

Compiling, connecting, transforming: The role of fantasy bestiaries in the transmedial diffusion and appropriation of foreign imaginaries in Japan

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Abstract

This study focuses on the transformative role of fantasy dictionaries as active agents in foreign culture reception during the 1980s–1990s in Japan, thereby leading to the internalization of their content and appearance of a new fantasy subgenre revolving around the database they seeded. Through a historical overview of the reception and creation of fantasy dictionaries in Japan and by reviewing previous studies that analyzed some of their content, I highlight the need for a better consideration of games and their paratext's influence on broader popular culture. New reflections on the transformative power of fantasy bestiaries and related materials will complexify this bird's-eye view.

Foreword

Over the last two decades, Japanese fantasy has gained unprecedented popularity across domestic and international media. Fantasy worlds based on a simulacrum of the European Middle Ages (but also borrowing from many cultural areas and periods) represent most settings for contemporary Japanese high fantasy¹ in manga, novels, animation, or video games². Using distant foreign cultures' mythologies, folklore, or religions as the basis for a country's fantasy is idiosyncratic to Japan³. During this naturalization process, the adopted motifs often lose their identity as foreign cultural items from specific lores and instead become understood as motifs from fictional, fantasy worlds. The currently popular transmedial Japanese fantasy

genre that relies on a vast aggregate of worldwide motifs has been defined as database fantasy (Esukando 2021a).

A substantial part of contemporary Japanese fantasy, defined as database fantasy, is characterized by the motifs used, the majority of which are foreign in origin, borrowed from overseas myths, religions, or sagas. However, these motifs hybridized at different phases of their passage to the archipelago and exhibit notable idiosyncrasies. Moreover, individual motifs are not isolated cases, but part of a whole repertoire of symbols Japanese audiences understand an internalized database at the creators' disposal. (Escande 2023, 5)

¹ High and low fantasy are two genres commonly used to categorize and describe fantasy works in relation to the nature of their setting. Low fantasy is widely understood as taking place in the primary world (our world), whereas high fantasy takes place in alternative worlds (Gamble and Yates 2002, 101–3; Clute 1999).

² Contemporary Japanese high fantasy is most often based on non-Japanese historical places (deWinter 2012, 69); images of the European Middle Ages in Japanese post-war popular culture are particularly ubiquitous (Iguchi 2010, 65). Most secondary worlds depicted or high-fantasy titles are based on neomedievalist Europe-inspired settings, whereas most primary worlds or low-fantasy titles depicted are rooted in either medieval Japan or China.

³ Using foreign elements from other cultures is also common in Western fantasy; although early fantasy literature mostly borrowed from

neighboring cultures, many foreign elements were incorporated in later titles. Regarding our object of study in particular, the bestiary of *Dungeons & Dragons* is cosmopolite. However, these elements are borrowed and incorporated in a setting that matches the creator's and intended audience's cultural backgrounds. There are a few exceptions, such as *The Last Airbender* franchise, based on a secondary world inspired by East Asia, and in particular, "Japanese anime, Hong Kong action and kung fu cinema, yoga, and Eastern philosophies" (Vasconcellos 2007). The operative word for our claim is *basis*; no other country besides Japan uses distant foreign cultures as the core of the fantasy secondary worlds they portray to such an extent that their own traditional imaginary is relegated to the background or isolated foreign elements in Western settings. Self-exoticization in Japanese fantasy is an interesting phenomenon deserving separate treatment.



Fantasy dictionaries, particularly of the bestiary type, are a central cultural broker to the importation and naturalization of the foreign cultural items composing this database. In this study, I focus on the history and lasting impact of different types of bestiaries, especially during the foundational period of the mid-1980s–1990s⁴. This study will refine the understanding of fantasy bestiaries in Japan, their relation to games and other media, and their role as cultural brokers in fantasy works centrally based on foreign cultures. I will define what they are (in relation to nonfantasy bestiaries) and what they do (through the actors involved in their creation and consumption).

I first define their cultural and historical context, including the particularities of Japanese fantasy as a genre. Then, I propose a definition of bestiaries and their subtypes by reflecting their changing roles as cultural brokers. By locating the roots of Japanese fantasy dictionaries in natural history since European antiquity and Western game design practices since the 1970s, I illustrate the importance of the complex network of transfers and transformations of which they are a part. These roots span the globe and tap into almost two thousand years of history⁵.

Presently, Japanese creators and consumers are equipped with an impressive knowledge of foreign motifs from various distant lores in the context of fantasy worlds; however, this has not always been the case. In recent years, the cultural reception of several motifs was the subject of case studies before the genre was defined.

For example, Date Masahiko explored the dissemination of the golem in Japanese video games (Date 2013). This case study focused on how the motif, originally from Jewish folklore, became a regular monster in Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs). Date commented on role-playing games (RPGs) as the main venue for golems in Japan as “regulars that took on the role of monsters to be vanquished” and “while there is some minor discrepancies, their design is patterned after the same model and their characteristics are also fixed” (2013, 199–200). Although

Date explains how golems came to be “typical beings” (201) in Japanese popular culture, he concluded by questioning the dangers of this appropriation: “as golem ties to ‘Judaism’ or ‘Kabbalah’, ‘Judaism’ and ‘enemy character’ start to connect and impart a negative image” (221–222). Nevertheless, this study does not explain *patterning after the same model and fixed characteristics* that Japanese golems exhibit. A consideration of fantasy bestiaries, and in the case of the golem, *Dungeons & Dragons’* (D&D) early tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) bestiaries in particular, helps understand these aspects (Esukando 2022b).

Similarly, a case study by Shimokusu Masaya focused on the role of the Celtic Boom in the late 20th century in Japan (2016), particularly William Butler Yeats’ Japanese translations in the reception of the Irish death messenger, dullahan. Although Shimokusu focused on Japanese animation, they also acknowledged the dissemination of the motif in JRPGs.

