Game Localization from Multiple Perspectives: The Roles of Industry, Press, and Players

by

Amy Dawson-Andoh

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Doctoral Committee:

      Associate Professor Megan Sapnar Ankerson, Chair
      Associate Professor Andre Brock
      Associate Professor Daniel Herbert
      Professor Christian Sandvig

Amy B. Dawson-Andoh

adawsona@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-6753-3790

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, mother, brother, and sister who have helped me greatly throughout this process. My parents have supported my educational pursuits throughout my entire life, and I will always be grateful for their love and encouragement.

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, video games have become a prominent form of entertainment media. Primarily developed in the United States initially, video games rapidly spread to other regions such as Japan and parts of Europe. An integral component of their worldwide spread was the process that allows them to be comprehensible across languages and cultures: localization. Localization is more than the translation of linguistic signs, it also accounts for cultural norms and expectations.

This dissertation delves into the localization process from the perspective of three stakeholders: industry, players/fans, and press. Game publishers and developers adapt localization policies that guide the work of individual localizers and teams. Localizers work with development teams to modify game content for release in a target locale. Players interpret and respond to changes made during localization. In some cases, they act when a localization is denied for their region. Finally, press operates between industry and players to mediate understandings of individual games, genres, and entire regions as cultural producers.

Ultimately, this dissertation concludes that localization is a liminal process in which multiple stakeholders interpret changes made to media artifacts. Localizers in the industry personalize games according to internal standards developed over decades. Fans and players can also act as localizers, and their ROM hacking work shows how programming and lingual translation are intricately connected in game localization. Game journalists mediate between industry and players, helping to contextualize games in larger social constructs such as genre.

Introduction: "Like translation, but more than that"

Since its beginnings in the 1970s, the video game industry has been a site of global connection, especially between the US and Japan, and spread as the market grew in the 1990s (Consalvo, 2006, 2009; Kent, 2001; Kohler, 2005; Sheff, 1999). While video games were initially developed in the US in the 1970s, Japanese companies quickly adapted the technology (Aoyama & Izushi, 2003). When the US video game market crashed in 1983, the Japanese company Nintendo filled the gap and dominated the industry for a decade. Nintendo entered the US market amid uneasiness over the rising power of Japanese hardware manufacturing that characterized most of the 1980s (Hjorth & Chan, 2009; Iwabuchi, 1998). After this revival of the console video game market in the US and Canada in 1985, the market continued to be dominated by Japanese firms for the next two decades (Picard, 2013). Nintendo's impact on the industry and its practices continue today (Jayemanne, 2009).

For over forty years, video games have developed a unique culture that connects people all over the world. When discussing video games, one would likely first think of the physical objects themselves: cartridges, discs, or the software itself. However, the experience of playing a video game goes beyond these physical artifacts. Games are played, watched, and discussed outside of the play experience. According to the Entertainment Software Association, over 227 million people in the US play video games for at least one hour every week. The largest group of players is in the eighteen to thirty-four years old range (38% of overall population of players). The gender divide is fifty-five percent male and forty-five percent female (Entertainment

Software Association, 2021). As their data clearly demonstrates, video games are a significant part of many Americans' everyday media consumption.

The video game industry has also grown rapidly and become a major cultural industry worldwide. From 2016 to 2021, the US industry's total revenue has almost doubled from $30.5 billion to $60.4 billion (Clement, 2022). Worldwide, overall video game revenue has grown from $91.95 billion in 2017 to a projected $208.52 billion in 2022. The main driver of this growth is the mobile game market. Furthermore, the domestic Chinese market has surpassed the US in size ("Video games - worldwide," n.d.). In contrast to other media industries that were negatively impacted, video game growth was boosted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This boost has helped the North American video game industry become larger than the film industry (Gilbert, 2020; Witkowski, 2021). In the HD era of high-definition graphics, popular games cost millions to develop (Koster, 2018). The international game industry could not have reached its current size without a means to release games in different regions. Localization is key to the proliferation of video games worldwide.

This dissertation draws on the transnational nature of the video game industry to examine how games, as cultural products, circulate transnationally through the mediating process of localization. In today's globalized world, cultural media and artifacts, such as literature, film, and music, in addition to video games, flow transnationally between different regions. Under the cultural imperialism paradigm of the late twentieth century, the dynamics of this movement saw cultural power centered in the West, especially the United States. Dominant Western powers were viewed as operating from the center with less powerful nations in the periphery. These nations were assumed to be subjected to the homogenizing effects of American popular culture. Scholarship on the transnational flow of media has since moved away from this unidirectional

model in favor of conceptualizing transnational flows as originating from different regional nodes of cultural activity (Appadurai, 1996; Tomlinson, 1997; Vertovec, 2009). Furthermore, Appadurai (1990) claims that the United States, generally considered the dominant force in transnational flows, is merely "one node of a transnational construction of imaginary landscapes" (p. 31).

The more complex reality is that of multifaceted global media markets where there are multiple cultural centers. With his concept of media capitals, Curtin (2009) highlights the importance of understanding transnational flows of media—as complex and multi-directional. Pieterse (1995), Hall (1997), and Tomlinson (1997) further argue that globalization is better understood as multi-dimensional as well as multi-directional. Examples of media capitals outside of the US are western Europe, South Asia, and East Asia. Bollywood has expanded beyond its regional success to become internationally influential (Punathambekar, 2013). Korean boy bands and the KPop genre have gained dedicated fans from all over the world (Song & Joo, 2020). And, since the early 1970s, Japan has successfully exported its popular culture to its Asian neighbors despite historical tensions remaining after Japan's brutal pre-World War II colonial rule (Iwabuchi, 1994, 2002). Localities also possess the agency to adapt foreign media to their own uses. Commercials and other marketing are frequently changed to adapt to the cultural norms of the regions to which they are exported (Maynard, 2003).

How are the flows of media that make these cultural nodes significant possible? Thousands of languages are spoken across the world among numerous cultures with their own traditions and histories (Anderson, 2012). Languages are also dynamic and change over time (Benjamin, 1923/2012). How does a soap opera produced in Japan, with a language that uses adapted Chinese characters, become popular in South America, where the primary languages are

Spanish and Portuguese? How does Disney ensure that a film it releases in Europe does not have any content that may be offensive to French or German viewers?

This dissertation examines the means by which these cultural flows are made possible: localization. Localization is more than simply translation, which is merely one part of the entire localization process. Adapting media artifacts for different cultures involves complex processes beyond translating linguistic signs. In film and television, localization can focus on replacing audio or inserting text for audiences in the target region. Replacing the audio of spoken dialogue from the original is known as dubbing, in which new voices in the target language are recorded to replace the original audio. Subtitling, on the other hand, leaves spoken dialogue untouched. Instead, it inserts a textual translation in the target language onto the screen. Both methods of localization present challenges for the viewer. Dubbed voices are constrained by the movement of characters' mouths on the screen and the timing of the dialogue. Subtitles, on the other hand, take up space on the screen and require that audiences read text while also processing visual information (Kapsaskis, 2020; Nornes, 1999; Pavesi, 2020; Pérez-González, 2007). These localization techniques highlight how film and television operate through visual, audio, and textual modes.

Video games, in contrast, operate on an even wider range of modes. In addition to visual, audio, and textual modes, video games are also intensely interactive. While other forms of media have interactive elements, video games demand constant and immediate responses from the player in order to achieve progress and experience their content (Skalski et al., 2011). This interaction is mediated through a controller, mouse, keyboard, or other apparatus such as motion sensors. Zagalo (2019) aptly distinguishes film and video games by describing the former as providing vicarious experiences while video games offer enactive experiences. Video games still

contain many vicarious experiences because of their mostly fixed narratives. The enactive element operates when players make choices that can change events on screen. Many of these choices affect things such as winning or losing in a combat situation. Some games offer players a means to make choices at key points in the narrative, leading to different nodes on a branching storyline (Moser & Fang, 2015; Zimmerman, 2004).

The result of interaction and enactive elements is ideally immersion, a state in which the player feels that he or she is situated in the world of the game (Stanney & Salvendy, 1998; Witmer & Singer, 1998). Game localizers prioritize maintaining the experience of playing the game and attaining immersion above all. This is even prioritized over linguistic parity with the original language (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006). A significant part of a localizer's job is to make decisions on how best to preserve the gameplay experience and thus, immersion, as they prepare a game for its target locale.

The *Pokémon* series, for example, was only able to attain its success as one of the most profitable brands of all time because of localization (Buchholz, 2021). The original game was released in Japan in 1996 and in North America two years later. Before even considering translating the text of the game, Nintendo of America had to decide how best to market the game to American audiences. First of all, the *Pokémon* series was a role-playing game (RPG), which is a genre that contains large amounts of text for players to read. Since the target audience for *Pokémon* was children, the text in the game needed to be easy to understand. Secondly, Nintendo also wanted to ensure that players understood how to complete an RPG, a genre in which many games could require around forty hours to complete. They prepared players for the debut of *Pokémon* by publishing special mini issues of their *Nintendo Power* magazine, which delved specifically into the first set of *Pokémon* games, *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* (Allison, 2003).

Yet before these games could even be marketed in North America, Nintendo of America expressed some concerns regarding cultural elements of the game. The main appeal of the *Pokémon* games were the dozens of cute, collectable creatures that players could catch and use in battles. Designs for *Pokémon* drew from Japan's cute, or "kawaii," culture (Allison, 2003). In a later interview, Japanese developers recalled Nintendo of America being initially resistant to keeping the cute designs for the American market. They believed that such designs would be less appealing to American audiences. According to Tsunekazu Ishihara of Creatures Inc.[1], one of the suggested redesigns was a sexualized version of the series mascot, Pikachu (Helix Chamber, 2020; "Special Dialogue," n.d.). The suggested change seemed to assume that Americans would prefer sexualized designs over cute designs. Ultimately, the original Japanese designs were kept in the English localization. A few changes have been made to designs to remove details considered culturally offensive, such as removing implications of black face in the art for the *Pokémon* named Jynx (Hutcheon, 2010).

Successfully localizing a game relies on more than simply ensuring that the text in a game makes sense. Localization professionals must also consider the cultural context in which a game will be released. As mentioned prior, a long-standing myth among American video game developers has been that cute designs are not appealing to their (often assumed to be young, white, and male) market (Cote, 2018; "Special Dialogue," n.d.). In the context of *Pokémon*'s first international release in 1998, Japanese-style RPGs were also relatively new to mainstream American audiences. By the time *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* were released in North America, the game had gone through a long, complex journey that began in the domestic Japanese market.

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[1] Creatures Inc. works alongside The Pokémon Company. It handles other *Pokémon* products such as the trading card game, toys, and related games ("Iwata Asks: Pokémon HeartGold Version," 2009).

In order to better understand the global nature of the video game industry today, we must look to processes of localization, a topic that has received relatively little attention in media studies and game studies (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). Video games are a worldwide phenomenon fueled by transnational flows of cultural artifacts across locales, cultures, and languages. The localization process is complex and rife with tensions as a game is modified to move from a source locale to the target locale or locales. The process involves not just the game's producers but also game press, which reports on and reviews games, and players, who interpret and respond to games based on their own experiences (Newman, 2008).

Games themselves are layered and comprise more than what the player sees on screen. Code and interface are two important elements underlying what is displayed on screen. Video games are digital media composed of programming code. This code determines the layout of the screen so that the graphical interface and character dialogue are navigable by players (Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Mandiberg, 2012). This dissertation examines video game localization, specifically in the Japanese to English context, to unpack what occurs when a media product moves between cultures, languages, and regions—a process further complicated by the digital nature of video games. O'Hagan (2017) argues that "digital environments are reviving the age-old question regarding the essential role of translation in mobilizing the text in its transformed state (i.e. in a new language)" (p. 188). Delving into the localization process helps us better understand the intricacies of transnational flows of media, particularly digital media, between regions and cultures.

Localization enables the international reach of the video game industry. Consalvo (2006) describes the console video game industry as a "hybrid encompassing a mixture of Japanese and American businesses and cultures to a degree unseen in other media industries" (p. 120). Japan's

success in exporting its cultural products to the US provides an example of Japan as a node of cultural activity that exists outside of North America and western Europe (Curtin, 2009). Video games' multimodal nature also requires that localizers to be creative in their work. Their prioritization of the gameplay experience came about as the result of innovations, new techniques, and streamlining of the process developed over three decades.

The significance of a game's localization does not end when the game is released in the target locale. In addition to localizers, other parties influence how localizations of games are received. Players and fans' desires for game releases often contrasts with those of profit-oriented game developers. In some rare cases, fans even conduct their own localizations by hacking game hardware and software (Consalvo, 2013b; O'Hagan, 2009). Another important group is game journalists, who are positioned between the industry and fans. As enthusiast press, most game journalists are fans who grew up playing games. An important aspect of their job is to reveal the inner workings of the industry to fans. In the case of Japanese to English localization, they also helped bridge the language divide to give players glimpses of Japan and its own gaming culture. Furthermore, journalists have played a role in helping players understand gameplay and genre conventions (Carlson, 2009; Perreault & Vos, 2020). The interactions and strategies deployed by these stakeholders in the service of localization is the central focus of this dissertation.

1.1 Defining localization

Overall, localization is a somewhat slippery term, and numerous stake holders have attempted to define it. The Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA) defines localization as the following: "Localization involves taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold" (cited in Esselink, 2000 p. 3). Carlson and Corliss (2011), meanwhile, consider the

industry's use of the term and define localization more broadly as encompassing "any of a wide range of activities designed to adapt products to the perceived differences between local markets" (p. 65). These definitions point to how localization has largely been understood from the perspective of commercial interests (Jiménez-Crespo, 2018; Schaler, 2010).

Localization involves more than just the translation of signs from one language to another. When trying to position localization in relation to translation, Schaler (2010) most simply states the difference between the two as, "like translation, but more than that" (p. 210). Achkasov (2017) more formally describes translation as one part of a larger process. These definitions hint at the origins of localization in digital content, which Baker and Saldanha (2019) trace to software development in the 1980s in the US. The 'more than' part of localization, in comparison to interlingual translation, is the "added value and cost of the engineering and management of complex products" (p. 300). In other words, unlike older texts, software includes programming code in addition to text (Mandiberg, 2009). The increased complexity of software also applies to video games and is a key consideration of this dissertation. Video game localization as a process is heavily informed by the dynamic nature of software code.

