Book Reviews

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Since the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1985, Japanese video games have been part of the global gaming cultural landscape; their characters, game design principles, and the genres that they comprise command the fascination of a large translational gamer audience that is more familiar with Mario than it is Disney’s Mickey Mouse.

But beneath this layer of familiarity lies an aura of exoticism and mystery surrounding these games. Often seen as more original or simply weirder products due to their dissonance with other productions from North American or Europe, their global circulation has helped establish a more or less permanent ludic ‘other’, a gamic entity originating from a distant culture whose transformations, brought forth by the many circulation processes that enable their consumption in foreign markets, remain largely invisible. Overseas, away from the cultural and media environment from which they emerge, Japanese games have acquired a new identity over the years and prompted gamers to devise new ways to enjoy them, in addition to profoundly impacting their perception of Japan itself. In her new book From Atari to Zelda: Japan’s Videogame in Global Contexts, Mia Consalvo tackles this broad phenomenon head-on: what are Japanese videogames and what do they mean to us?

What is at stake here is our relationship with Japan as gamers and consumers; it is about the issue of acknowledging Japanese games as a distinct corpus without relying on the rhetoric of Japaneseness and the Japanese specificity to explain these differences. Throughout many case studies and historical overviews, which draw upon the author’s long-term engagement with the topic, the hypothesis presented in this book is that the Japaneseness that is often underlined in games originating from Japan needs to be rethought in relation to the broader production context that characterize them rather than their cultural origin. The business strategies, production incentives, and
the authorship of each studio that create these games are presented as essential aspects that need consideration when explaining the nature of Japanese games. The book can be divided into three parts, each focusing on a specific theme that construct this argument: gamers and their relationship to Japanese games, the games’ production and localization processes, and, finally, Japanese videogame studio studies and Japanese games’ influences within the Western game industry.

In chapter one, Consalvo analyses several interviews that she conducted with a number of gamers to find out to what extent Japanese games influence their gaming habits and other aspects of their lives. The author identifies several attitudes compatible with the notion of a ‘cosmopolitan predisposition’, a state of mind that favours the adoption of an openness and appreciation of the ‘other’ (39). The interviews demonstrated varying degree of engagement with Japanese culture beyond gaming such as language learning in the strongest of cases (38). Consalvo discovers a sort of cosmopolitan engagement in these gamers, in the way most of them acknowledged the foreignness of the games they play, but, in some cases, how these games triggered another sort of engagement situated on a more technical and creative level through ROM hacking and fan translation. These methods of engagement are explored through the case study of the Final Fantasy V, a game that missed its encounter with the West on console, but, as a result, turned into an early example of a fan-driven localization project through ROM hacking (47), and with Mother 3 as an example of a fan translation project that was approached with a high level of professionalism (60).

Following this player-focused section, the book invites us to consider the close reading of a diversified selection of Japanese games available in North American stores. Doing so, Consalvo demonstrates the difficulty of defining Japaneseness in games given today’s increasingly globalized business strategies; Japaneseness is often the result of marketing decisions, rather than a concept based on the formal qualities of a given title (65-66). This chapter scratches at the surface of the wealth of games produced in Japan just enough to provide the reader with reference points that are employed in later sections of the book. These questions are further explored in the following section where the Japanese genre of JRPG (Japanese Role Playing Game) scrutinized through the case study of the studio Square-Enix. Here, the company is described as a ‘culture broker’ (100), embodying a cosmopolitan attitude that adapts its games to a wider market through the elimination of their cultural ‘noise’. In the process, Square-Enix acknowledges cultural specificities of target locales, sometimes choosing to fuse Eastern and Western references in games such as in the Kingdom Hearts series (112) and, on the business side, diversifying