By the early 1990s, Dullahans had become common characters in such Japanese videogames as Castlevania, Final Fantasy, Shining Force, and Valkyrie Profile. Most of the Dullahans in the games are male and covered with iron armor... (2016, loc. 3046–3052)

Shimokusu examined the origins of the armored dullahan (locs. 3126–3129) because such representations are not present in original folklore. However, they did not acknowledge other representations specific to Japan, such as the dullahan-as-undead or the predominance of women dullahan in Japanese titles.

While the aforementioned studies have demonstrated that games are crucial for the diffusion and transformation of the analyzed foreign motifs, they did not recognize the role of fantasy bestiaries. Therefore, they are notably noncommittal about precisely when and how the motifs were introduced and diffused or how they changed to adapt

⁴ For our object of study, this is due to three intersecting trends. First is a drastic change in market trends accompanying the burst of the economic bubble and, notably, the establishment of “the multimedia culture of anime, manga and computer and video games” becoming “the fastest growing components and among the most successful export industries of Japan’s recession-stricken economy” (Daliot-Bul 2009, 247). The second trend is the consequent renewal of the Japanese fantasy genre with more originality than past derivative trends (Takahashi 2004, 32–33) as new venues of publication focusing on a broader readership appeared and succeeded (Takahashi 2004, 33; Morise 2019, 126). Third is a peak in

TRPGs popularity in Japan. While it would be followed by a decline—the so-called Winter of TRPGs (Gamers Field 2001, 6)—it represented an important stimulation for both their digital offsprings, with RPGs entering many homes through Nintendo’s Famicom in 1986 and transmedially through the high popularity of records; the novelizations of TRPG campaigns, such as *Record of Lodoss*, were published as a replay from 1986 to 1988 in the magazine *Comptiq* (Takahashi 2004, 33–34).

⁵ Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis historia* (AD 77) is one such root, which directly and indirectly nurtured early Western TRPGs and Japanese games bestiaries.

to the Japanese context, thereby leaving several questions unanswered. Instead, they focused on their representations after repeated uses in Japanese titles. This focus on a “before” and an “after,” making the median and ongoing process of hybridization an afterthought at best and a blind spot at worst, is a by-product of comparativist approaches that fail to acknowledge cultural brokers such as fantasy dictionaries.

More recent case studies provide insights into the transformative role of foreign and local bestiaries in specific motifs (Esukando 2022a; 2021b; 2022c; Escande 2023). Through them, it was demonstrated that fantasy dictionaries are not simple depositaries of knowledge but transformative actors. These studies show that locally compiled dictionaries and foreign ones imported to Japan and read in the original language or in Japanese translations are the origin of several uniquely Japanese reimaginings of foreign lores, sometimes unwittingly and sometimes as the result of creative intent. Even when the Japan-specific reimaginings are accidental, I suggest that those are not errors that need to be addressed but a positive source of creativity.

However, these are narrow case studies; a broader consideration of Japanese fantasy dictionaries, their historicity, and their role in the hybridization of Japanese fantasy imaginary is needed. This study traces these and clarifies their role as agents of foreign culture reception.

To this end, I will provide nomenclature to classify different fantasy bestiaries based on their content and function as cultural brokers. Although research has started on bestiaries⁶, related transcultural dynamics remain underexplored, which will be the focus of my analysis.

By providing a meta-analysis of past studies recontextualized around fantasy bestiaries, this study will establish a broader understanding of their role as central cultural brokers in contemporary Japanese popular culture. Furthermore, by underscoring their historical and contemporary ties to games, this analysis will demonstrate the cultural impact of games and their paratexts⁷ on the Japanese fantasy imaginary across media, thereby answering a call for deeper considerations of such

dynamics by several scholars (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 9; MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk 2018, 184).

1. Study Scope

We posit that in Japan, fantasy dictionaries cemented the budding database of knowledge that was originally foreign and is now widely internalized in and appropriated by Japanese popular culture. During the 1980s–1990s, their role as sources of information on foreign mythologies, religions, or histories was critical because the internet had yet to be widely used and Japanese books on the subject were still few (Morise 2019, 129).

Such bestiaries encompass foreign books often used by Western game creators, such as Borges’s *Book of Imaginary Beings* (1974a) or TRPG guidebooks—e.g., D&D’s various *Monster Manuals*.⁸ They also comprise Japanese fantasy dictionaries written directly in reaction to the TRPG and RPG booms of the 1980s, such as *RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia* (RPG Gensō Jiten, Hayakawa 1986b) or *Dwellers of Fantasy Worlds* (Gensō Sekai no Jūintachi, Takerube and Kaiheitai 1988). These books were initially written to compile knowledge on motifs used in RPGs and were subsequently used as reference materials by many creators across media. This study highlights the foundational role of fantasy bestiaries in broader cultural reception processes that led to the appearance of unique Japanese fantasy genres.

Interest in this phenomenon inevitably leads to considering foreign games first and then Japanese games, particularly those that belong to the role-playing genre, beginning with TRPGs and followed by RPG video games. In the West, although TRPGs were first established on a substrate of fantasy literature (Peterson 2012, chap. 2.1 The Evolution of Fantasy) based on mythologies, folklores, religions, or previous literary works close to the authors (Clute and Grant 1999), the trend of fantasy dominating Japanese popular culture was, in an inverse dynamic, established on the substrate of previous games (Kamm 2020, 50; Takahashi 2004, 33–34). The direct reception of foreign games (Western TRPGs and their digital

⁶ Jon Peterson’s work on monster designs for bestiaries in *Playing at the world* (2012, chap. 2.6 Fantastic People and Creatures) and more focused treatments, such as “The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons” by Stang and Trammel (2020).

⁷ “The concept of paratext was defined by Gérard Genette (1997) as common elements provided within a book (peritext) and elements outside of the book (epitext) that refer to the book and can affect

individual, as well as cultural, perceptions of a text” (pp. 4–5). (Gross and Latham 2017, chap. Introduction)

⁸ At the time, very few reference materials on the European Middle Ages and related topics were available in Japanese, so translated TRPG materials were often used by creators. This phenomenon facilitated the further removal of historicity from Japanese fantasy, even when compared with Western neomedievalist titles (Morise 2019, 129).

offshoots—computer role-playing games) and popularization of RPGs through the development of Japanese games have been the primary channels. However, another intermediary has also been vital to the diffusion and transformation of the vast sum of knowledge transferred across cultural areas and time to nurture contemporary Japanese fantasy to its current form.