In this research, the term localization denotes the overall process of transferring a cultural product from a source to target locale. LISA, Carlson & Corliss (2011), Schaler (2010), and Achkasov (2017) define localization as something broader and larger than translation. As already discussed, video games are more complex texts in terms of materiality than other translated media. The concept of location and space is also important. Esselink (2000) specifies that the concept of locale in the context of localization refers to "a specific combination of language, region, and technical context" (p. 1). A cultural product starts from a domestic locale and is localized to be distributed to a target locale.

The term translation, on the other hand, will refer to the more specific practice of moving

signs from one language to another. The aforementioned definitions of localization position it as

a larger umbrella over translation. Furthermore, Chandler and Deming (2011) and Honeywood

and Fung (2012) discuss translation as just one part of the overall localization process. The other

two stages that they mention are internationalization and culturalization. The former addresses

issues related to game code and interfaces[2], and the latter refers to cultural elements of games

such as text, images, and music. Despite the industry often using the terms translation and

localization interchangeably, this dissertation maintains this distinction to clarify the specifics of

the overall localization process.

Localization is worth paying attention to because it affects the production of social

meaning when transferred across cultures. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) define

social meaning as that which "provide[s] us with resources and reference points for giving

significance to the world around us and for expressing and constructing our identities, our sense

of who we are" (p. 42). The numerous decisions made during the process manifest in the final

product released to a specific target market. When elements of games are modified or removed,

the overall meanings communicated by games change. An example of this kind of modification

is Nintendo's standards for games released in the US and Canada that predated the establishment

of the Entertainment Software Rating Board in 1994 (Mandelin, 2018a). These standards

prohibited themes of alcohol, sex, and religion in localized games. A Japanese version of a game

could have crosses on a church, for example, but these were usually removed in the localized

English version. These company-wide policies existed alongside the decisions made at the

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[2] Character encoding determines how computers can display text, such as the Latin alphabet or Chinese characters. Incorrect coding (anything side from UTF-8 encoding) causes issues with the display of accented letters and writing systems aside from Latin characters (Ishida, 2015).

individual level by individual translators and localizers. Localization professionals are highlighted by Carlson and Corliss (2011) as "gatekeepers" of games as transnational products (p. 64). Such decisions may be as small as changing a joke that relies on specific cultural references into something that makes sense to the target locale or as large as changing the personality of a character. Overall, game producers, localization teams, and the individuals that comprise them impact how meaning is communicated across borders through the decisions that they make during the process. These concepts and their significance to meaning will be explored further on in this dissertation as part of the discussion on video games as experiences.

1.1.1 Object of analysis: Localization as a liminal process

The object of analysis in this dissertation is the localization process itself. Because localization depends on the transfer of games from one cultural and linguistic context to another—from a source to a target—it is a liminal process. Liminality describes an in between state, in which something is in transition, usually between two points (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In a liminal state, a person or object cannot be considered to simple be at Point A or Point B, but rather in a transitional state between the two. Attributes of Point A blend into Point B. This dynamic contrasts with a binary understanding of the location of something, such as a game's dialogue and script.

Localization is not necessarily the end-result or finished product; it is a liminal process of movement that is viewed contrastingly by game producers, press, and players. Once a localized game is released in the target locale, these stakeholders may have differing expectations or perceptions of it. Therefore, localization does not have a definitive terminus. Most importantly, localization is the state of a media artifact existing in a position between a source and target locale.

Thomassen (2014) traces the concept of liminality to van Gennep's (1969) anthropological study of rituals of passage. He describes these rituals as having three stages consisting of a beginning, middle, and end. The liminal stage, he argued, was significant because it was a phase in which established rules and norms of society broke down. Thomassen further argues that in such a phase, rapid change and transformation are possible due to the absence of limits set by rules and norms. This dissertation conceptualizes localization as a liminal process where the usual linguistic rules governing a language are in flux (in addition to music, images, and other elements), which allows localization professionals to creatively craft meanings.

Other scholars have already used liminality to describe the movement of cultural products between Japan and the US. Denison (2011) and Hills (2017) identify communities of fans who subtitle Japanese broadcasts of anime. These 'fansubbers' exist in multiple contentious spaces between two points: in an imagined space between Japan and the US, in a precarious space between fan creativity and piracy, and at the intersection of neoliberal and fan-driven economies. Conceptualizing these contexts as liminal allows for Denison and Hills to complicate the discussion beyond simple dichotomies. Denison specifically describes fansub groups as operating "between legitimate and illegitimate practices, between old and new fan groups, between older and newer technologies, between the highly visible and the more difficult to find" (p. 464). The position of fansubbers is thus blurry and occasionally even contradictory.

The localization process also involves similar amounts of blurriness. In Denison (2011) and Hills' (2017) cases, they were focusing specifically on fansubbers of Japanese anime into other languages. For localization, this research focuses on three subjective points in the localization process: game developers, game press, and players. Many of the tensions that arise in this process arise between these different groups. For example, localization professionals can

be freelancers or work directly under developers. Some professionals enter the industry working for a specific game developer and then transition to freelancing or vice versa. Game press mediates between the industry and consumers by reporting on new games through previews, reviews, analyses, and other press coverage. Finally, video game players have also created unofficial localizations of games that were not released outside of Japan (Muñoz Sánchez, 2009). In the case that this dissertation examines, a fan localization sought to reach the standards of an official localization despite lacking access to game developer resources.

Localization is a precarious process that guides a game's movement from source to target locale. This process starts from pre-release and has effects that continue well after a game's initial debut. Returning to van Gennep's (1969) example of ritual passage, Thomassen (2014) points out that failure is a possibility in rites of passage. Localizations can fail on more than one level. They can fail to live up to game developers' standards, which aim to replicate the experiences of the original game (Chandler & Deming, 2012). They can also fail from the perspective of players when changes cause them to suspect that the game has been 'censored' in some manner (Mandiberg, 2018).

More specifically, the localization process is precarious because even a small error can have negative effects on a player's experience. Failures in video game localization can lead to bizarre phrasing that eventually becomes the subject of jokes. Less amusingly, they can also impede progress in a game and frustrate players (Dietz, 2007). An infamous example of a 'bad' video game translation is in the 1992 game by Sega called *Zero Wing*. In the game's dramatic opening, the villain declares, "All your base are belong to us" (Mandelin, & Kuchar, 2017). The statement was actually meant to inform the player that the villain had captured all of the protagonist's bases. This line was in a cutscene early in the game and the mistranslation did not

negatively impact player progression. This mistranslation became more widely known in 2001

when a video reproducing the introduction with voices went viral online. References to the

mistranslation spread to other areas of popular culture, and the mistranslation is occasionally

refenced presently. "All your base" was one of the first prominent Internet memes of the early

2000s (Walker, 2021).

On the other hand, mistranslations can become what Dietz (2006) refers to as "linguistic

plot stoppers." These kinds of mistranslations make progression either difficult or impossible. An

example of this is a puzzle in the 1998 game *Tales of Destiny*. In the English localization of the

game, a puzzle in one of the game's dungeon areas had incorrectly translated clues (Fraundorf,

1998). The player could not progress further in the game using only information provided by the

game. Instead, the player would need to either make guesses among a wide range of possible

answers or refer to an outside source such as a walkthrough. Incorrect translations can range

from amusing to outright devastating to the gameplay experience.

The PlayStation 3 game *LittleBIGPlanet* is an example of a costly localization error. The

game was delayed in Europe and recalled worldwide due to a culturalization error. The

culturalization part of the localization process addresses content that could be considered

offensive in a target locale. Even if a game is translated linguistically correctly, some content is

offensive to some regions and cultures. One of the background music tracks in *LittleBIGPlanet*

featured lines from the Qur'an, which was offensive to Muslim countries. The game was

eventually recalled, and the lyrics referencing the Qur'an were removed in a patch (Kuchera,

2008; Sinclair & Cocker, 2008). Localization errors can occur outside of linguistic translation,

and the consequences can be significant (Edwards, 2006).

1.1.2 Contributing scholarship and research question

This research draws on literature from multiple areas to better understand the significance of localization to the movement of media across borders internationally. The goal is to describe the numerous tensions that arise when a video game is in the liminal state of moving between locales. This research also aims to track how localization professionals operate within the multiple layers of text in video games. Game studies provides tools for understanding how games function as narratives and as play experiences. Media studies provides perspectives on how media function as texts, how those texts are produced by authors and interpreted by readers, and how media flows across borders. Translation studies provide a history of the practice and insights into how meaning is transferred between semiotic systems. Finally, software studies bridges the connections between older media and technology, which impacts how culture is produced in the digital era.

In order to coordinate these diverse fields of study, this review of literature will follow Julie D'Acci's circuit of media study model (D'Acci, 2004). The model is flexible in that it acknowledges how different areas of study fit into a topic while also acknowledging that these areas should not be rigidly bounded. It features four bounded domains: the cultural artifact, reception, socio-historical context, and production. D'Acci specifically describes these domains' boundaries as "porous and analytical rather than self-contained and fully constituted" (p. 431). The researcher is thus free to carry her analysis through the domains denoting different areas of study. D'Acci refers to this movement of one's analysis as articulation. The research question is another, thicker layer of movement of ideas between the domains. The movement of analysis and ideas is also attributed to the researcher, who is acknowledged as part of the entire process. However, she simultaneously acknowledges that the analysis being conducted in the research "may not always be specifically involved with the text or a cultural or text" (p. 432). This model

thus acknowledges the wider context around a topic of study and provides structure without imposing strict limits.
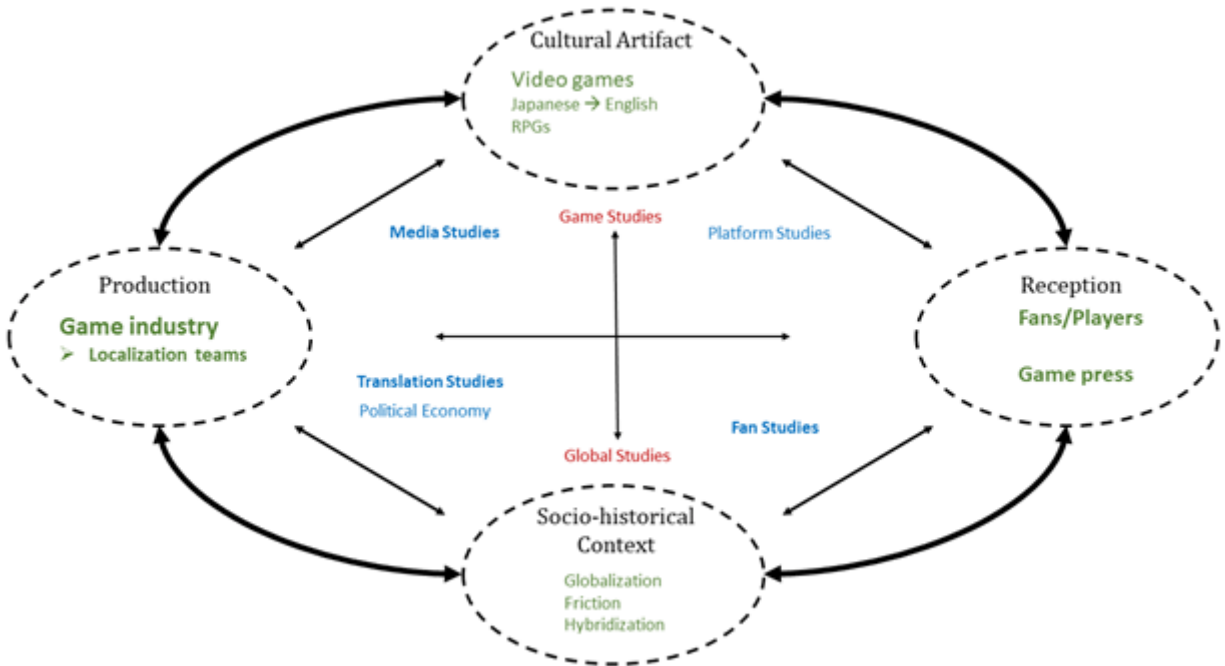
Figure 1. Diagram of how this research is structured based on D'Acci's model. The four main approaches are video games as a Cultural Artifact, Reception including fans/players and game press, Production has the game industry (focusing on localization teams), and the Socio-historical context supports these three other areas.

This dissertation primarily focuses on the production and reception domains. The cultural artifact being examined is video games, specifically games that are being translated from Japanese to English (primarily using examples from the RPG genre). The sociohistorical context surrounding video games is also explored in relation to these topics. This diagram also shows the multidisciplinary nature of this dissertation. Media studies provides the grounding for this research; however, other fields such as game studies and fan studies contribute frameworks of analysis to further delve into the topic.

As media artifacts, video games have affordances that determine how they are developed, translated, and played. This dissertation focuses on the video game localization process as a period of transition in which power is exercised through decisions determining how meaning

moves across borders. Power is exercised by these three groups, who are sometimes in contention with one another. Considering their role in localization, this dissertation seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What tensions arise during the process of Japanese to English video game localization?

   a. How are these tensions negotiated among game developers, players and fans, and game journalists?

1.2 Methodology and analysis

1.2.1 Analytical framework

Localization occurs in the spaces between languages. Likewise, localization professionals operate between the larger structures of the video game industry and the players who consume cultural products produced by the industry. Rather than focusing on a top-down view of video games from the industry perspective, Critical Media Industry Studies (CMIS) focuses on a middle level view of the industry (Havens, Lotz, Tinic, 2009). Video game developers and publishers represent the larger structures that produce games and have significant resources. The media texts that they produce are read, interpreted, and discussed by players (the audience). Localization professionals operate between these two levels while also imparting their own creative elements (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). Game journalists similarly operate on this level as "mediators in the production of commodity value" (Carlson, 2009) when they review and report on new games. This "helicopter" level perspective brings into view both the texts that are produced as well as the industrial practices and creative negotiations that go into translating, distributing, and releasing video games in different national and regional markets around the globe.

