**Book Reviews**

Ken Baumann


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Michael P. Williams


Boss Fight Books, a micropublisher based in Los Angeles, was launched in 2014 after a successful Kickstarter campaign. Each book put out by the publisher details the development, release, and reception of a single video game, but the topics explored along the way include transnational media markets and the highly individualized affective labour of gaming. Several of the titles are of special interest to scholars of international digital mediascapes, as they deal with issues relating to the translation, localization, and marketing strategies that resulted in a number of Japanese games entering the lexicon of global popular culture. In this review I will focus on three such titles: *EarthBound*, *Chrono Trigger*, and *Super Mario Bros. 2*.

The first book in the series, *EarthBound*, is written by Boss Fight Books’ editor and co-founder Ken Baumann, who originally published a portion of the text on the video game news and culture website Kotaku. *EarthBound* was released in North America for the Super Nintendo in 1995, and Baumann’s initial discussion touches on the dedicated fannish community that has sprung up around the game during the past two decades. *EarthBound* is the brainchild of renaissance man Itoi Shigesato, who began his career as a copywriter before becoming a media celebrity in Japan. Baumann describes how Anglophone fans of the game, attracted by Itoi’s idiosyncratic yet charming writing and
scenario construction, have celebrated his work while encouraging Nintendo of America to re-release the game for current generation consoles.

Baumann’s main concern, however, is how the game has intersected with his own personal history. After presenting the reader with the broader context of the game, Baumann chronicles the experience of a complete playthrough of EarthBound, relating its story to his life experiences and an eclectic selection of his readings. For example, the Onett chapter, named after the first city in the game, contains scattered topical references ranging from John Gray (on the myth of teleological progress) to Mircea Eliade (on the appeal of nostalgia) to the website TV Tropes (on the figure of the corrupt politician in popular culture). The Summers chapter, named after one of later areas in the game, chronicles the bacchanals the author once engaged in as a professional actor, his introduction to Zen Buddhism, and how his rediscovery of a box of childhood treasures at his parents’ house inspired him to reflect on his lost innocence. Baumann’s playthrough of EarthBound thus becomes a cipher for the process of growing up and establishing one’s own identity as a young adult.

The second Boss Fight Books title, Chrono Trigger, is written by Michael P. Williams, a former Japanese research specialist who is primarily concerned with how the Japanese cultural context of the game informs its diegetic world. For example, in his fourth chapter, ‘Straight? White? Male?’, the author provides a fascinating discussion of the role race plays in Chrono Trigger, contrasting this portrayal against the cultural theorist Kōichi Iwabuchi’s concept of mukokuseki (deliberately lacking in cultural odour) and his own personal experiences as an English teacher in Fukushima City. According to Iwabuchi, Japanese producers have taken steps to remove the ‘Japanese-ness’ of media intended for international release, but Williams argues that the fair-skinned monoracialism of the human characters in Chrono Trigger belies the narratives regarding race and ethnicity in its country of origin, where he himself was once constantly confronted with his status as a racial outsider. In his sixth chapter, ‘The Day of Lavos’, Williams touches on how Japan’s history of nuclear disaster has played out in popular media representations, including the in-game apocalypse that gives the chapter its name.

Throughout the book, Williams compares the two official English translations of Chrono Trigger to the original Japanese text. The sixth chapter, ‘Neuga, Ziena, Zieber, Zom’, a reference to a magic spell that was completely rewritten in the 1995 English translation to create a rhyming couplet, contains a transcript of an interview between Williams and the author of said translation, Ted Woolsey. Woolsey talks about Nintendo’s censorship policies as well the rationale behind some of his most iconic translation decisions, which would become known as ‘Woolseyisms’. This conversation is followed by an interview