Fantasy dictionaries are ongoing transformative agents. However, this study focuses on the period when they were instrumental in the emergence of what is today known as database fantasy, that is, from the mid-1980s to the end of the 20th century. During this period, fantasy dictionaries of different types coexisted and influenced each other through a complex network of intertextual relationships. They all can be traced to their archetype: bestiaries from European antiquity and Middle Ages, which were intended as natural history. Although rarely referenced directly by consumers and creators, they are not only the archetype for later fantasy dictionaries, including D&D's first *Monster Manual* (Gygax 1977) and its offshoots, but are also quoted as sources in fantasy dictionaries of all types. These natural history-intended bestiaries were the model for modern imitations, such as Borges' *Book of Imaginary Beings* or in Japan, Tatsuhiko Shibusawa's *Fantastic Natural History* (1978). These books are nearly scholarly. Bestiaries related to games, as part of them or as later-published epitexts, often reference original bestiaries and their imitations. Not limited to games in Japan, these latter fantasy dictionaries created for fantasy fiction enjoyment were the most impactful on database fantasy, as I will confirm.

From the perspective of the field of cultural transfers⁹, fantasy dictionaries acted as cultural brokers, mediators, or, more literally, cultural ferrymen (*passeurs de culture*), which is a French concept. These brokers can be individuals, organizations, artwork, or even objects (Cooper-Richet 2013, 131). In our case, they are the books and their writers. Cultural transfer is “a methodological orientation for research in human sciences that aims to highlight the imbrications and *métissages*¹⁰ between national spaces or more generally cultural spaces; an attempt to understand through which mechanisms

identitary forms can be nurtured by importations” (Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in Cooper-Richet 2013, 130). Emphasis is placed on the networks that cultural ferrymen establish and the nonlinearity of the cultural transfers occurring among them (Compagnon 2005, 18). I highlight cultural transfer theory in this study because instead of comparative approaches, such a framework focusing on hybridity is apt to shine a light on the phenomena that interest us: cultural hybridity in Japanese fantasy and the cultural broker role played by fantasy dictionaries in it.

“The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in *Dungeons & Dragon*” by Stang and Trammel (2020), a rare study taking a direct interest in fantasy bestiary, offers a key insight into how bestiaries can shape representations beyond their pages. It concisely defines types of bestiaries that, while helpful to their argument, fall short when considering broader ramifications, especially across more distinct cultures. My study will reconsider their nomenclature, thereby redefining bestiaries as several types clarified later—natural history, cultural, paratextual, and creator bestiaries—as well as their ludic and encyclopedic modes of creation, enjoyment, and use.

By providing the aforementioned nomenclature¹¹ and its foundation in the genre's cultural history, I not only clarify one mechanism of cultural reception and hybridization of Japanese fantasy imaginary but also demonstrate the role of games and their paratexts as cultural brokers. Furthermore, doing so provides a solid basis for rethinking past case studies that identified transformations and reimaginings, but not their agents, and allows for more rigorous investigations in the future.

To properly approach the role of fantasy dictionaries, the term first needs to be better defined.

⁹ The conceptual field of cultural transfers (*transferts culturels* in French and *Kulturtransfer* in Deutsch) emerged from the research of historians Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in the mid-1980s. Their focus was on the analysis of historical relations between France and Germany; they “opposed the then widely accepted history of hegemonic influence (Einflussgeschichte), focusing instead on simultaneous research into

neighboring societies and peripheral zones (*métissage*)” (Rossini 2014, 6). See Rossini's introduction for further details on the field.

¹⁰ The concept of *métissage* has a rich background; I cannot elaborate sufficiently on the topic here, but in this context, its meaning is close to cultural crossbreeding/hybridization.

¹¹ Defined in detail in “3. Definition and Classification of Bestiaries.”

2. Cultural Context: Fantasy and Japanese Fantasy

We must first tentatively define fantasy to examine why fantasy bestiaries are so important in Japan, particularly those relating to games. This task is not easy because the boundaries of the genre are continuously reimagined.

There are many approaches and definitions of fantasy and its numerous subgenres, all of which differ in the scope of their definition of the genre. For fantasy, less is more; thus, I will start with a definition that is minimalist but as encompassing as possible.

According to W. R. Irwin, fantasy is “a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility” (Irwin 1976, 9). Hume Kathryn defines fantasy just as concisely as “any conscious departure from consensus reality” (Hume 1984, 21), a definition justly amended by Napier as “any *conscious* departure from consensus reality” (Napier 1996, 9). Thus, excluding mythological and historical texts, I can point to early Japanese fantasy based on Arthuriana reception, such as Natsume Sōseki’s *Maboroshi no Tate* (1905). However, fantasy revolving around secondary worlds only appeared after World War II¹². They were imitations of Western fantasy literature with little cultural originality—Jun Takahashi uses the term *rebaking* (2004, 33)—and being rooted in mostly foreign novels, had no ties to game culture. The name of the genre, *wasei fantajī*—literally “Japan-made fantasy”—is itself of interest, which suggests that fantasy is first foreign and that *wasei fantajī* is a local iteration of it. It assumes a foreign standard, and as mentioned earlier, this was indeed the nature of *wasei fantajī*.

Takahashi situates a shift starting in the second half of the 1980s, defined as the start of the “Second Wave” of *wasei fantajī*, noting an increase in importations of

textually voluminous Western high fantasy. They then proceed to pinpoint the end of the 1980s as a period of “digestion of foreign influences and creation of originally Japanese contents” and the subsequent increasing originality in form and atmosphere of Japanese fantasy, graduating from “rebakings” to “titles striving to construct original atmospheres” (Takahashi 2004, 32–33). However, this thoroughly documented analysis fails to recognize the role of fantasy dictionaries in the naturalization of foreign motifs¹³ and the consequent increase in the originality of Japanese fantasy.