CMIS also relies on case studies because they are microcosms that can answer larger questions about cultural industries and the texts they produce. In the case of Square Enix, the corporation itself has strategies that it employs to be successful both in the Japanese domestic market and globally (Consalvo, 2006, 2013a). Havens, Lotz, and Tinic (2009) mention "ways that cultural workers maintain some degree of agency within the larger constraints imposed by the structural imperatives of the media industries, their owners, and regulators" (p. 247), which corresponds with O'Hagan and Mangiron's (2013) concept of transcreation and emphasis on translator agency in game localization. Exercising this agency applies to more than sociolinguistic translation. Richard Honeywood, for example, drew on his programming experience to revolutionize the localization process at Square Enix in the late 1990s. His contributions helped to revolutionize game localization at Square Enix by incorporating specialized programming tools to streamline the entire process (Fenlon, 2011). Honeywood's contribution goes beyond translation or writing. He helped simplify working with the game's code so that localizers could more easily work with text on the textual layers above code.

An advantage of examining the middle level of video game production is tracing power through established discourse and what is taken for granted. Havens, Lotz, and Tinic (2009) draw on Michel Foucault to highlight the importance of "how institutions organize ways of knowing into seemingly irrefutable logics of how systems should operate" (p. 247). The general consensus among game localization professionals that were interviewed for this research was that a good game localization was an invisible one. According to a veteran translator interviewed for this project, the player should not be able to tell that the game has a foreign origin, and modifications made to games should be seamless by not interrupting the gameplay experience (Veteran localizer, personal communication, June, 2016).

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1.2.2 Methodology and analysis

CMIS is an excellent framework for addressing actors occupying a middle position. Game localization professionals and game journalists operate between the game text and reception of the text. Fans are also viewed in a similar context—when they take on the role of producer unofficially. Furthermore, localization itself occupies a middle position as game texts move between regions. This process also occupies vital positions in relation to the game industry. Havens, Lotz, and Tinic (2009) stress the importance of human agents in "in interpreting, focusing, and redirecting economic forces that provide for complexity and contradiction within media industries" (p. 236).

The localization professionals working within the game industry perform tasks ranging from translation, proofreading, creative writing, and editing programming code (Jayemanne, 2009). This project also considers two distinct kinds of localization professionals: internal localization teams, which are part of a game publisher, and freelancers, who work independently and are hired by publishers. The primary aim is to draw on the experiences of these professionals to address the research questions that seek to understand how they carry out their work. To accomplish this, industry professionals were interviewed about their experiences working on game localization projects using individual, in-depth interviews with open questions with all participants.

Interviewing individuals working in the video game industry presented numerous challenges. The video game industry is infamously secretive due to high competition between game publishers (O'Hagan & Chandler, 2016). Non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) are a common method used by game publishers to prevent past and present employees from disclosing too much information about their work for these companies (Cote & Raz, 2015). As a result,

face-to-face interviews were supplemented with other interviews with the same individuals

conducted by other scholars and game press (Jayemanne, 2009). Game sites such as 1up.com,

USGamer, RPGamer, and other, smaller websites featured numerous interviews with localization

professionals (Cunningham, 2012; Learned, 2017; Mackey, 2016; Parish, 2012a; Parish, 2014a).

Since this project already uses Square Enix and their localization practices, the interviews

that were conducted face-to-face focused on localization professionals that had worked as

internal or external localizers. Five individuals in total were interviewed: one veteran who had

worked as an internal employee for a decade from the mid-1990s to 2000s, a translator who

worked for them during the 2000s, a localizer working for an external studio, a translator who

had worked for Square during the 1990s, and a localizer who lives in Japan and translates

anime[3]. Interviewees were contacted through email, LinkedIn, and through references from

interviewees themselves. When speaking with individuals still employed by game publishers,

confidentiality and anonymity were used to protect the interviewee from possible relation.

Information considered "off the record" was not used to further protect participants.

Interviewing Clyde Mandelin was approached differently. He gave permission to use his

real name in this research. Since most of his work covered in this dissertation is outside of his

professional work as a translator for localized anime, using his name was deemed less

detrimental to his work. Information from the *Mother 3* fan localization team's blog

supplemented information provided by Mandelin in interviews. The blog recorded the progress

of the fan localization team from November 8, 2006, when the project started, to the release of

the finished localization in October 2008. Updates have continued after the initial release for

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[3] Veteran translator will be referred to as "Veteran Localizer." The localizer working for an external studio is "E. F."
The translator living in Japan is "K. C." A female game journalist interviewed will be "D. Q." The localizer who
retranslated a popular game is "R. P."

updated versions of the translation patch and other news related to the fan localization (Young, n.d.).

This case study of *Mother 3*'s fan localization is important because it is an example of fans acting as producers and making their own localization decisions. Even more importantly, the decision to translate *Mother 3* to English was counter to Nintendo's intention to not localize the game at all. Mandelin's unique experience as both a fan translator and official localizer contributed immensely to this project. He also gave permission to use some screenshots from *Mother 3* used in his blog. Both the interview with Mandelin and the development blog helped explain how the fan localization team avoided having legal action taken against them by Nintendo.

To understand just how these magazines presented games of Japanese origin to American players, the first twenty-four issues of *Nintendo Power* were examined. This period covers the release of significant games such as *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*. By 1991, when this analysis ended, coverage of games began to move into the Super Nintendo Entertainment System era. This research focused on early, influential Japanese RPGs and the ways in which Nintendo presented Japanese game culture in the 1980s to readers.

As a joint operation between Nintendo of America and their Japanese counterparts, the magazine had access to parts of Japanese game culture that no other magazine featured at the time. This analysis of select early issues of *Nintendo Power* further highlight the role that game press has played as intermediaries between the game industry and players (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). Ultimately, this dissertation argues that game journalism and press publications translate the translations for games. They craft a narrative for players about the origins of localized games.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic discourse analysis. Kirkpatrick (2017) notes that this method addresses "concern[s] with language and representation" (p. 456). It also assumes that there is a surface level of denotative significations in discourse that stem from a deeper level of connotative meaning. Themes were developed by tracking both patterns and breaks from patterns in the discourse. The breaks in pattern, Kirkpatrick emphasizes, also indicate shifts in the underlying layers of discourse. These themes also draw from the literature on creativity in game localization (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013; Van Dijk, 2011). They were used to identify connections between different interviews and interviewees (Jones, Chik, & Hafner, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2012).

Discourse analysis was also applied to game reviews of *Final Fantasy XIII* to understand how the highly anticipated game became synecdoche for Japanese video game development overall among video game journalists. Drawing on work from Pelletier-Gagnon (2011), analysis of themes focused on the discursive creation of the genre known as "JRPGs." This genre developed over a few years in game journalism discourse to distinguish RPGs of Japanese origin from RPGs developed in the West that followed the *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition more closely.

The goal of focusing on the three sites of industry, press, and players in this analysis is to provide a deeper understanding of the development of game localization practices, the challenges encountered, and how power operates in this context.

1.3 The localization process

The process of localization has changed significantly since the practice began in the 1980s. At first, games themselves were simple enough that they did not need extensive textual localization. Instead, they went through "box and docs" localization, in which only the game's

marketing material, packaging, and associated instruction booklets were localized (Bernal-Merino, 2014; Mandiberg, 2012; Mangiron, 2021). As games became more complex throughout the 1980s, more intricate forms of localization were required. Examining the RPG genre is especially useful for understanding localization. First, RPGs even from their earliest days contained vast amounts of text compared to other games. Secondly, the RPG genre has been prominent in Japan since the mid-1980s. One particular RPG publisher, Square[4], revolutionized their localization process as they released increasingly complex RPGs both in Japan and in North America. Consalvo (2013) describes Square as a cosmopolitan operator in her analysis of the company's operations. She attributes this to the company's willingness to expand outside of Japan while adapting to new markets. Square's substantial expansion into other markets makes it a useful object of study.

The early history of Japanese to English localization at Square illustrates the highly technical nature of game localization. Kaoru Moriyama, who worked on games released in the early 1990s described her work as "never really 'translating' but chopping up the information and cramming them back in" (Collette, 2003). She worked on a preliminary script, which would then be modified, usually shortened, to fit into a game. Developers encountered two different kinds of limits in fitting text into a game. First, limited memory (space on the game cartridge) meant that text often needed to be abridged. This is an area where the differences between the Japanese writing system and the Latin alphabet are a significant factor. Using two syllabary systems and Chinese characters (kanji), Japanese can express an idea using fewer characters than English (Saint-Jacques, 1987). In many cases, this means that English text takes up more space in

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[4] Square Enix was formed in April 2003 from the merger of Japanese publishers Square Co., Ltd and Enix Corporation (Kohler, 2005).

memory than Japanese text[5]. A simple example is with naming a character in a game. For the Japanese, six character spaces is enough for a name like Takeshi (たけし or ta-ke-shi) or Junichiro (じゅんいちろ or ju-n-i-chi-ro). To English speakers, however, this is fairly limiting. In *Final Fantasy IV*, for example, a character named Gilbert was renamed Edward in the English version because the original name was seven characters long ("Edward Chris von Muir," n.d.). Another way in which space for text was limited was in the game's interface and menus (Jayemanne, 2009). Interfaces optimized for displaying Japanese characters often had to be adapted to displaying the Latin alphabet. In many cases the interface could not be changed much, which meant that English text fit somewhat awkwardly into text boxes and menus (Szczepaniak, 2009).

Early video game localization at Square mostly relied on a single person handling the translation of text. Ted Woolsey, a prominent translator who worked for Square in the early 1990s, operated under short deadlines. His work on games such as *Secret of Mana*, *Final Fantasy III*, and *Chrono Trigger* are notable for having fluent English translations with memorable dialogue. His work stands out in this era because the status of localization as mostly being an afterthought of development often led to errors in translation. Another issue was translations done directly from English to Japanese, which led to English dialogue that sounded unnatural to native speakers. One of the reasons Woolsey was hired by Square was to learn from mistakes made during the localization of *Final Fantasy II*[6] and improve translation in future games (Collette, 2003; Szczepaniak, 2009).

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[5] The Latin alphabet has an advantage over the Japanese writing system because it only needs alphanumeric and syntax symbols. Japanese has a larger character set, especially if kanji is also being used. Furthermore, kanji is limited by screen resolution. Many older games simply did not have the resolution to display kanji and only used the syllabary instead (Mato, 2008).

[6] *Final Fantasy II* and *Final Fantasy III* were, in actuality, the fourth and sixth entries in the series, respectively. They were renamed for their North American releases since the second, third, and fifth entries had not left Japan.

Long delays between a game's initial release domestically and internationally were also common during this period. Games were generally released in North America after a year or longer. For Europe, many Japanese releases took even longer. In many cases, Japanese games were not released in Europe because publishers were not willing to invest in FIGS (French, Italian, German, Spanish) translations. As Japanese to English localization efforts expanded at Square and other Japanese game publishers, they also invested more resources into European game releases.

An important development in the localization process at Square was expanding their localizations from an individual translator to an entire team. The highly successful release of *Final Fantasy VII* on the Sony PlayStation brought the series and Japanese RPGs into the mainstream of North American console gaming. As a result, Japanese game developers significantly increased their output of games localized into English. After *Final Fantasy VII* sold over one million copies, Square also began to invest more in their localization process. Instead of having a single translator handling all the in-game text, teams would also have editors who would ensure that the text read fluently in English (Fenlon, 2011).

Advances in localization at Square in the latter half of the 1990s also showed how the process required more than linguistic competency, but also proficiency with programming. A prominent figure during this era was Richard Honeywood. His experience in programming allowed him to not only oversee a localization team but also to implement tools to make the process easier. One of his contributions was a program that converted text from full-width alphanumeric characters to ASCII, which was easier for the localization team to edit. Another important element was improving communication between the localization team and the game developers (Edge Staff, 2006). While in the past, localization had been done post-development,

localizers were increasingly allowed to communicate with the development team earlier in the game development process (Fenlon, 2011).

During this time, localization teams expanded to include localization coordinators, localization specialists, editors, and localization programmers. Localization coordinators then oversaw the entire process. Programmers worked closely with the second layer of text, the game's programming code. Specialists and editors worked with the first layer of text that players interact with. Specifically, specialists translated the text, and editors ensured that translations were culturally appropriate (Honeywood & Fung, 2012).

Furthermore, the process of localization after this period comprised of five steps: "preparation and familiarization, glossary creation, translation and editing, integration and quality assurance, and master up and 'after service'" (Honeywood, 2007, p. 22). The initial three steps were salient examples of translators' creative agency in the process of translating a game. The first step involved planning out the schedule of the project and assigning specific translators. During this step, they also considered game-specific assets such as fonts and screen space. The veteran translator interviewed for this dissertation referred to these components of the game as the "user interface" (Veteran Localizer, personal communication, June, 2016). In the following step, the game's localization team determined norms such as naming conventions and special terminology. This part is especially important due to the need for new entries in a given game series to use terms that were consistent with earlier entries to maintain diegetic consistency that contributed to the gameplay experience. The third step required that members of the team compare their work for consistency. These first three steps were not only for assuring efficiency and consistency, but also for keeping the localization work consistent with that of the game's world. The fourth step described by Honeywood is specific to the game industry. During this

step the translated text was programmed into the game's code. Quality testing checked the game for bugs or other issues that may arise from such alterations to the game's code. The final step finished up the project and prepared it for distribution as a game on a specific console platform. Even after the game has been released, some of the development team remains on the project for translating press related to the game (Honeywood, 2007). Much of this structure is still present in localization teams at Square Enix and other Japanese publishers (Honeywood & Fung, 2012).

The early 2000s were marked by a shift to audiovisual localization. The more advanced PlayStation 2 console enabled voice acting in games. Difficulties that the localization team encountered while implementing English voice audio into *Final Fantasy X* once again involved an intersection of language and computation. Most lines spoken in Japanese were shorter than English translations of them. Unfortunately, the game's cutscenes were designed in such a way that extending their length would cause the game to crash. Similar to how they had to adapt game development to better accommodate English text, later games in the series increasingly accommodated foreign language dubs (Jayemanne, 2009; Mackey, 2016).

