them in the mid-1980s. Curiously, no such backlash (at least, on a mass scale) could be found in English-language discussion of the game. What this points to is Japanese players’ own essentialization and internalization of “Japaneseness” in JRPGs based on later developments in the genre.

And yet, a “Japanese-style” RPG need not even have anything to do with Japan at all, as *Battle Chasers: Nightwar* (2017), a JRPG-like game developed in the US, illustrates. The same goes for other genres traditionally associated with Japan, such as visual novels and dating sims. After all, genre conventions, much like creativity, know no national bounds. Interestingly, though, many non-Japanese JRPGs and visual novels still choose to adopt characteristic anime-style aesthetics, use Japan as a setting, give their characters Japanese-sounding names, etc. Examples include the disability-themed dating sim *Katawa Shoujo*, the British visual novel *Sakura Spirit*, and the meta-reflexive games *Evoland* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*, the latter two of which provide a metacommentary on the very genre conventions they utilize. These games, then, seek to produce a “Japaneseness” that is not rooted in geography or language (since they are mainly created in languages other than Japanese) but that instead stems from following aesthetic conventions and narrative tropes

recognized by players as “Japanese.” (See Brienza 2015 for parallels found in manga comics produced outside of Japan.)

This “non-Japanese Japaneseness” can result in various further complexities. For example, despite having a Japanese title, *Katawa Shoujo* was developed by a predominantly non-Japanese team and was only translated into Japanese later. Indeed, in Japan the title of the game became a subject of controversy, since *katawa*, which roughly translates as “handicap,” is considered *sabetsu yōgo* (discriminatory language) and is banned from use in the mass media. Thus, a game that exudes Japaneseness to many players outside of Japan, was perceived as being somewhat “off” and incongruous by audiences in the country.

Similar to the case Cubero (2017) makes for the West Indies, these paradoxes and incongruities testify to “the hybrid, migratory, the postmodern and the improvisational” (p. 4) elements that constitute the transinsular core of Japanese gaming.

Conclusion

The intention behind this article is to make a case for introducing the concept of transinsularity into Japanese game studies parlance. In doing so, I hope to address the ostensible contradictions that have pervaded much of the discussion around Japanese gaming. Japanese gaming is a globally influential cultural form that itself draws on diverse cultural influences. It is also a form that has evolved its own distinct identity and flavor, which set it apart in the global gaming landscape, but which are constantly mimicked and renegotiated. There are disconnects between global and domestic aspects of Japanese games, just as there is continuity between them. Japanese games are not always made in Japan or by the Japanese, but may simply be rooted in aesthetics and imaginaries associated with them. Transinsularity offers a way of seeing these not as logical contradictions, but as productive dialectic tensions that make Japanese games what they are: a phenomenon resulting from cultural and historical circumstances whereby the insular and the transnational converge.

I do not claim that this article faithfully follows Cubero’s original intent behind the concept of transinsularity, or that it offers a completely accurate representation of that concept. Rather, my aim was to draw inspiration from Cubero’s concept and appropriate it for the task at hand, i.e., analyzing Japanese videogames.

Neither do I claim that transinsularity in gaming is necessarily something specific to Japan, or indeed to island cultures. It may well be the case that many of the tensions described above could be found in other locales. But my point of departure was looking for a way to address the tensions found in the Japanese context specifically and a prism through which to examine *shimaguni*-style identity discourses around Japanese games. To that end, I find that transinsularity has proved a useful tool.

While the present article is meant as a position paper, I believe the concept of transinsularity is also operationalizable and could be applied as an analytical construct to empirical material. In a future project, I aim to utilize it in an analysis of Japan's history of independent videogame production.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone in the Replaying Japan community for being an inspiration and for the many thought-provoking discussions that helped me conceptualize this paper. I am particularly thankful to Rachael Hutchinson, Mattias van Ommen, and my two anonymous reviewers for their input into this paper and suggesting many useful references (not all of which I had the time to follow up on).

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