Takahashi does not define what followed the above paradigm shift as a third wave. However, database fantasy can be seen as an extension of it and would qualify as a clearer departure from *wasei fantajī* to the establishment of a uniquely Japanese genre revolving not around consciously received influences but their naturalization, thereby pushing to the background the historicity and foreignness of the motifs and recontextualizing them as creatures from fantasy worlds (Esukando 2021a, 82) for use in a creolized¹⁴ fantasy genre, that is, what was defined as database fantasy.

Neomedievalistic and Europe-centric high-fantasy titles relying on elements originating from distant foreign cultures centralize the issue of transfers. Differences in the content used in *wasei*-type fantasy and what would evolve to be database fantasy are also crucial. While the former emphasized neomedievalist settings inspired by Western fantasy novels, database fantasy focuses on the use and enjoyment of widely-understood tropes relating to characters or monsters. The recent trend of *isekai* titles that fit into the more prominent genre (or meta-genre) of database fantasy exemplifies the dynamics of character-based database consumption (Levy 2021). The growing shift from worldbuilding-centric titles to character-centric titles can be theorized as being related to the changing place

¹² “What broadened post-war Japanese fantasy was several ‘fantasy booms’ after the 1970s. The period of the “First Wave” is the 1970s, especially its latter half. The introduction of foreign titles, and chiefly that of Heroic Fantasy, from the anglosphere was central. However, from the perspective of what established and broadened the genre, the establishment of Hayakawa Publishing’s ‘Hayakawa FT Collection’ (FT is an abbreviation for fantasy) also needs to be mentioned” (Takahashi 2004, 31). Morise also describes the 1970s as the cradle of sword and sorcery fantasy and the 1980s as its period of momentum-gaining (2019, 126–27).

¹³ Takahashi does acknowledge games as a new territory for fantasy titles but only as a broadening of the media that genre occupy or regarding cross-media adaptations of franchises (2004a, 34).

¹⁴ As per Ulf Hannerz’s definition of creolization as a confluence of cultural currents, a concept is linked to the notion of an open cultural continuum as organized by the center–periphery; this view rejects passive reception at the periphery (Hannerz 2005, 471). The naturalization of foreign elements to provide building blocks for the creation of local works in Japanese fantasy makes for an interesting new example. The popularity of such titles overseas, including in the countries from which some motifs originate, is also an interesting illustration of a cultural counterflow (Ibid.).

of fantasy dictionaries and bestiaries in Japan, which accompany and strengthen the influence of the games themselves on other media.

3. Definition and Classification of Bestiaries

Although an exhaustive history of bestiaries would be interesting, this study does not allow for a sufficiently thorough exploration of the genre across two millennia. I will instead defer to the concise definition of Stang and Trammel before providing nuance.

Bestiaries are books from the medieval period that chronicle the behavior, traits, and origins of creatures both real and imagined. As we will demonstrate, there are two features common to both the bestiary and the monstrous body in games: first, both situate the monstrous body as the other—the monster is different and distinct from either the reader or the player; it is an obstacle that must be killed or overcome.

Second, both control the monstrous through an implementation of a database structure that catalogues, separates, and differentiates monstrosity, so that it can be better understood or controlled by the designer, reader, or player. (Stang and Trammell 2020, 731)

We first need to extend the timeframe for the above description; the core definition of bestiaries as books that catalog and structure creatures in a database also applies to natural history from antiquity, such as *Natural History* (ca. AD 77) by Pliny the Elder, that was incidentally an important source for medieval bestiaries¹⁵. Works of natural history and medieval bestiaries are not limited to monsters but centrally focus on animals¹⁶. In some cases, those animals exhibit fantastical attributes, but those were considered natural at the time, even if they pertained to distant, exotic lands full of strange beasts.

The Ethiopian catoblepas, widely thought to be an interpretation of the wildebeest, is a striking example of an animal fantastically reimagined in Europe before becoming a staple of fantasy worlds in the West and in Japan (Esukando 2021b; Escande 2023, 10–13).

However, the problems with Stang and Trammell's definition are not limited to the timeframe.

The design of the bestiary produces abject bodies: It is an apparatus through which the body of the other is reduced to that of an animal and placed outside the Christian moral order. Likewise, what we refer to as the ludic bestiary is a database that situates monstrous bodies within an all-consuming statistical order. Although the ludic bestiary does not overtly rely on the Christian moral code to ascertain the human, it does incorporate morality in terms of labeling the monsters “evil.” (Stang and Trammell 2020, 731)

A distinction appears to be made between *bestiaries* (understood as historical bestiaries) and *ludic bestiaries* (made for games as paratextual elements), but this distinction is not sufficiently clarified. Both definitions contain problematic criteria. This is due to the previously mentioned overly narrow time span and Western centrism. First, a Christian moral order had little to do with bestiaries from classical antiquity; rather, it would be more accurate to speak of the natural order. However, as Stang and Trammel claim, bestiaries are interested in “creatures both real and imagined” (2020, 731). This point is key; not all creatures, especially those that are real and well known by the creators of bestiaries-as-natural-history, are made to be monstrous. Many are very mundane.

It is essential to understand that while an important part of bestiaries from antiquity and the Middle Ages are entries on fantastical creatures, this understanding of their nature as beings outside the natural order is a modern understanding. At the time, they were considered part of the natural world; these bestiaries are, after all, works of natural history¹⁷. On the contrary, very few historical bestiaries are exclusively concerned with otherworldly beings; in the Christian context that Stang and Trammel emphasize, these would fall in the category of demonology, if anything. Even then, they would be regarded as belonging to the realm of

¹⁵ More direct penetrations of classic natural history outside of academia in Japan also exist; chiefly, writer and translator Tatsuhiko Shibusawa (1928–1987) was an important cultural broker for the wider, although partial, diffusion of texts by Pliny the Elder. Most relevant to our objective is his bestiary *Fantastical Natural History* (Gensō hakubutsushi 1979).

¹⁶ See for example the archived *Der naturen bloeme* manuscript KB KA 16 (van Maerlant 1340).