Currently, localization at Square Enix is far more sophisticated than it was thirty years ago. Localization teams are well-integrated into the overall game development structure. Honeywood and Fung (2012) have described the ideal localization process as having three stages: culturalization, internationalization, and localization. Culturalization considers historical, religious, geopolitical, and related contexts in the target market. The goal of this step in the process is to avoid including content that may be culturally offensive. Internationalization provides guidelines for designing a game so that its programming code, interfaces, and menus will accommodate foreign languages. This involves fonts, character encoding, and file structures. Finally, localization now entails more than translating text. It also requires that localizers

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familiarize themselves with the game's narrative and characters. Since maintaining the gameplay experience is crucial, localization teams now keep glossaries of terms specific to a game's diegetic setting. Voice over work has also been incorporated into this step of the process. The final step is quality assurance, which means testing the modified game to ensure that everything has been incorporated properly into the game's code and interfaces (Chandler & Deming, 2011).

A large blockbuster release like *Final Fantasy XIII*, for example, had foreign language voice overs recorded shortly after the original Japanese. Character models were designed so that the movements of their lips could be modified and animated for the English dub. The localization team for the game was also in communication with the game development team throughout the game's creation. Internationalization steps are now a regular part of many of Square Enix's game localizations as HD resolutions allow for more intricate interface design.

The game localization process varies widely across game publishers, game genres, and games themselves. The RPG genre has often required the most intricate approaches to localization due to their large volume of text. The game publisher Square (later Square Enix), who primarily publishes RPGs, has been one of the pioneers of localization strategies. From the late 1980s to current day, localization at the publisher progressed from a single translator to an entire team of translators, localizers, and editors. Furthermore, the time between releases in Japan and outside of the country have greatly decreased, especially for games with a large budget. The expansion of the localization process to include culturalization and internationalization have further integrated technology, linguistics, and cultural concerns into the process (Honeywood & Fung, 2012). However, localization is still not a perfect process. Games with smaller budgets may still have translation errors or subpar English dubs compared to the

voice over work of the Japanese original. Localization continues to be developed and refined as games and related technology become more complex.

1.4 Dissertation outline

1.4.1 Literature review

Chapter Two explores and engages with the literature from a variety of disciplines to address the multifaceted nature of this project. Using D'Acci's (2004) circuit of media study model, it examines the literature relevant to my project from three perspectives: production, the cultural artifact, and reception in the twenty-first century. The flexibility of this model is helpful for addressing the complexity of video games and localization. Furthermore, it positions the researcher as a central figure who carries her analysis through each domain, which is not entirely separate from the others. The goal of this chapter is to place this work in the multidisciplinary conversation that it engages.

This chapter draws on media studies to address the structures that comprise the video game industry and how they are related to game localization practices. Software studies informs this project's understanding of video games as digital media. Translation studies provides a rich history in which to contextualize game localization and the development of its practices. This chapter also discusses the significance of liminality to the in between nature of game localization.

The literature review chapter then examines video games as complex cultural artifacts. It engages with the literature to discuss the primacy of the gameplay experience as a unique aspect of gaming that strongly affects the localization process. Games are layered texts composed of programming code, interfaces, and gameplay elements. Much of the gameplay experience emerges in the interaction between player and game. Drawing on Anable's (2018) work on affect

in video games, this chapter also argues for the importance of player experience in understanding video games as a medium.

Finally, this chapter discusses how this dissertation contributes to literature on fans and participatory culture. Video game fandom that has a particular interest in games of Japanese origin mirror the development of participatory communities oriented around other Japanese media, such as manga and anime. Whereas the former communities have established their own means of unofficially localizing titles that have not left Japan, doing so with video games is more difficult. In the case of video games, fans must hack into games to enable the display of English language text, thus creating unofficial localizations. Game journalists are also part of video game fandom due to game press' origins as enthusiastic press. They engage more closely with the game industry inside and outside of Japan and influence how players interpret trends related to Japanese video games.

1.4.2 Chapter 3: "Change it to keep it the same": The paradox of game localization

Chapter Three focuses on the work of localization professionals and the tensions that arise during the process. This chapter is informed by five in-depth interviews with localization professionals and their varying experiences working for different companies and games. Interviews from other sources, such as game magazines and other scholarly work, supplement these interviews (Jayemanne, 2009). The face-to-face interviews draw from two sources: internal localization teams and freelancers. Internal localization teams work within a game development firm. Their position generally offers them the advantage of working closer with game development teams so that they can directly address issues with game code. Freelancers, on the other hand, are independent and work with multiple firms. Both types of localization teams provide insights into different dynamics operating in the industry.

Localization professionals' experience also provides insight into how power operates in the context of transferring meaning from Japanese to English versions of games. Individuals working with a game's text are ultimately those who determine how meaning moves across language versions of the game. They are influenced by policies established by the developers and publishers that they work for, regional content rating boards, and their personal philosophies as translators. This chapter's thematic analysis of interview data considers how these different factors affect specific game projects.

1.4.3 Chapter 4: The "official" unofficial fan localization of Mother 3

Chapter Four moves away from the industry to a case study of an unofficial game localization carried out by fans. This chapter explores the fan-made localization of the Game Boy Advance game *Mother 3* as an example of "do-it-yourself" localization. The localization of this game serves as a case study of individuals outside of the game industry deciding to make a game available to audiences outside of Japan. It draws on Consalvo's (2016) concept of unintended travel to highlight the different perspectives of producers and fans. This chapter also collected data from the blog maintained by the fan localization team. The analysis of this data tracks how discourse in the community changed between the initial release of the game in Japan and the completion of the fan translation project.

The interview with the main translator for the game informs contributes a perspective into the specifics of fan labor. Clyde Mandelin presents a unique perspective because he also does work as a professional translator. His experiences present an opportunity to compare and contrast fan and professional approaches to localization. This interview and his comments in the fan localization blog reveal strategies that the team used to navigate the gray legal space of fan localization. The strategies that they employed were crucial in avoiding legal retribution from

Nintendo. Comparing and contrasting the experiences of fan localization and official localization reveals that industry professionals and fans operate under different expectations. These different expectations affect how they approach game localization, which then influences how meaning is transferred between Japanese and English versions of games.

1.4.4 Chapter 5: Discursive constructions of Japanese games through genre

Chapter Five explores tensions that game journalists contend with in their middle position between producers and players. Barkl (2011) and Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009) have note that game press act as mediators between the industry and the game playing audience. Early game magazines, especially *Nintendo Power*, played an important role of giving English-speaking players a glimpse into Japanese video game culture. This was especially important before the proliferation of the Internet and related technology made accessing news from Japan easier. *Nintendo Power* also played an important role in managing player expectations and helping them understand genres, such as the role-playing game genre.

This chapter also discusses how game press interpretation of trends in the Japanese video game industry influenced how players viewed Japanese games and culture. The period from 2005-2012 marks a period where a narrative of decline in the Japanese game industry due to numerous factors became prominent in video game journalism. This narrative influenced how game journalists discussed and reviewed new games. The troubled release of *Final Fantasy XIII* is used as a case to demonstrate how the problems surrounding one game's release were tied into larger narratives about the quality of Japanese game development and of the validity of Japanese developers' interpretation of the RPG genre.

This chapter illustrates how Japanese to English localization also involves cultural understandings of how games are played. In their role of bridging Japanese and English-speaking

game cultures, game press also helps shape perceptions of Japanese video game trends. The RPG genre became synecdoche for all Japanese games as Japanese developers struggled to adjust to the higher demands of HD game development.

1.4.5 Chapter 6: Findings and conclusion

The conclusion brings together the three sites of inquiry to answer this dissertation's research questions. The tensions that arise during the localization process are the result of differing priorities between game localizers and developers, fans and players, and game journalists. Localizers prioritize invisible localizations that conceal a game's Japanese origins. They also operate under game developers and publishers whose goal is profit. If game creators have determined that a game will not sell well in a specific region, then they will not invest resources into localizing the game for that region. Players and fans, on the other hand, form affective connections with games and their narratives. Furthermore, some players are specifically interested in the Japanese origins of games and savor the cultural odor of Japanese games that localizers eschew (Iwabuchi, 1998). Game press operate between these two parties as mediators. Not only do they use their access to game developers and industry insiders to provide players with exclusive information, they also help to define game genres. Their mediation helps shape player perceptions of Japanese games and industry trends through cultural and linguistic barriers.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Understanding the localization process, including unauthorized localization and the larger

context of how games are received by players and fans, requires a multidisciplinary approach.

First, this dissertation draws on translation theory to contextualize the work of game localization.

Translation theory, drawing on literature and film, provides a foundation for exploring the newer

medium of video games. Media studies and game studies address the unique properties of video

games, such as their interactivity and immersive properties. Media studies also addresses the

nature of games as post-Fordist, content-based products in contrast to more material-based

products of the Fordist era. Finally, media studies provides perspective on audiences, such as

what it means to be a gamer and who plays games. Furthermore, studies of fans help to explain

the cross-cultural appeal of Japanese media products. Game journalists, who are also fans and

players of games, will also be examined through the lens of audiences.

2.1 Production: Authority/authenticity and translation

As discussed earlier, the development of the international video game industry is the

result of multidirectional, nuanced flows of culture that do not originate in the West. Translation

developed as a necessity to break down barriers that could impede business in this context. The

ability to successfully translate games from Japanese to English was the foundation of the

expansion of Japanese games to regions outside of East Asia: North America, Europe, and

eventually Latin America (Kohler, 2016).

2.1.1 Authorship and authenticity

Discussing localization in video games requires understanding how authorship is established. Determining not just the where the author, but also authenticity, resides for video games is a major site of tension. Since localizations are arguably copies of the original game, identifying a game's author establishes a frame of comparison between the initial author's vision and the translator's interpretation. For the most part, video game authorship is distributed. Games, like other kinds of software, are created by development teams that have grown in size in the past three decades (Jennings, 2016; Lopes, Tavares, & Marques, 2018).

Who makes video games? Do players associate a game such as *League of Legends* with one particular person? Video game authorship can also be either distributed or associated with an individual. Jennings (2016) defines authorship of video games as something that "…involves the power to create, shape, and influence the content, structure, form and affordances of video game works. It involves the power to alter, to write, and to create" (p. 7). Like film, most video games are large productions that can involve over a hundred people. Unlike film, however, video game authorship is more difficult to attribute because game producers are far less transparent about the process of game development (Lopes, Tavares, & Marques, 2018).

Localizations of games interpret the artistic vision embedded within the cultural artifact, and determining the source of this vision is significant to understanding the process. Auteur theory, which is usually applied to film, locates the source of this vision in one individual, usually the director (Andrews, 2012; Lopes, Tavares, & Marques, 2018). Compared to film studies, video game scholarship has not been as heavily influenced by auteur theory. For the most part, video games are credited to a publisher or studio (Jennings, 2016). However, there are some video game creators who have become so famous that they have become auteurs credited for their unique styles that influence their games.

Generally, auteurs are rare in video games. A few examples are Will Wright, creator of *SimCity* and *The Sims*, and Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of the *Mario* series and numerous other Nintendo intellectual properties. Much of their fame is the result of the circumstances in which they created games. Will Wright's decision to create a game not focused on winning or losing set his games apart from many other games in the 1990s and 2000s (Yi, 2003). Miyamoto has worked for Nintendo since the 1970s and heavily influenced entire game genres during a highly experimental era of game development in the 1980s (DeWinter, 2019).

Another auteur of note is Hideo Kojima, who is known for the *Metal Gear* series and *Death Stranding*. When he rose to prominence in the late 1990s with *Metal Gear Solid*, he was more associated with his employer, Japanese game publisher Konami. His highly experimental approach to *Metal Gear Solid* stood out for borrowing film techniques to enhance the player's sense of immersion through cutscenes. Kojima is an example of an auteur that spent much of his career being more associated with Konami before breaking out on his own (DeWinter, 2019). After he left Konami for Sony, his name has continued to be tied to the games he makes (Parkin, 2015).

Indie games are often associated with a single author because of the smaller teams that produce them. The indie RPG *Undertale*, for example, is closely associated with its creator, Toby Fox (Schilling, 2018; Wawro, 2016). *Stardew Valley* is similarly associated with its sole creator, Eric Barone—a developer who uses the nickname ConcernedApe (Singal, 2016). Fox and Barone were the creators of almost every part of their games, including music. They are thus rare examples of lone creators in an era of games where development, even for indie games, is almost always done by a team.

When no clear author is specified, attribution of authorship may be assigned by those outside of the industry, such as game press or players. The highly successful *Final Fantasy* series is mostly associated with the company that produces the series, Square Enix, rather than any particular individual (Consalvo, 2016). This authorship has also changed over time. The series was originally created by Japanese game designer Hironobu Sakaguchi; however, he left the company in the early 2000s. The popular *Kingdom Hearts* series, another Square Enix property, is closely associated with its creative director, Tetsuya Nomura (Kohler, 2005). Authorship for games or game series is not fixed and can change over time.

The status of author is a powerful position. For one, the author can bestow authenticity to cultural products (Gray & Johnson, 2013). Players compare the work of localization teams to what they consider to be the authentic original. The perceived authenticity of a localization affects the reception of a new game. Fans who keep track of game releases in Japan tend to compare localizations to the authentic 'original' game released in Japan (Consalvo, 2016).

The question of whether a game's localization is an authentic copy or not may differ among producers, game press, and players. In the case of translated games, video game companies tend to treat each localization for a specific region of a game as its separate entity (Chandler & Deming, 2012; Jayemanne, 2009). Whether the author of a game is considered to be an individual or a group, the decisions made by localization teams and publishers impact how the game will be received in a target locale. These decisions, like the case of the book publishers that Venuti (1998) criticized, are informed by certain cultural perceptions held within the industry. Focusing on video game localization sheds light on these decisions and the views that inform them.

2.1.2 Industry perspective and translation studies perspective

The translation studies discipline has produced the most research on video game localization. Their research on the topic is informed by a long history of translation theory that offers the basis for rich analyses of the game localization process (Benjamin, 1923/2012; Schleiermacher, 2012; Snell-Hornby, 2006). Translation studies scholars point to the importance of video game localization teams and translators as mediators between cultures (O'Hagan, & Mangiron, 2013). Video games are multimodal digital media that present new challenges to localization (Mangiron, 2012). This body of literature also contrasts with the video game industry's profit-focused motives for game localization.