¹⁷ For further details on the relation between myths and ancient natural history, see Robinson's “Some Fabulous Beasts” (1965) for a synthesis, or *The Naming of the Beasts: Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary* (George and Yapp 1991) for a more comprehensive study.

the preternatural¹⁸. Thus, bestiaries were classifications of natural beings and part of an effort at natural history. The claim by Stang and Trammel that “design of the bestiary produces abject bodies,” reducing them to “animals” that are “placed outside of the Christian moral order” (2020, 731) is unsubstantiated. Humanoid, monstrous creatures were not part of such books even when they existed in the mythologies of the culture at the time. For example, the inclusion of the medusa in bestiaries, or hags to use Stang and Trammel’s case study, is specific to later *fantasy* bestiaries from the modern period either as a compendium of mythologies or as what Stang and Trammel call *ludic bestiaries*. Too many generalizations are made to serve their argument but do not withstand closer historical scrutiny and find their limitations when applied to other objects of study.

A second core characteristic of *ludic bestiaries* as defined by Stang and Trammel is the use of “evil” as a classification criterion; however, this is also a too-broad conclusion from a too-narrow scope. Historically, in Japan, documents on classification and enjoyment as a database of local preternatural creatures known as *yōkai*¹⁹ during the Edo period (1603–1868) gave birth to enduring bestiary-type database consumption broadly conceived as *yōkai culture* or culture of the *yōkai* (Foster 2009). A contemporary extension of it is illustrated in the gaming franchise *Yo-kai Watch* (*Yōkai Uotchi*), but it has broader roots in Japanese popular culture. Rather than morality, the potential for harm and hostility is the main criterium because they are morally ambiguous (Foster 2009, 15).

The pre-existence of a local practice of enjoying a database of monsters through bestiary-like documents and works relating to *yōkai culture* can be theorized to be a factor that facilitated the reception and creation of fantasy bestiaries in Japan.

Even in bestiaries created for or in games, not all monsters are considered evil. In Stang and Trammel’s own examples, such as D&D or the Pokémon franchises, *monsters* are understood as a category of actors to be used or that appear in play. In the case of D&D, this includes good creatures—Stang and Trammel mention it themselves

(2020, 741)—or even plain human characters. In the Pokémon franchise, the so-called monsters accompany children in their travels without any connotation of abjection, a concept made central to bestiaries by the authors.

Such limitations make obvious the need for broader nomenclature unbound by time and cultural paradigms. The concept of ludic bestiaries even interpreted in the broadest sense and stripped of the criterium as mentioned earlier is problematic. What of those that are used for game development but were not created for this purpose? What of those that were created not for games but for creators of other media? Should this criterium be based on the nature of the document at the time of creation or consumption? Are ludic bestiaries only texts made for games? What, then, of the ludic enjoyment of catalogs pertaining to *yōkai* culture (Foster 2009, 31, 48–49)? Are they (historical) *bestiaries* or *ludic bestiaries*?

Instead, I propose the following categories.

Natural history bestiaries: Bestiaries made as catalogs of natural history. They are concerned with the natural world, as understood at the time of their conception and include works from antiquity, such as Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* or European Middle Ages bestiaries.

Cultural bestiaries: Bestiaries made to further understandings of fantastical creatures through their historical context and often concern themselves with a worldwide corpus. Borges’s *The Book of Imaginary Beings* is an example, whereas Tatsuhiko Shibusawa’s Pliny the Elder-inspired *Fantastical Natural History* (1979) focuses on the corpus of classic natural history.

Paratextual bestiaries are another type that I will further subdivide; they work in relation to specific texts.

Peritextual bestiaries: Bestiaries contained by the work they relate to. This is in terms of supplemental material, such as D&D monster catalogs²⁰, but also catalogs consultable in game, such as the Pokémon franchise’s Pokédex.

Epitextual bestiaries: Bestiaries relating to specific texts but independent from them. They elaborate upon a specific franchise bestiary, such as *Wizardry 3 Monster*

¹⁸ Not outside the bounds of nature as supernatural is but within its bounds, even if abnormal, uncommon, or outside of normal mortal capacities (Daston 1991, 95–99).

¹⁹ An accurate definition in English of what *yōkai* are and are not would need to be the object of a separate study; I will explain the definition here by saying that preternatural would be a better qualifier than supernatural because it is arguably part of nature rather than outside of

its bounds and that while naturalized, many *yōkai* are of foreign origin, often Chinese. An interested reader can consult *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Foster 2009) or *The Yōkai in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime* (Deborah Shamoon 2013).

²⁰ Here, I consider a specific edition of a specific TRPG as one work.

Manual: Legacy of Ilygamyn (Uizātori 3 monsutāzu manyuaru : Legacy of Ilygamyn, Game Arts 1987), or are concerned with a specific genre, such as *RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia* (Hayakawa 1986b).

Creator bestiaries: Fantasy bestiaries that are expressly made as reference material for creators. Nevertheless, this does not prevent them from being enjoyed in other ways; I will elaborate on modes of creation and consumption later. One such example is *A dictionary on fantasy worlds for creators: Everything game creators want to know about mythology, fantastical beasts, magic, and other worlds* (*Sōsakusha no tame no Fantajī-sekai jiten: gēmukurieitā ga shitteokitai shinwa maboroshijū majutsu isekai no subete*, Gensōsekai Tankyū Kurabu 2018). Fantasy bestiaries include all of the above, except cultural bestiaries because they were written as natural history.

These bestiary types can be used or enjoyed independently of their intended purpose. Foster's keen analysis of *yōkai* culture used the *ludic mode* and the *encyclopedic mode* to define shifts in the creation and enjoyment of these texts; I borrow these concepts because they are apt for more than *yōkai* culture. Although historical bestiaries were self-evidently made with the encyclopedic mode in mind, they can be enjoyed in a ludic manner. Paratextual bestiaries are made for ludic purposes but can be read as important artifacts of cultural history. Creator bestiaries are conceived as work tools but can be enjoyed ludically.

Based on the above nomenclature, I now consider how Japanese bestiaries outside of the scope of *yōkai* culture came to Japan and influenced its fantasy imaginary.

4. Establishment of Japanese Bestiaries During the 1980s

While *yōkai* culture includes preternatural beings imported from China, the more culturally distant creatures that now populate database fantasy started to be catalogued in Japan through the partial translations or rewritings of ancient Western bestiaries, such as Tatsuhiko Shibusawa's Pliny the Elder-inspired *Fantastical Natural History* (1979), and complete translations, such as Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings* (1974a). These references from the 1970s influenced later original Japanese fantasy bestiaries

during the 1980s and 1990s, thereby becoming hypotexts²¹ to them, which are of great interest to us for their transformative power.

As first exemplified in *RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia* (Hayakawa 1986b) or *Monster Collection: The World of Fantasy RPG* (Yasuda and Group SNE 1986) (Figure 1 & 2), a prominent characteristic of early Japanese epitextual bestiaries is their focus on monsters (as well as less prominent items) from RPGs. Only later do fantasy dictionaries focus on historical backgrounds, thereby shifting the intended mode from ludic to encyclopedic. In particular, *RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia* explains monsters without differentiating between the original creatures from TRPGs and those with roots in myths, folklores, and religions. For example, the index shows that creatures from real-world imaginaries and traditions, such as the lamia, zombies, kobolds, ghouls, centaurs, or sylphs, coexist with those with an origin (or recreation²²) in TRPGs, such as D&D's carrion crawler or Azers (Figure 3). D&D's halflings are included under this name, not as hobbits per their origin rendered under Tolkien's pen and without mentioning this background, proving D&D's major influence (Hayakawa 1986b, 284–85) on fantasy literature in this context. In this manner, both types of monsters are grouped as creatures inhabiting fantasy worlds. This blurring of lines might have been a factor in the gradual rejection of relevant historical backgrounds and characteristics in Japanese titles, thereby leading to an internalized, dehistoricized database.

The first volume of *Dwellers of Fantasy Worlds* (Takerube and Kaiheitai 1988) in the ongoing series, *Truth in Fantasy*, was claimed to be a pathfinder for such fantasy dictionaries. In an interview with the author of the aforementioned dictionary, game designer and literary critic Akira Okawada claimed, "As a book retracing the origins of monsters from fantasy literature and games, *Dwellers of Fantasy Worlds* was one of the forefathers of the now well-established genre of fantasy manuals" (Okawada and Takerube 2021, 4). As a book focusing on the historicity of the compiled monsters, and especially considering its continuing popularity, *Dwellers of Fantasy Worlds* might be considered the start of a new trend.

²¹ "Hypertextuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary." (Genette 1997, 5)

²² Even motifs that might seem original creations, such as the green slime, can have less obvious roots in pre-existing imaginaries. Often, these roots can be found in older popular culture titles (Gygax 2007, 60).

However, *RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia* published two years earlier also covers their historical origins.

Fundamentally, with its content explaining monsters or weapons and armors appearing in arcade and computer games, even if it was broad and shallow, *RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia* attracted the interest of its readership with its facile stroke of the brush and directed their interest to the backgrounds of fantasy stories. (Morise 2019, 135)

Because *RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia* was a bestseller (Morise 2019, 135) before the publication of *Dwellers of Fantasy Worlds*, defining the latter as a precursor might be an overstatement, despite being a pillar of the genre and its influence being proved across case studies (Escande 2023; Esukando 2021b; 2022).

As the *Dwellers of Fantasy Worlds* author acknowledges, “At the time, I wasn’t even that knowledgeable about fantasy (laughs)” (Okawada and Takerube 2021, 5). More of a science fiction reader than a fantasy aficionado, his distance from the genre led him to adopt a taxonomic approach (Okawada and Takerube 2021, 5); the change to an encyclopedic focus was a conscious choice. Compared with the earlier fantasy dictionaries created by fans for fans, the book is thorough, which might be attributed to his peculiar relationship with the genre. Takerube explains that “Ishikawa²³ was a game partner. He approached me with a proposal regarding not a fantasy novel or game per se but a series aiming to provide fantasy titles enjoyers with ‘true knowledge’ about them. I want the first opus to be about monsters” (Okawada and Takerube 2021, 5).

An important shift in the mode of consumption occurred in the early 1980s. Initially, consumers (mainly game players) were reading epitextual bestiaries to learn the backgrounds of the monsters and items they encountered in titles. The descriptions in these early books (Yasuda and Group SNE 1986; Hayakawa 1986b) emphasized the game aspects of entries, such as weak points, rather than their historical roots, although the latter are often mentioned with varying degrees of veracity. The line between the motifs in games and in their historical contexts is often vague.

Many dictionaries are now explicitly directed at creators and focus more on historical considerations than the older books, mostly for character designing, such as *A Dictionary on Fantasy Worlds for Creators* (Gensōsekai Tankyū Kurabu 2018) or *A Cyclopedia of Isekai Fantasy Creation* (*Isekai fantajī no sōsaku-jiten*, Enomoto et al. 2019). These fantasy dictionaries that are classified as *creator bestiaries*²⁴ are specific to Japan. I was unable to confirm the publishing of books on, for example, Asian monsters for the express purpose of creating Asia-inspired secondary worlds in the anglosphere.

The gradual establishment of database fantasy along with the internalization of foreign imaginaries can explain this shift. Database fantasy relies on the shared understandings of the motifs used across titles; a goblin will be commonly understood through its core characteristics, even if it sometimes adopts idiosyncrasies in specific titles. Similar dynamics were covered in different fields such as monster designs in tabletop games (Peterson 2012, chap. 2.6 Fantastic People and Creatures) or character designs in manga (Itō 2005, 95–96).

5. Fantasy Dictionaries and Cultural Reception

Although different in intended readership and editorial lines, all the types of bestiaries that I defined are connected by a dense intertextual relationship. Many Western books are referenced by Japanese fantasy dictionaries. The 1977 D&D guidebook on monsters, *Monster Manual* (Gygax 1977), is one such text. Although *Monster Manual* describes various characteristics of and the lore surrounding monsters for play, its creators borrow from many sources, including mythology, literature, and movies (Weinstock 2014, 194). Retracing the monster design methodology often leads to unexpected connections and long-lasting influences on subsequent media. The now widely accepted—including in Japan—ghoul as a subtype of zombies in games has its origin in D&D, although this transformation also has roots in a prominent French literary translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* and horror cinema (Esukando 2022). Thus, Japanese fantasy titles could have been similarly influenced; however, they are unique in their systematic borrowing rather than through

²³ Sadaharu Ishikawa, a creator from the authoring Kaiheita group.