The game industry sees itself as selling experiences through their games (Heeter, 2000; Squire, 2006). Localization policies are designed to preserve the feel of playing the original game (Chandler & Deming, 2011). This experience relies on input from the player in response to stimuli from the game. Mangiron (2016) makes this connection explicit when she describes how video games develop "an affective link between the player and the game" (p.202) which then "facilitate[s] the player's immersion in the game world" (p. 196). The quality of a game's localization thus has a significant impact on the gameplay experience.

The player interacts with the game through physical controllers and engages with its narrative via text and audio on screen. More advanced games, especially role-playing games, use narrative as a main component of a game experience. Immersion in the world in which the narrative is set is key to forming a strong affective link between player and game (Anable, 2018). Localization professionals aim to preserve this sense of immersion. Errors in translations can have significant effects on the gameplay experience. Dietz (2006) describes the concept of the 'linguistic plot-stopper,' which is an error in translation that makes progression in the game

impossible. As discussed earlier, a small mistranslation in a key part of a game, such as a puzzle, can make player progress difficult.

The game industry's goal in game localization is usually to make the game more familiar to the target locale (Mandiberg, 2009). This approach to translation is defined in translation theory as domestication (Venuti, 2002). Translation studies, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of cultural difference than can be transferred from one culture to another via translation. This is an example of foreignization (Schleiermacher, 2013). Domestication, as Venuti (2008) describes it, favors the target culture of a translation. Writing in the context of literary translation, Venuti characterizes domestication as transporting the author of the original work closer to the reader. Domestication emphasizes the importance of fluency in the target language. Foreignization, conversely, aims to move the reader closer to the original author. Instead of focusing on fluency in the target language, foreignization revels in the fact that the translation originated from another language (Gambier & van Doorslaer, 2013; Heemsbergen, 2016; O'Hagan, 2009b). Translation studies offers critical tools that problematize assumptions that the game industry makes about what constitutes a "good" localization.

Taking the domestication approach, game producers usually prefer to obscure a game's foreign origin (Heemsbergen, 2016). Koichi Iwabuchi's (1998) concept of 'cultural odor' presents a helpful metaphor for the intricacies of edits made during localization. Iwabuchi defined the term as "the way in which the cultural presence of a country of origin and images or ideas of its way of life are positively associated with a particular product in the consumption process" (p. 166). He likens cultural influences that link a product back to its country of origin to one's sense of smell. He also refers to some examples, such as products that are attractive because they invoke images of their source culture in the minds of consumers. This odor is more

than an association with Japan, such as the Sony Walkman, but rather is related to "discursively constructed images of the country of origin" (p. 166). Consumer electronics from Japan can still invoke imagined images of Japanese culture, such as creating an association of Japan with advanced technology.

In the case of Japanese games, this means scrubbing away this odor. The goal of the domestication approach in this context is an invisible localization. A 'good' localization, according to many localization professionals, is one that leaves no sense that the game was localized at all (Jayemanne, 2009). In contrast to literary publishing, which Venuti (1995) describes as devaluing translators' work by making it invisible, invisibility is seen as a sign of quality and skill in the game industry. Producers, including localization professionals, view the best translation as one where a translator's work is not apparent (Chandler & Deming, 2011; Jayemanne, 2009; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). The mark of a good game localization, then, is one that does not bear evidence of the work that went into it.

Invisibility is not necessarily what players prefer, however. The question of domestication versus foreignization is an area of tension between fans and game publishers. As Consalvo (2016) found, many fans of games originating in Japan and other Japanese media are interested in the original language and culture of media products. They desire products with a strong cultural odor (Iwabuchi, 1998). These fans may even seek out the Japanese language version of a game if they are unsatisfied with a game's official localization. In the case of the game *Fire Emblem: Fates*, which had content removed in the English localization, fans created their own unofficial translation (Klepek, 2016). These fans desired a foreignization approach where content that might be deemed unfitting for the target locale can be experienced regardless.

In the case of *Fire Emblem: Fates*, fans disagreed strongly with what Nintendo's localization standards considered appropriate for English-speaking audiences (Mandiberg, 2018).

Contrary to many game developers, translation studies scholars argue that cultural differences are significant even if they are smoothed over in the localization process (Delabastita, 2010; Venuti, 1995). The *Fire Emblem: Fates* case shows that fans can access the original version of a game to compare it to the localized version. However, these more dedicated fans are generally just a segment of the wider audience for video games. Game producers operate with the assumption that the larger audience prefers a domesticated, fluent localization that does not provide obvious connections to the game's original culture (Chandler & Deming, 2012; Jayemanne, 2009).

2.1.3 The task of the translator

This research locates the power of cultural mediation in members of game localization teams who have enough agency to make decisions while operating within the larger framework of the game industry. The overall preference in the game industry is domestication and invisible translations, but the individual decisions made by members of localization teams are also important. The invisibility of game localizations also applies to game interfaces. A good interface will be one that is unobtrusive (Bolter & Gromala, 2003). Localization professionals must also work within a game's interface to ensure that text is readable to the player. Decisions made at the individual level on localization teams can have a significant impact on the game even before it is released.

The creativity of individual localization professionals is important to understanding the possible outcomes of the process overall. O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) refer to the agency that translators and other members of localization teams in games have as "transcreation."

Furthermore, O'Hagan and Mangiron (2004) note that games have a similar need for creativity as literary translation. Like fictional novels, many games, especially those in the role-playing genre, rely heavily on narrative. These games present players with fictional worlds that have their own rules, terminology, and other unique features that create the sense of immersion in that world (Anable, 2018). Dietz (2006) argues that game translation concerns not only dialogue and speech, but also specialized terms that are specific to every game. Localization professionals not only need to make a game understandable to players in terms of their culture, they must also consider the culture of the game's own world.

Ensuring that a localized game is internally consistent requires new approaches to translation. The creative agency that localization teams and translators express is of particular interest to translation studies scholars who aim to identify and understand these newly developed approaches (Jiménez-Crespo, 2018; Mandiberg, 2009; Mangiron, 2007, 2016; O'Hagan, 2005, 2009b). Aside from narrative and fictional settings, the technical aspect of games requires that translators operate within limitations that would not affect a literary translator's work (Dietz, 2006; O'Hagan, 2015; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013).

Games use interfaces to present text to players. Localization teams not only translate text, they must also ensure that text is displayed properly in a game's interfaces (Mandiberg, 2012). In older games, for example, the space for text in menu interfaces was limited. The Japanese language can express ideas using fewer characters than English (Mandelin, 2006). Earlier games were designed as Japanese games first and foremost, and decisions to localize the games for other regions were made post-production (Kohler, 2016). Localization teams were thus faced with the challenge of fitting information into spaces on screen not initially designed for the Roman alphabet. The solutions varied from omission to clever abbreviations and often relied on

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the time and resources that the individual translator or localization team had at their disposal (Jayemanne, 2009).

By interrogating the creative practices of localization professionals, this dissertation aims to understand what tensions arise in these creative moments. Considering the importance of computer interfaces to localization, this research is also primarily interested in the ways in which localization teams' work interacts with these interfaces (Mandiberg, 2012). How do localization professionals approach immersion? How do they configure interfaces to ensure that text is readable? Interfaces are textual in that they contain text necessary for the player to understand the game. They are also visual, and their design mediates a player's game experience (Bolter & Gromala, 2003). Video games are an example of how new media and digital technology present new ways of telling stories and communicating meaning (Kerr, 2006). They require new approaches to localization and translation due to their multi-layered nature.

2.2 Cultural artifact: Video games

2.2.1 Analyzing video games as cultural objects

As previously discussed, video games are a challenging object of analysis because they are interactive, immersive, and experiential. Not only are games read or watched, similarly to literary texts or film, they are also played. Zagalo (2019) makes a clear distinction between games and film, arguing that film offers vicarious experiences and games offer enactive experiences. This is not to say that other forms of media are not interactive. Video games operate at a different level in terms of interactivity, however. Games constantly demand immediate responses from players (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2011). With the exception of long cinematic sequences, video games demand that players consistently focus their attention on the game (Skalski et al., 2011). As a result of these demands, many players feel as though they are drawn into the game

and its world (Jennet et al., 2008). This experience is related to immersion, which is central to the gameplay experience.

This project looks to game studies, media studies, and software studies scholarship for the means to address the complexities of video games as cultural objects. Game studies has evolved over the past two decades and grown from essentialist roots to more expansive theoretical approaches to games. Additionally, this research draws on Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) to bring together cultural and economic frameworks of video games. They conceptualize games as post-Fordist cultural artifacts in which their content is more important than their physical form. Jones (2008) contributes a textual studies perspective and argues that playing video games goes beyond the text itself. Finally, Bogost and Montfort (2009) provide a model for locating the game code and interface in relation to the surface experience of playing games. This project draws from these frameworks to locate the experiential aspect of playing video games.

The early debate in the game studies discipline between narratologists and ludologists highlights the difficulty of studying the medium across disciplinary boundaries. The former argued that narrative was a crucial element of games and adapted older theory, and the latter rejected the claim that narrative was essential to games and instead focused on the play experience as bounded by rules. According to Kerr (2006), narratologists drew from modernist and postmodernist theory and were interested in developing theories for new kinds of narrative made possible by video games. Ludologists, on the other hand, mainly saw themselves as working in opposition to narratologists (Bogost, 2007, 2008). They prioritized the rule-bound and goal-oriented nature of digital games that exist alongside narrative. Ultimately, Kerr argues that this debate was formalism that attempted to distill video games down to a theoretical

quintessential essence of narrative or play, which is not useful to video game analysis. Remnants of narratology and ludology still exist in the discipline; however, they are less antagonistic than they were in the past. Even so, game studies has other weaknesses and blind spots. One of these is an overemphasis on the computational aspects of games, which will be discussed in the next few paragraphs.

The larger context of playing video games revolves around the game play itself as an experience. In her book, *Playing with Feelings*, Anable (2018) centers emotions as an important element of playing games. Referring to the aforementioned debate in the field, she notes how narratologists and ludologists did not address the representative aspects of games. On the one hand, game studies' focus on computation and code neglected the player experience. On the other hand, approaches that focused on the player were myopic in their prioritization of interactivity. They also assigned more agency to players' decoding of meanings in games than they actually possess. Returning to the significance of the narratology/ludology debate, Anable argues that the outcome of this debate was a split between representation and computation in game studies as well as an overemphasis on the latter.

Game studies' preference for computation over representation can be traced to pressure the field has faced from external parties concerned about violence in video games (Anable, 2018; Fromme & Unger, 2012; Jenkins, 1999). Focusing on computation instead of representational aspects shifts the conversation away from a negative association that those outside the community and industry have frequently used to attack the medium. The avoidance of discussing representation is also reflected in the larger video game community. Resistance to understanding representations in games constrains discourse about games, and even worse, can encourage hostility to attempts to critically analyze games (Paul, 2018).

In studying game localization, this research draws on Anable (2018) and Van Ommen (2018) to recenter the player experience; especially how the game industry conceptualizes this experience. Their understanding of the gameplay experience informs the decisions made regarding localizations. This project is interested not in how players themselves feel when they play games, but rather how localization professionals *think* players feel. This dissertation traces "how feelings move through and get expressed through particular objects" (Anable, 2018, p. xiv). The chapter focusing on game press examines how game journalists, who are in a position between production and reception, translate the choices of localization professionals to players. Finally, the chapter on players looks at the emotional impact of a particular game series on a community of players.

2.2.2 The emergent gameplay experience

In order to understand how localization operates, this dissertation conceptualizes the gameplay experience as emergent from the connection formed between player and game (Christou, 2014). Fernández-Vara (2015) argues that "the cultural significance of games emerges from the context of play" (p. 7). The player brings their own prior experiences to a game, which affects how they respond to it. Ermi and Mäyrä (2011) formalize elements of the gameplay experience in their model that addresses the many components that comprise it. Games evoke emotions in players by offering challenges, narrative, and most importantly, through representation. The player forms a connection with the game through the input device of the controller and output from the game that is expressed visually and audibly (and in some cases haptic, such as vibration feedback in some game peripherals). The emergent property of the gameplay experience means that this phenomenon is more than the sum of its parts: player and

game. Every player has a different experience of a game; however, these experiences also have commonalities which allows players to socialize with others who have played the game.

Games not only have narrative and interactive elements, they also have a social component. Game developers and publishers claim to be selling more than a game, but are rather offering an experience (Heeter, 2000; Squire, 2006). Jones (2008) similarly describes this phenomenon as a dynamic event that goes beyond the game text itself. Playing a game thus does not end with the game itself but rather extends well beyond the realm of the game software. Playing a game is highly social, whether one plays in a group in one physical location or plays with others online. Players also seek information through magazines and websites that cater to them.

Game developers and publishers claim to be selling not just a game, but an experience (Heeter, 2000; Squire, 2006). Jones (2008) similarly describes the experience of play as a dynamic event that goes beyond the game text itself. Playing a game does not end with the game itself but rather expands well beyond the realm of the game hardware and software. Playing a game is highly social, whether one plays in a group in one physical location or plays with others online. Even playing alone can involve seeking information through magazines and websites that cater to them. Games not only have narrative and interactive elements, they also have a social component.

The goal of this research is to map these connections in order to locate the place of localization in the overall gaming experience. Jones (2008) presents the challenge of reconciling the multiple elements of games as cultural objects to scholars as the following:

It seems to me that the job of scholars looking at video games should be to illuminate those connections and boundaries, to trace the material and cultural determinants, from

software code to design, to marketing, social networks of players and fans, and to wider

cultural fictions and key texts, that help to shape the production, distribution, and

reception—which is to say the meanings—of video games. (Jones, 2008, p. 16)

Jones thus suggests an overall analytical framework for video games that includes the materials

that comprise the game hardware, the cultural influences that inform game design, and the ways

that players and critics respond to games. He also highlights the importance of the relationship of

games to each other and to other texts. Material and cultural considerations affect how games are

developed.

2.2.3 Games as post-Fordist Commodities

Video games are excellent examples of what Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter

(2003) call post-Fordist information capitalism. The describe post-Fordism as a major shift in the

role of cultural industries at the end of the twentieth century as one part of the shift to post-

Fordism reliant on information capitalism. Cultural industries thrive in this environment, since

they produce experiential media whose value rely more on their immaterial rather than material

attributes (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Unlike mass-produced commodities such as cars, which were

emblematic of the Fordist era, many post-Fordist commodities are ephemeral, based on the

consumption of a period of time, and their associated meaning can be renewed even after they

reach a saturation point. Experiential cultural products' value is dependent on how they

communicate social meaning, and the way in which they are localized can be beneficial or

detrimental to this value because translation mediates these meanings.

Drawing on the Regulation School's concept of Fordism and post-Fordism, Kline, Dyer-

Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) argue that video games are the ideal commodity for this kind of

economy. Fordism is linked to an industrial capitalism characterized by material, mass goods

that are marketed through mass media to a mass society. Since the 1970s, economists have argued, Western countries have shifted to an information economy. While the industrial Fordist economy focused on material goods, the information post-Fordist economy focuses on experiential commodities. Furthermore, they describe this economy as relying on perpetual innovation. Knowledge, such as copyrights and trademarks, is more prominent than material goods.

Unlike other post-Fordist entertainment media, however, video games offer an interactive experience, which this dissertation characterizes as the emergent gameplay experience. Video games are also unique compared to other kinds of software because they are designed specifically to entertain. Whereas other kinds of software have interfaces designed to be efficient, user-friendly, and aesthetically pleasing, video games have interfaces that are also meant to be fun (Jones, 2008; Mangiron, 2016; O'Hagan, 2009b). In this way, games are similar to film and literature. The narratives within games communicate social meaning not just through dialogue and sound, but also through music, elements of the diegetic game world, interactive elements (combat and tinkering with characters, which will be discussed later in this chapter), and characters (Van Ommen, 2018).

Since immaterial goods are rendered valuable depending on the experiences they provide, controlling the cultural meanings communicated by these goods is crucial. What is especially helpful from Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) is how they conceptualize meaning in information capitalism. They sum up this dynamic as the following:

> Consumer culture is a treadmill whose machinery of desire is a marketing communication
> system based on the creative destruction of meaning in media, and a perpetual innovation
> and exhaustion of signs. (p. 71)

Marketing imbues immaterial goods with meaning through discourse that they communicate using media. Generating hype around new games is an example of how important marketing is to the industry. Communicating the immaterial value of games is carried out by not just a game publisher's marketing, but also magazines and game journalism. Unlike other journalism, game journalism is more closely tied to developers (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). Game press can influence how players perceive a game through reviews and feature articles.

Considering how video games are experiential media that players invest time in, localization affects the social meaning that games communicate. Game producers aim to keep what they view as a game's intended meaning intact throughout the localization process (Chandler & Deming, 2011; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). This goal is mediated through the decisions of the localization professionals that they employ, whether these professionals are internal or are external freelancers. Players and game journalists also possess agency in interpreting these meanings. These perspectives do not always align, which makes game localization a notable site of tension between these groups. These groups are all desire an enjoyable gameplay experience.

2.2.4 Games as texts, computational objects, and designed experiences

To study the material dimensions of video games, Bogost and Montfort (2007, 2009) devised a model that focuses on the role of platforms in digital media. Platform studies ties the materiality of technology directly to the creative work that goes into creating media (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). In doing so, it also serves as a bridge between newer concepts related to digital media and concepts from older traditions. Bogost and Montfort (2009) make this bridging possible by dividing their model into the following categories starting from the most technical and material: the platform, code, form/function, interface, and reception/operation. They also

position culture and context as existing outside of these multiple levels and affecting all of them. This overall model is helpful for mapping the larger gaming experience.

This research is primarily concerned with the two top two layers of the model: interface and reception/operation. These two areas are where much of the localization work takes place. Localization does enact changes in the code and form and function of games; however, this research focuses on the interface and reception and operation of games as they are the levels that critics and players interact with most (Mandelin, 2006). Mandiberg (2012) specifically associates translation with the interface layer in the context of video game localization. He separates the interface into the graphical interface, which comprises graphics on the screen itself that players see, and game controls, which are determined by the input device for the game. Localization interacts with these components and can determine not only what players see in games but also how they interact with the game. Mandiberg also sees reception as intricately associated with localization because critics and players are responding to how the game has been changed for a target locale. The cultural context that Bogost and Montfort (2009) positioned as affecting all of these layers determines how localization is conducted. In the context of this research, perceived differences between Japanese and Anglo-American culture inform how localization, and thus translation, is carried out.

However, while this research borrows from the platform studies scholarship for its theoretical applications, it does not aim to operate entirely within the framework. Criticizing platform studies, Apperley and Parikka (2018) warn that platform studies focuses too much on the industry perspective at the expense of unofficial channels such as fans. The game industry and players do not always agree on localization approaches, which is a kind of tension that the platform studies model does not take into account. Much of the significance of reception lies in

unofficial works made by devoted consumers, or fans. They expand the experience of the game beyond the hardware into the social realm. Platform studies concepts guide this project, but this is not a platform studies project.

2.2.5 Who plays video games?

Who plays video games? Many would describe those that play games as 'gamers' (Sheffield, 2013). The term clearly describes the activity; however, this label is far from neutral in its actual use. To be a gamer means to be part of a social construct with its own history and tensions (Shaw, 2012). In recognizing the social meaning inherent in this label, this dissertation does not use this term to refer to people who play video games. Video games and gamers have a long history of being associated with masculinity (Braithwaite, 2016; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Cote, 2018). Recently, this association has been problematized in the community. Considering Shaw's (2013) suggestion of looking outside of established market logics to define people who play video games, this research aims to leave space to discuss players of video games who exist outside of the stereotypical young male.

What is a gamer? The term carries many connotations both within and outside of the gaming community. Outside of the community, playing video games has long been pathologized. Video games as a pastime have been demonized as juvenile wastes of one's time and as violence-focused simulations that drive young people to replicate that violence (Fromme & Unger, 2012; Jenkins, 1999). Many video games also require heavy investments of time, which is often judged by those outside the hobby as wasted time. Most importantly, they are associated with young white men and geek stereotypes. The gamer identity is heavily gendered and only recently has encountered resistance to this connotation.

The stereotypical gamer is imagined by the industry to be young, white, and male (Cote, 2018). Gaming is social. Within the community, to call oneself a gamer means not only identifying the self, but also to position one in relation to others. Drawing on Butler (as cited in Shaw, 2012), Shaw observed through interviews that the gamer identity is also performed. The way in which interviewees identified themselves as gamers or not gamers was contextual. Some interviewees identified as gamers in comparison to others they knew. Many women that Shaw interviewed did identify as gamers, but they often viewed themselves relative to a male sibling or friend. Others avoided identifying as gamers for fear of negative associations with the label.

Despite recent movements to diversify, video games are masculinized in popular culture. The association of video games with young men traces back to the 1980s, when the video game industry was relatively new. After the market crash in 1983, the resurgent game industry, to reduce risk, focused on attracting specific consumers instead of families (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Cote (2018) found that this "community of taste" (p. 465) was further cultivated by game magazines such as *Nintendo Power* and *Electronic Gaming Monthly*. These magazines interpellated boys and young men as the primary players of games: gamers.

Cultivating this audience created game communities and social circles that were either all or mostly male. Even as video games as a medium have expanded onto cell phones and to more diverse audiences, many game developers still cater to this core group. This group of core or hardcore gamers are associated with triple-A games[7] that are expensive to develop and are marketed heavily (Nakamura, 2012). For the most part, the term 'gamer' is often still associated with this group.

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[7] "Triple-A" refers to video games primarily produced for console or PC platforms that have large budgets, intensive use of technology, and significant resources invested in production. The term tends to be used in marketing and does not have a formal definition (Deuze, Martin, & Allen, 2007; Keogh, 2015).

As games have expanded to new audiences, tensions have arisen as some core gamers view this expansion as a threat. The Nintendo Wii made a huge impact by bringing in groups who usually never played games (Juul, 2009). Tensions have arisen in online gaming communities in response to calls for increases in representation in games. The gaming community had always had female gamers, however, as their voices grew louder, they faced vicious backlash. Alexander's (2014) provocative article declaring that "gamers are over" sparked a strong response. Much of the backlash coalesced in online harassment campaigns targeted at women and minority groups.

Online gaming spaces have always been precarious for women and minorities. Nakamura (2012) notes the heavy usage of racial slurs and other insults in online games that fuel this precarity. Such hostility goes hand in hand with the harassment campaigns that have formed in response to increased calls for diversity in games. To some, the term 'gamer' has increasingly come to describe the old guard, mostly young men that traditionally made up the consumer base.

Therefore, the term "player" is used in this dissertation in order to avoid the associations with devotion to the medium and hostility to change that is often attributed to the term "gamer." Shaw (2013) suggests that instead of trying to expand the term out past its heavy association with the hardcore devotees, we should explore ways in which to understand playing video games outside of a capitalism-oriented framework. This project does not consider 'player' to be a neutral term. However, this term does have far less baggage attached to it. In using this term, this research acknowledges video game experiences beyond the traditional, core gamer.

2.3 Reception: Fans, modding, and game journalism

2.3.1 Fans imagining Japan

Non-Japanese fans of Japanese media are numerous worldwide and have formed large, active communities. Jenkins (2006) and Consalvo (2016) describe these fans as "pop cosmopolitan" (p. 155) because their interests in media extend beyond the local to the global. Fans of Japanese media, however, are also part of a "transnational confluence of social, cultural, and technological trends" (Ito, 2012, p. xii) called 'otaku' culture. The term originated in Japan, where it referred to both devoted hobbyists and a marginalized geek subculture. The concept of the otaku has spread beyond Japan's shores and now denotes geek subcultures invested in Japanese media and culture. Ito defines otaku culture as a "constellation of 'fannish' cultural logics, platforms, and practices that cluster around anime, manga, and Japanese games" (p. xi). Not only are otaku-aligned fan communities cosmopolitan, they are also intensely engaged with technology.

Japanese media fans in the West have quickly adapted to changing technology and new media. Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2017) point out that digital technology makes production far easier for fan communities. The progression of anime fandom in the West is an example of fans rapidly adapting to new technology. The development of anime fandom also somewhat parallels that of Japanese video game fans. Jenkins (2006) notes that while companies may have specific intentions when they move media from one market to another, consumers can attach their own interpretations. In the case of many kinds of Japanese media, such as video games and anime, fans will bypass the source to access media that interests them. Before Internet access became widespread, American anime fans imported video cassettes to bypass the official distribution process. While translated Japanese animation had been made available in the US in the 1970s and 1980s, television standards such as syndication led to extensive edits of the source material. Differences in standards between Japan and the US also led to removal or modification

of material considered inappropriate for American audiences. For anime fans, importing video cassettes directly from Japan was a means of accessing the raw source material without a middleman (Condry, 2013; Ruh, 2010; Schodt, 2007).

The Internet and related technology allowed anime fans to rapidly edit and distribute anime worldwide. Anime fans quickly took advantage of the spread of broadband Internet access. Instead of importing video cassettes, fans downloaded 'raw' recordings of aired television shows uploaded to servers. Another new technology, torrenting, made circulation of recordings easier and more accessible. Fan-made subtitles, or 'fansubbing,' developed alongside this new distribution form to make the shows accessible to audiences that did not speak Japanese (Denison, 2011; Hills, 2017; Ito, 2012). Like officially produced video cassettes and DVDs, fansubbing involved the process of adding subtitles to digital video files of anime shows (Nornes, 1999). Digital video files were capable of storing subtitles separately and were thus more easily edited than previous formats like VHS. Despite the dubious legal nature of the practice, many credit fansubbing with increasing the popularity of anime in regions that had previously not had much exposure to it, such as North America (Cubbison, 2005; Denison, 2011).

The experiences of Japanese video games fans in navigating the constantly changing digital media environment has followed a somewhat parallel route. Video game fans react to localization decisions and have developed their own set of practices for accessing foreign media. An important difference between anime and video games, however, is the fact that video games are far more difficult to edit than television programs. Fan-made translations of games are, as a result, comparatively rare. Instead, fans also explore other avenues such as campaigns advocating for the localization of specific games in their territory. Furthermore, they respond to

what they see as undesirable localization decisions using social media and other avenues. Fan

translations of games are usually a last resort that requires a dedicated group of skilled

individuals who are willing to invest the considerable amount of time required by such a project.

The following two cases show how fandom has come to play such a significant role in the

global circulation of video games. They also illuminate how the cultural work of translation and

localization is a collaborative and contentious process that negotiates the profits and pleasures of

global game culture. The first case is of Operation Rainfall, which is the name of a fan campaign

to convince Nintendo to release three games that had initially only been available in Japan. The

campaign began on the forums of the video game website IGN. Drawing from the practices of

television fan campaigns that mailed in letters to television networks in order to prevent or

reverse the cancellation of a television show, Operational Rainfall proposed doing the same in

order to convince Nintendo to release three games. (themightyme, 2011). These three games

were the following: *Pandora's Tower*, *The Last Story*, and *Xenoblade Chronicles* in the US.

These games all had gained a cult following because of unique gameplay and two of the games'

association with famous game designers (McWhertor, 2011). The campaign was ultimately

successful, and all three games were released in English within the next two years. PC World

credited the campaign for accomplishing something rare because, historically, influence

campaigns targeted at large video game publishers were rarely successful (Gagne, 2013).

Fans of *Earthbound* similarly attempted to convince Nintendo to localize the sequel,

Mother 3. After employing similar methods as Operation Rainfall, such as physical letter mail

campaigns, they were unsuccessful in achieving their goal (Mandelin, 2018b; "*Mother 3*

Petition," 2006). Afterward, a group of fans decided to take the task of localization into their

own hands. The *Mother* series had gained a cult following in the US with the release of *Mother 2*

(localized as *EarthBound*) in English in 1995. When *Mother 3* was released in 2006 in Japan, fan communities also made appeals to Nintendo to release the game outside of Japan. The lack of response that they received convinced some in the community to take it upon themselves to make the game available in English (Reidman, 2006). For two years after *Mother 3*'s release in Japan, fans collaborated on the translation of *Mother 3* from Japanese to English, which was then made available as a file for anyone to download and play in English using emulator software.