²⁴ Admittedly, *creator dictionaries* would be more apt if considering a broader scope than the present study because some books focus on such

things as weapons and armors or even architectural traditions for worldbuilding.

the more diffused influence of the aforementioned Western titles.

As previously mentioned, a crucial aspect of database fantasy is the internalization of monsters to the point that their historical origin and the agents of their introduction to Japan are forgotten. Another example of this is that while the fundamental meaning of a golem is understood by Japanese consumers of fantasy titles, its origin in Jewish lore is widely unknown. Today, golems are first understood as monsters from secondary fantasy worlds, especially in video games (Date 2013, 212). The use of materials, such as D&D's guidebooks, by players and nonplayer creators (Morise 2019, 129) in early heroic fantasy Japanese works, particularly video games and manga, created a cycle of indirect, secondary receptions. The multiplication of intermediaries created a complex network wherein some elements were rejected and others added, thereby leading to the gradual naturalization and creolization of foreign imaginaries.

Early Japanese epitextual dictionaries and their links to foreign and local games are evident in their titles. However, the relation among fantasy games, the state of the market, and other media at the time deserves clarification.

RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia was originally a compilation of 17 articles published in the game magazine *Beep* from August 1985 to December 1986 under the name *RPG Fantasy Dictionary* (RPG Gensō Jiten²⁵). At the time, there were few JRPGs in the strict sense²⁶, and the fantasy genre was largely limited to print media. The collective consciousness about the European Middle Ages or fantasy worlds based on them was mostly limited to *wasei fantajī*, with the exception of some individuals having access to information in foreign languages. Japanese heroic fantasy manga had yet to be published in a significant manner²⁷.

RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia/Dictionary's author Hayakawa explains, "Originally *Gensō jiten* started with my intent of having computer RPGs fans also enjoying the atmosphere of tabletop RPGs" (Hayakawa 1986a).

However, computer RPGs were not yet Japanese titles but foreign ones, such as from the *Wizardry* or *Ultima* series, which were very popular in Japan before the rise of console gaming. In addition, bestiaries from such titles (also often borrowing from D&D) were influential, and Japanese bestiaries were dedicated to them, such as *Wizardry 3 Monster Manual: Legacy of Ilylgamyn* (1987) compiled by Game Arts, a Japanese publisher, and illustrated by a Japanese artist.

An important aspect of fantasy bestiaries in Japan is that despite being database-like artifacts aimed at faithfully cataloging creatures, they are active in the naturalization of their contents. They are not mere repositories but actors of change.

An example of this is in the *catoblepas*, an interpretation of the *gnu* of ancient Roman natural history. The *catoblepas* reached Japanese fantasy through the *Book of Imaginary Beings*, which quotes a portrayal of the beast by Gustave Flaubert in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874). The origin of the long-necked *catoblepas*, which can be largely found throughout Western and Japanese fantasy, lies in this piece of French literature (Escande 2023, 8–10). What is uniquely Japanese in its rendering is the pairing of its long neck with another attribute: a single frontal eye. The long-necked, one-eyed *catoblepas* is idiosyncratic to Japanese popular culture, and its origin is in misquotes and reinterpretations of foreign fantasy dictionaries (Escande 2023, 8–11). Such accidental reinventions are often the result of interest by fantasy dictionary writers and their intended readers of monsters' historicity coupled with obscure sources or mistranslations during the research or writing process.

Original recreations in games and novels may be a conscious decision, such as making the *catoblepas* in *FF XV* (Square-Enix 2016) a gigantic creature and reinterpreting its physical idiosyncrasies based on its in-game habitat, which attracted the interest of ethnologists (Yamanaka and the National Museum of Ethnology 2019,

²⁵ Although phonetically similar, the ideogram used for *jiten* refers to encyclopedias for books and to dictionaries for article series.

²⁶ *Black Onyx* (Rogers 1984) was a pioneer and often credited as being the first JRPG. Henk Rogers' drive to develop the game was rooted in the lack of Japanese games (Edge Staff 2012, 1). However, its creator was Dutch, and his inspiration was based on his gaming experience in the West (Ibid.). The game jacket reads in English, "AMERICAN FANTASY ROLEPLAYING GAME – JAPAN VERSION," despite the game being an original creation for the Japanese market. This marketing choice showcases how, at the time, roleplaying games were understood

as a foreign genre under the influence of popular franchises, such as *Wizardry* or *Ultima*. However, other developers were hard at work, and titles such as *Mugen no Shinzō* (Xtalssoft 1984), *Lizard* (Riverhillsoft 1984), and *Dragon Slayer* (Nihon Falcom 1984) were published in the same year.

²⁷ Kentaro Miura's *Berserk*, starting in 1989, was an early example of Japanese heroic-fantasy. Miura states, "When I started to write fantasy, there was almost no fantasy manga in Japan.... It was starting to get known through novels or games, but it wasn't a major genre at all" (2016, 161–62).

221–22). However, sudden and radical reimaginations can also occur; they stem from the direct influence of the bestiaries' nature as catalogs. One example is the fire-wreathed peryton found in several Japanese games (Figure 4 & 5). This uniquely Japanese reinvention was theorized as the result of a conflation between the phoenix and peryton due to their respective entries being located side by side in the *Book of Imaginary Beings* (Escande 2023, 13).

6. Conclusion

The significant extent to which originally foreign monsters appear in Japanese titles and their wide understanding as specific monsters despite differences in minute details across titles hints at the role of fantasy dictionaries as supporting frames.