These two cases illustrate the dynamics of influence campaigns for localizing Japanese games. Operation Rainfall's success was an outlier, historically (Gagne, 2013). On the other hand, fans of *Mother 3* were unable to convince Nintendo to invest resources in localizing the game (Mandelin, 2018b). Since the influence campaign to release *Mother 3* happened two to three years before Operational Rainfall, it is possible that the former influenced the latter. Unfortunately, determining why Operational Rainfall succeeded where *Mother 3* fans failed is difficult without information from Nintendo, who is infamously silent about internal decisions regarding game releases.

Even when games are localized, tensions can arise regarding the changes made during the localization process. Game producers and the localization teams they employ often try to filter out Japanese cultural references that they think will alienate consumers in a target locale (Mandiberg, 2015). Once again, Koichi Iwabuchi's (1998) concept of cultural odor is helpful here. Producers of cultural products often try to lessen the odor of Japanese culture attached to what they import to the West. However, just as an odor can linger even after its source is removed or covered up, traces of Japanese culture may remain. Many Japanese media fans, on the other hand, consider Japanese cultural references to be a desirable fragrance. They will go so far as to oppose the desires of producers and seek out the original, unedited product. This is a

source of tension that has become increasingly relevant as the Internet facilities media circulation and allows fans to bypass official distribution channels (Jenkins, 2013).

Fans of Japanese media are part of a transnational group of technologically savvy fan communities that have drawn some inspiration from otaku subculture. Anime fans turned to subtitling digital files to make anime that they consumed easier to distribute to other fans. Fans of Japanese games, on the other hand, have a more difficult time altering games. Not only do they need to replace the Japanese text with a different language, they must also work with the game's programming code. When fans do modify games to make them available outside of Japan, they must engage in a more complex process of modifying a game's code. This fan labor resembles modding, a widespread practice among personal computer gaming communities.

2.3.2 Modding, ROM hacking, and fan translations

Computer games, while having developed separately from console games, share many similarities with them (Newman, 2017). One of these similarities is the ability for users to modify, or 'mod,' the game's code to create new levels, characters, and even entirely new game experience. Game modding highlights labor practices that have developed in new media environments that blur the line between official and unofficial as well as fan and producer.

Modifying computer games is a practice that grew in popularity with the rise of PC gaming in the 1980s and 1990s (Sotamaa, 2010). Kücklich (2005) specifically traces the development of the practice back to the PC game *Doom* in the mid-1990s. While mods of this game were not the first, they did establish a framework that continues even today. Specifically, *Doom*'s publisher id Software created tools that allowed users to modify elements of the game. This structure eventually led to certain computer games' engines being used to develop other games. Game engines are frameworks licensed and owned by publishers. Mods, on the other

hand, are often created using tools provided by publishers. Even so, modding tools can be used to essentially create entirely new games on top of an existing one. This was the case with what Kücklich describes as one of the most popular mods in history, the game *Counter-Strike*. Based off of the Valve game *Half-Life*, *Counter-Strike* was a highly successful mod due to its creators selling the game to Valve and joining the publisher. Despite starting out as fans, these creators joined the industry.

Fans have taken advantage of new technology to bring themselves closer to publishers. Sotamaa (2010) and Kücklich (2005) emphasize the importance of the relationship between the modder and the game publisher. Publishers of computer games have responded by allowing fans to create mods within terms that they dictate. One reason they do so is the opportunity to profit from the unpaid labor influenced by dedication toward the game being modded. Mods can also lead to heightened player engagement. Kücklich points to how a game's modding community can extend the life of a game, which ultimately helps sales for the publisher.

In contrast to computer game modders, who were often motivated by adding content to games they already had access to, fan translations of video games are motivated by a desire to make the game accessible to a larger community of players. Consalvo (2016) refers to this as "unintended travel" (p. 42). While a game producer might not intend for a game created for the Japanese market to leave the country, fan communities can come together and bypass official channels in order to release games to larger audiences. These communities' work is arguably like that of fansubbers; however, the process is far more complicated and reveals how much labor fans are willing to invest in accessing games they enjoy.

Two main elements of video game fan translations are the following: the translation itself and hacking the game's code. Translators and programmers work in tandem in order to

accomplish the main tasks of translating the game's text, including its narrative script, and inserting that text into the game's programming code. Muñoz Sánchez (2009) describes the programmers involved in these projects as ROM hackers due to the fact that they hack the original game file (read-only memory). He also identifies some tools used by ROM hackers to access and modify game code. Unlike PC game modding, however, these are not official tools provided by publishers. ROM hackers must work without any documentation to guide them in the process of understanding how a game's code operates.

Fan translations thus combine elements of fansubbing and game modding. The work done by ROM hackers in translation projects is similar to fansubbing in that it bypasses language barriers and computer game modding. Unlike fansubs, the text contained within a ROM's programming code can be arranged in a variety of ways Muñoz Sánchez (2009). Once the ROM hacker locates this text and figures out how it is incorporated into the game's overall code, he or she can use tools to remove that text and present it in a format for the translator to work on. The translator relies on the work of the ROM hacker to work with the game's programming logic and extract the text into a form that is more amenable to being read by humans instead of a computer.

Fansubbing and computer game modding in comparison to fan translations and ROM hacking present examples of how different fan communities can develop similar practices in different contexts. Fan communities in the context of the game industry also provide yet another avenue for understanding new practices that have been developed by fans within the new media environment (Jenkins 2006, 2013). Even with fans' increased ability to modify games and bypass localization decisions by publishers, they do so without the permission of game publishers. Console game publishers keep details of their development practices deeply guarded and mostly communicate with fans through their own channels and game press.

2.3.3 Game journalism: Mediators of hype

Aside from producers and consumers/players, game journalists and press also occupy a significant position in game culture. They act as mediators between the two by promoting and evaluating games—essentially fulfilling a marketing role. This middle position makes game press yet another site of tensions. Historically, game journalism has been closer to producers than other kinds of journalism (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). Carlson (2009) traces this closeness to game journalism's status as enthusiast press, in which fans and press overlap significantly. Despite being so close to fans, game journalists rely on publishers for coverage and access.

As a product of the post-Fordist information economy, video games thrive on hype to drive sales and to cultivate interest from consumers (Kline Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003). In the early days of the industry, game magazines did this by presenting exclusive previews of new games, reviewing games before they hit stores, and offering behind the scenes glimpses into games. Consalvo (2016) highlights the importance of the official Nintendo magazine, *Nintendo Power*, in "defin[ing] for readers what a good game looked like and how to judge or rate games" (p. 10). The magazine also cultivated a devoted fanbase invested in games published by Nintendo on their platforms (Cote, 2018). As Internet access became more common, game magazines moved online. Game press now includes websites, blogs, social media accounts, podcasts, newsletters, and other electronic content (Barkl, 2011; Nieborg and Sihvonen, 2009).

As a result of their position as mediators between producers and consumers, game press faces pressure from both. In general, game journalism is less independent of game producers than other kinds of journalism (Perreault & Vos, 2020). Access to game producers, who are very secretive about their work, is the lifeblood of any game press publication. Game reviews are one possible site of conflict between press and producers. When a highly anticipated game made by a

prominent game publisher is given a low score, the publisher may revoke access (Elliot &

Ashley, 2007). Game journalists try to strike a balance between giving a game a fair review to

inform players and maintaining access to producers.

Players also demand fair and accurate coverage from game press. Game journalists

present localized games to players; in a sense, they translate the translation by placing a localized

game within the larger context of expectations and genres. Their involvement in the localization

process subtle, yet still important. The way in which localized games are covered can influence

perceptions such that what one calls localization another would consider to be censorship

(Mandiberg, 2018).

Game journalism does not impact localization at the developer stage; however, its role as

marketer and messenger between the industry and players is part of the process. Even if a

potential player does not pick up a magazine or read an online article about the game, they may

be reached by word of mouth. Considering how closely game producers guard information about

games, they are closer to developers than players and provide another subjective position to the

localization process.

2.4 Conclusion

Bringing together these diverse fields is one of the main challenges in this dissertation.

Media studies serves as the foundation, and game studies and translation studies help inform the

industry and audience-focused analyses. Platform studies provides a useful, basic framework for

understanding the layers that localizers and ROM hackers operate within. Fundamentally, this is

a media studies project borrowing from other disciplines to provide detail to the unique contexts

of video game localization.

Chapter 3 "Change it to keep it the same": The Paradox of Game Localization

3.1 Introduction

The goal of game localization is paradoxical. The localizer translates a game and changes its content to be more culturally appropriate, and their goal is to "reproduce the gameplay experience of the original game and elicit a similar response on target players" (Mangiron, 2016, p. 187). This means replicating the gameplay experience of players in the source region so that players in the target region can enjoy the same game in their own language. In practice, accomplishing this goal is incredibly difficult. As a veteran localization professional described the process, they must "Change [the game] to keep it the same" (Veteran Localizer, personal communication, June, 2016).

The Nintendo DS game, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, provides a perfect example of this approach to localization. In these games, the player assumes the role of defense attorney Phoenix Wright and must navigate dramatic court trials to progress in the game. As it guides players through an interactive visual novel, the game makes clever use of clues and puzzles to present challenges for solving each court case and ensuring that the defendant, the player's client, is not declared guilty by the judge. The game eventually gained a devoted following for its unique gameplay and memorable cast of characters ("Game Series Sales," 2021).

Originally, this game was developed and published by Capcom in Japan under the title *Gyakuten Saiban*, which means "Turnabout Trial" in Japanese. This series is heavily situated in Japanese culture. The entire premise of the game, being a defense lawyer in court and defending clients, is based on the Japanese court system. Furthermore, the game's setting relies heavily on

Japanese cultural markers and includes a cast of characters with pun-like names usually based on their role in the story. In the Japanese version, the main character's first name is "Naruhodo," which translates to "I see" or "Of course." The name is a pun on the fact that the player must find clues and make discoveries to solve the cases that Naruhodo (Phoenix Wright in the English version) litigates in court.

Much of the gameplay experience of *Gyakuten Saiban/Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* relies on humor delivered through puns on character names. This alone presents a significant challenge to localization teams because Japanese puns often rely on homonyms. Words that sound the same can have vastly different meanings, such as "hashi" being the sound for both "chopsticks" and "bridge." The Chinese characters that denote the words are different, which provides numerous opportunities for plays on words. This kind of construction is not nearly as common in English. The challenge presented by the puns in the game are an example of a fundamental issue in linguistic translation. Languages do not match each other on a one-to-one basis. To preserve the game's humor, the localization team had to creatively translate the sense of the game's intended humor from Japanese into English.

The English localization took many steps to adapt the game to appeal to American audiences. How the game would fare in the U.S. market was uncertain at the time, and the game's publisher, Capcom, was not confident about its chances. Thus, the overall goal of the game's localization was to produce a seamless (in terms of hiding national borders) gameplay experience where players would not be confused by unfamiliar cultural elements. First, they renamed every character and devised puns that work in English. Aside from some uniquely Japanese cultural references that appear in some parts of the game, the English localization is

tailored to native English speakers. Secondly, the game's setting was changed from Japan to Los Angeles (Mandiberg, 2015).

After the first game sold beyond Capcom's expectations, the localization team was tasked with translating the second and third games in the series. Despite the localization team's best efforts, traces of Japanese culture were difficult to completely erase, especially as the series continued (Iwabuchi, 1998). Maintaining the consistency of an Americanized diegetic game world became more difficult. By the time the sixth game in the series was released, Japanese concepts of spirituality and mythical creatures became important to the storyline. The increasingly questionable claim that the game's setting was Los Angeles culminated in player commentary like the following comic:

Figure 2. *Comic titled "Culture Schlock."* The comic depicts the protagonist of the *Phoenix Wright* series declaring that he lives in Los Angeles, despite the obvious Japanese cultural markers that increase with each panel (Tiedrich, 2013).

The comic portrays the main protagonist of the series, Phoenix Wright, declaring that they are, in fact, living in Los Angeles despite the obvious signs of Japanese culture surrounding him (a kotatsu is a fixture of many Japanese living rooms). In later panels, his outfit spontaneously changes from a business suit to a Japanese kimono. The only character who seems to notice the cultural incongruencies is the deuteragonist Apollo, whose concerns are brushed aside as he is told to eat his "hamburgers." The reference to hamburgers refers to how the first game in the series replaced ramen with hamburgers in the English localization (Mandiberg, 2015). The title "Culture Schlock" completes the joke, indicating that the comic is making fun of the English localization's attempt to claim that the game is set in Los Angeles instead of Japan.

Ultimately, the *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* series has gained a dedicated audience outside of Japan. The game's changed setting is often treated as a joke among fans of the game. While some fans are aware of the game's Japanese origins, English-language discussion online tends to use the names of the characters from the localization. The games themselves still feel like cohesive experiences. The gameplay focuses on finding clues and solving puzzles to uncover the truth that resolves a court case in defense attorney Phoenix Wright's favor. Puns in character names provide humorous clues as to what role the character could play in a particular case. The main character's first name, Phoenix, highlights his role as an underdog. Since the trials always feature a dramatic turnabout, Phoenix can rise from seeming defeat to litigate his way to victory. The localization team's goal of changing the game to maintain the experience has arguably succeeded. Currently, Capcom considers the *Ace Attorney* series to be one of its top sellers worldwide ("Game Series Sales," 2021).

From the perspective of Capcom and many localizers in the game industry, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* is a good, successful localization. This is because, ostensibly, it offers

English-speaking players the same gameplay experience as Japanese players: a visual novel adventure where players progressed through court cases by solving puzzles and cleverly using clues provided to them. The game's script was humorous and revolved around thematically named characters hinting at their role in the story. Localizers carefully and creatively covered up the Japanese cultural odor under the assumption that it might alienate some English-speaking players. The *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* series features a fluent English localization whose Japanese origins are mostly hidden. Nonetheless, some of this odor lingers beneath the surface. These lingering traces of Japanese culture were caught by players, resulting in jokes such as the aforementioned comic. Localizers made changes to the game with the goal of giving English-speaking players the same experience as domestic, Japanese players. Despite their best efforts, however, the fact that the *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* series originated in Japan was not completely hidden.

3.1.1 Change it to keep it the same

This chapter interrogates the paradoxical approach of localization professionals. It focuses on the liminal position of localizers, who exist between languages, between game producers and players, and between fidelity and license. How do localizers decide on what elements of games to change? How do they conceptualize the gameplay experience? And what do they consider to be maintaining this experience across regions and cultures?