Further inquiry is necessary to deepen our understanding regarding the foreign culture reception in Japan that nurtured a new genre of fantasy. Such inquiry will be of interest to transmedial studies of the fantasy genre. More narrowly, for this study's readership, further research should highlight the complex network of influences across media and cultural spheres that created the now widely recognized genre of JRPG and explain its popularity in the West. Such findings will also be important for cross-cultural character design, especially monster design, and the cultural hybridity observed throughout Japanese fantasy.

To facilitate such necessary explorations, along a historical overview of fantasy dictionaries in relation to Japan, I provided a nomenclature for the classification and analysis of bestiaries based on their historical background, textual relationship, and intended readership. In addition, I complexified this classification of bestiaries by considering the modes through which they are created, enjoyed, or used. This nomenclature is intended to prevent biases resulting from the arguments or pitfalls relating to an overly narrow understanding of what bestiaries are historically and contemporarily.

The birth of the uniquely Japanese one-eyed catoblepas (Esukando 2021b; Escande 2023, 8–11) or the gradual naturalization of the golem (Esukando 2022b) are examples of culturally specific texts translated across several types of bestiaries, which created a plethora of unique iterations across JRPGs and mobile games. This overview of the cultural history of fantasy bestiaries in relation to Japanese popular culture should constitute an important step to better understand not only the impact of broader culture on games (from natural history, literary

classics, or popular culture on other media) but also that of games on broader popular culture (as the root of a transmedial subgenre of fantasy dominating contemporary Japanese popular culture).

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Figures

Figure 1 *RPG Fantasy Encyclopaedia*, 1986



Figure 2 *Monster Collection: The World of Fantasy RPG*, 1986



Figure 3 *RPG Fantastic Dictionary's* index

モンスターインデックス		I N D E X	
A	DOG 151	JABBERWOCK 179	PEGASUS 201
AMOEBIA GIANT 128	DOPPELGANGER 152	JACK-O-BEAR 180	PERYTON 202
ANT GIANT 128	DRAGON 152	JINN 180	PHANTOM 202
ANT LION 128	DRAGONWET 156	K	PHOENIX 203
APE 129	DRAGONFLY 156	KELPIE 181	PIXIE 203
ASCOMOID 129	DRUID 157	KOBOLD 181	POLTERGEIST 204
ASSASSIN BUG 130	DULLAHAN 157	KRAKEN 182	POOKA 205
AXE BEAK 130	E	L	PURPLE WORM 205
AZER 130	EAGLE 157	LAMIA 182	R
B	EEL 158	LAMPREY GIANT 183	RAT GIANT 206
BAKU 131	ELEMENTAL 158	LARVA 183	RHINOCEROS 206
BANDERSNATCH 131	ELEPHANT 160	LEECH GIANT 184	ROC 206
BANDITS 131	ETFIN 160	LEOPARD 184	ROPER 207
BANSHEE 132	F	LEUCROCOTTA 184	S
BARLOG 132	FIRBOLG 161	LICH 185	SALAMANDER 207
BASILISK 133	FROG GIANT 161	LION 185	SANDMAN 208
BAT GIANT 133	G	LIVING STATUE 185	SATYR 208
BEAR 134	GARGOYLE 162	LIZARD GIANT 186	SCORPION GIANT 209
BEE GIANT 134	GAS MONSTER 162	LIZARDMAN 186	SCORPIONMAN 209
BEETLE GIANT 135	GELATINOUS CUBE 163	LYCANTHROPE 187	SCYLLA 210
BEHEMOTH 135	GHAST 163	M	SHADE 210
BERSEKER 136	GHOST 164	MANDRAGORA 189	SHADOW 211
BLACK PUDDING 136	GHUL 164	MAN-O-WAR GIANT 190	SHAMAN 211
BLINK DOG 137	GIANT 165	MANTICORE 190	SHAMBLING MOUND 212
BLOODWORM GIANT 137	GLOOMWING 168	MANTIS GIANT 191	SHREEKER 212
BOGLE 137	GNOLL 168	MANTRAP PLANT 191	SIRENE 213
BROO 138	GOBLIN 168	MEDUSA 191	SKELETON 213
BROWNIE 138	GOLEM 169	MERMAN 192	SLUG GIANT 214
BUGBEAR 139	GORGON 171	MERROW 192	SNAKE 214
C	GRAY OOZE 172	MIMIC 193	SPECTER 215
CARBUNCLE 139	GREEN SLIME 172	MINOTAUR 193	SPHINX 216
CARRION CRAWLER 140	GRELL 172	MOLD 193	SPIDER 216
CATOBLEPAS 140	GREMLIN 173	MUDMAN 194	STIRGE 217
CAVEMAN 141	GRIFFON 173	MUMMY 194	STOORWORM 217
CENTAUR 141	GRIMLOCK 174	MYCONID 195	SYLPH 218
CENTIPEDE GIANT 141	H	N	T
CERBERUS 142	HAG 174	NAGA 196	TALOS 218
CHARON 142	HARPY 175	NECROMANCER 196	TERMITE GIANT 219
CHIMERA 143	HELLHOUND 175	NIGHTMARE 197	TICK GIANT 219
CHONCHON 143	HIPPOCAMPIUS 175	NIXIE 197	TIGER 219
COCKATRICE 144	HIPPOGRIFF 176	NYMPH 198	TITAN 220
COUATL 144	HOBGOBLIN 176	O	TREAT 220
CRAB GIANT 145	HORNET GIANT 177	OCTOPUS GIANT 198	TRITON 221
CROCODILE 145	HUMBABA 177	OGRE 199	TROLL 221
CROW GIANT 145	HYDRA 178	OPININGUS 199	U
CYCLOPS 146	I	ORC 200	UNICORN 222
D	IMP 178	OTYUGH 200	V
DEMON 149	INVISIBLE STALKER 179	OWLBEAR 201	VALKYRIE 222
DERUVISH 151	J	P	VAMPIRE 223
DEVIL 147			VULTURE 224
DINOSAUR 151			

Figure 3 Firebird Peryton as a Duel Masters collectible playing card, 2009



Figure 4 Hazy Flame Peryton as a Yu-Gi-Oh! Trading Card Game collectible playing card, 2012