This localization strategy is informed by the contexts of Japanese game development, the trajectory of localization in the game industry starting in the late 1980s, and the philosophies of the localization professionals involved in the process. Generally, Japanese game publishers have been self-conscious about the presence of Japanese culture in games. They fear that unfamiliar cultural references will alienate English-speaking players. This self-consciousness informs their

localization expectations. For much of the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese to English game

localizations aimed for fluent English dialogue and the removal of most Japanese cultural

markers (O'Hagan, 2009b; Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2004).

Localization professionals thus prioritized invisibility. They view a good localization as one in

which the player has no idea that the game originated in Japan. They also believe that

minimizing unfamiliar cultural markers preserves immersion, a key element of the gameplay

experience. In the case of *Phoenix Wright*, the cultural odor of Japan was effaced by changing

the setting to Los Angeles and removing cultural markers.

The concept of the gameplay experience is also important to understanding video game

localization. This dissertation defines the gameplay experience as emergent and formed in the

connection between player and game. The experience can roughly be narrowed down to the

intersection of player interaction with games, the emotional connection that players make with

games, and the long periods of time that these games require of players (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2007).

There is also a social component of games that goes beyond the game itself (Jones, 2008).

Playing games with friends who are physically present, playing online games, and discussing

games with others are all social elements tied to the gameplay experience.

As discussed in the Introduction and Literature Review, video games are multimodal

media. Localizing a game requires far more than linguistic translation. Video game localization

professionals attempt to reproduce the entire gameplay experience, which goes beyond language

elements of games. The experience to which they refer is immersion in the diegetic game world

and forming an affective connection with the player. Immersion is "a psychological state

characterized by perceiving oneself to be enveloped by, included in, and interacting with an

environment that provides a continuous stream of stimuli and experiences" (Witmer & Singer,

1998, p. 227). It is a fundamental part of the gameplay experience and sets video games apart from other media. Immersion is not exclusive to video games. However, video games are also highly interactive and constantly require input from the player through controllers, a mouse, and other peripherals. Games have the potential to immerse players in unique worlds, and the way in which the player controls the game intensifies that immersion.

In addition to immersion, the emotional connection that players form with the game remains long after play has ended (Mangiron, 2016). Anable (2018) and Van Ommen (2018) have linked gameplay experience and immersion to emotions using affect theory. Wilson (2016) examined fanfiction consumption and similarly found that readers affectively engage with media as they read and write fanfiction. Affect theory in its entirety has varying ways of interpreting affect (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). The definition that Van Ommen uses, which focuses on emergent affect is the basis of what I discuss in this chapter. He describes emergent affect as the following:

> …affective relationships that fans hold with game worlds and characters that are emergent twofold. First of all, emergent in the sense that various separate elements (gameplay, characters, customization, music, cinematic scenes, mini-games, etc.) can work together to produce something more (i.e. an affective relationship) than merely the sum of its separate parts. (p. 23)

The second way in which this kind of affect is emergent is due to how "…they take place in the procedurally based emergent systems that make up interesting variation in video games (cf. Juul 2002), highlighting the personal agency of the player" (p. 23). The gameplay experience emerges as a combination of different elements of games, the physical connection the player has to the game via controls, and the game world itself. For Japanese RPGs specifically the game

world is tied closely to a narrative and characters than the player controls. The gameplay experience is more than the sum of its parts. Music, for example, can create associations with games, as described by former Square Enix translator Alexander Smith:

> I feel like, more than the changes [Uematsu made in his approach to *Final Fantasy 7*'s music] — and there were certainly changes — I like the consistency of it. I mean, Uematsu-san's songs sound like Uematsu-san songs, and that's comforting. People want that, especially if it's Final Fantasy. It's a real note for the series. (Smith, as quoted in Leone 2017)

Predicting how a game would affect any individual is difficult because the experiences that they bring to games also affect how they respond to them.

Preserving the gameplay experience is also an area of contention between game producers, press, and players, which will be addressed in the following chapters focusing on fans and players, and on game journalists. The industry's understanding of what this experience means depends on the producer, a particular game's development team, individual localization professionals, and so on (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2007). Interviews from localization professionals and other sources provide insight to how localization professionals work toward this goal.

3.1.2 The task of the localizer

Translation is only one part of localization; however, translation theory also illuminates some of the philosophical conundrums inherent in localization. Changing a game to keep it the same echoes the difficulty of translating the form and meaning of a text. Walter Benjamin addressed the seemingly impossible task placed before translators in his essay, *The Task of the Translator* (1923/2012), which discussed his understanding of some of translation theory's greatest philosophical questions. The task of the translator, according to Walter Benjamin, may

well be futile before he or she even begins the task. Languages do not map onto one another neatly. They can differ in grammar, sentence syntax, writing systems, and the way in which they depict the world. The translator cannot recapture the original work exactly in his or her native language.

Schleiermacher (2012) discusses two theoretical approaches to translation: paraphrasing and imitation. Benjamin (1923/2012) refers to these concepts as fidelity and freedom, respectively. Paraphrasing and fidelity are word-for-word translation. Schleiermacher associates it with the sciences and defines paraphrasing as mechanical, even math-like. He claims that the "paraphrast treats the elements of the two languages as though they were mathematical signs that can be reduced to the same value by means of addition and subtraction" (p. 48). The imitator, on the other hand, works to "contrive a copy, an entire work comprised of parts that differ noticeably from the parts of the original, yet which in its effect comes so close to the original as the differences in the material permit" (p. 49). Schleiermacher associates imitation with the arts. The twentieth century was marked by a general preference in translation theory for fidelity and accuracy because of the rise in prominence of scientific and commercial documentation. Efficiency and ease of communication were priorities rather than artistic license (Bastin, 2019).

At first, a word-for-word translation seems like a simple enough task. However, translating the words that comprise a text is different from translating the meaning. Benjamin argues that a word-for-word translation ironically obscures meaning when he states, "with regard to syntax, word-for-word translation completely rejects the reproduction of meaning and threatens to lead directly to incomprehensibility" (pp. 80-81). The meaning that comes out of a text is more than the syntax and grammar rules that govern language. Meaning communicated by language is more than the sum of the components of a spoken or written sentence.

Schleiermacher (2012) and Benjamin (1923/2012) both argue for going beyond this dichotomy, though they do not provide a clear solution to the problem.

These theoretical concerns raised by Benjamin (1923/2012) and Schleiermacher (2012) also apply in the case of video game localization. However, the task of the localizer, in most cases, is not to prioritize linguistic fidelity, but rather fidelity to the gameplay experience. The gameplay experience is subjective, and thus localizers must make their own decisions as to how to best Whereas the deeper meaning communicated by language is the challenge for the translator, the deeper meaning of playing a game is the challenge for localizers. Understanding how localization professionals make changes in games to maintain the gameplay experience requires dissecting the components of the gameplay experience.

Game localization is more than translation, it is also creative writing. Localization professionals fill in what is possibly "lost in translation." Language and meaning are precarious during this process, yet the lack of structure also provides opportunities for creativity. Localization professionals take advantage of the instability of this space and blurred boundaries between languages to creatively transform meaning. O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) apply the concept of "transcreation" (p. 196) to the localization process. Transcreation refers to how localizers tactically maneuver within the limits imposed on them from producers. Originally, the concept of transcreation referred to post-colonial translation practices in Brazil and India that actively pushed back against Western colonial power (Munday, 2016; Vieira, 1999). These transcreative approaches question the primacy of the original text and reconceptualize translation as two-way instead of simply from source to target locale. In the context of game localization, Mangiron and O'Hagan (2006) define transcreation as the "freedom granted to the translator, albeit within severe space limitations" (p. 11). The translator subjectively makes decisions as to

how to apply their creativity to preserve the original gameplay experience. Game localization is unique among other kinds of translation because of the creative license that is given to localization teams. Translators are allotted a significant amount of agency in many cases while also complying with rules and guidelines imposed from above by game producers (Šiaučiūnė & Liubinienė 2011).

Overall, the game localization process is a liminal process located between source and target locales. It operates in the spaces between languages, which in this case, are English and Japanese. In this in-between space, the grammatical and semiotic structures of language break down (Turner, 1979; van Gennep, 1981). This concept was first applied to rituals and later to physical spaces such as border areas between nations (Thomassen, 2014). Localization is the border region between languages and cultures, where the rules and conventions of Japanese language flow into those of English. Localization professionals must navigate this space as they work to transfer meaning from one culture to another.

Localizers also operate in a liminal space between industry and players as well as between producers and game text. Video game producers set the limits from above, and expectations of player preferences guide the creative decisions that many localizers make (Chandler & Deming, 2011). Before the establishment of the Entertainment Software Rating Board, Nintendo had strict content policies for any game published on its platforms. Such policies severely limited religious references, alcohol, and sexual content. As a result, localizations of games for Nintendo platforms had to modify or remove any elements that violated their policy (Grealy, n.d.; Mandelin 2018a). In this space, localizers do more than simply transfer linguistic signs from one language and culture to another. As game localization has developed since the 1980s, the process increasingly demands more intricate changes to game

content. Many localization teams consist of translators and writers who specialize in the target language (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013).

Finally, a key part of game localization is the importance of invisible localization. A major goal of changing game content to maintain the perceived original, source language, experience of playing the game is to make the finished product as seamless as possible. Localizers consider a good localization to be one where the player cannot tell that the game was modified at all. Two concepts from translation theory, domestication and foreignization, explain the different ways that localizers approach the process. Domestication brings the foreign author closer to the reader and prioritizes making the translation sound fluent in the target language. Foreignization, on the other hand, carries the reader closer to the foreign author by keeping traces of the source culture and deliberately challenging the reader by introducing them to new perspectives (Gambier & van Doorslaer, 2013; Schleiermacher, 2012).

Invisibility in game localization, which is a domesticating strategy, refers to two strategies. First, localizers aim to remove Japanese cultural references that may confuse or offend the target locale. Secondly, modifications made to games should be seamless. Even games that embrace Japanese cultural references as part of the setting incorporate changes like the insertion of English text to replace Japanese text as seamlessly as possible.

3.2 Factors affecting localization

Video games are produced first, and foremost, for profit (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). Accordingly, video game producers view successful localization in terms of profitability rather than philosophy. Like producers in other media industries, game producers manage a large amount of risk. Large blockbuster games' budgets can exceed $100 million in cost, which can far exceed the budget of many films (Koster, 2018). Like other media industries, video game

producers employ several strategies to reduce risk and cost. One strategy is relying on franchises to reduce risk by using familiarity to attract players. The *Final Fantasy* franchise, owned by Square Enix, has sold over 144 million units and has grossed approximately $11.7 billion since the series' debut in 1987 (Adler, 2020). Development costs have increased with advances in hardware and related technology, which only further increases risk. As a result, video game producers weigh the cost of localizing a game against how well the game is likely to sell in the target locale. These decisions are often based on the sales of past entries in a franchise or other games of the same genre (Mandiberg, 2015; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013).

The video game industry's prioritization of profitability is strikingly similar to the goals of English language publishers. Venuti's (1995) book, *The Translator's Invisibility*, critically examined the position of English and British publishers and how they approached translation. His central critique was that they favored "fluent" translations from foreign languages into English, or domestication. He argued that domestication did a disservice to readers because it denied them the opportunity for growth through exposure to the foreign. He also framed this dynamic in the larger context of imperialism and the dominance of the English language worldwide. Domesticated translations favored the status quo by limiting cultural influences from foreign sources.

Venuti (1995) also connected English-language publishers' preference for domestication to post-World War II economics. He described these publishers' preference for fluent-sounding translations as a diluting of language to merely its economic value. The reader was meant to look through the language, rather than focusing on the language itself. He also noted how contracts for translators in the U.S. classified translators as working for hire. The labor of translation itself, Venuti claimed, was taken for granted.

The hegemony of the English language functions differently than in the context of book publishing as discussed by Venuti (1995). Japanese video game publishers are translating their works into English, usually with the English-speaking markets in U.S. and Canada in mind (Mangiron, 2021). The English language publishers criticized by Venuti operated from a comfortable position due to the status of English as lingua franca worldwide. Japanese game producers, on the other hand, operate from a locus outside of the favorable position of native English-speakers. They target foreign markets to move into the profitable space of English-language cultural products (Consalvo, 2013a).

3.2.1 Japan's self-conscious exports

Secondly, Japanese media producers are self-conscious in their approach to American markets. Most Japanese localizations intended for English-speaking audiences try to avoid including any elements that they believe would alienate audiences in the target locale (K. C., personal communication, May, 2021). Thus, they prefer domestication—moving the cultural references in the work closer to the target culture—as a localization strategy. On the other hand, foreignization is increasingly being applied in response to the popularity of Japanese pop culture in the West.

An example of foreignization is Atlus's approach to localizing the *Persona* series, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The series is set in Japan and centers around high school students. Localization keeps the setting and explicitly states that characters are Japanese and living in Japan (Namba, 2017). Whereas domestication seeks to cover up cultural odor, foreignization embraces it as a "fragrance" that is a "socially acceptable, desirable smell" (Iwabuchi, 1998, p. 166). For many fans and players, they want to consume more of this

fragrance, and Japanese producers are realizing that this audience group can also be profitable (Consalvo, 2016).

Furthermore, geopolitical dynamics have shaped translation and localization of Japanese media into English. As the international lingua franca, English has an advantage over other languages. In contrast, the Japanese language is in a less prominent position. In the late twentieth century, Japan looked to North American and European markets as markers of international success. Iwabuchi (1994, 1998) argues that in the postwar era, Japan has assumed a self-Orientalist position between its Asian neighbors and the West. After Japan's defeat in the second World War and subsequent occupation by the U.S., it formed a close relationship with the U.S. Self-Orientalism refigures the "West and the rest" dichotomy as "Japan, the West, and the rest" while still viewing the entire dynamic in binary terms. In comparison to its Asian neighbors, Japan sees itself as a more advanced nation in line with the West. Relative to the West, however, Japan occupies a position as a nation in a disadvantaged position. Self-Orientalism allows Japan to represent Japanese cultural identity as something positive in relation to foreign entities. Ultimately, self-Orientalism colludes with Orientalism to position Japan as unique and superior to its Asian neighbors. Despite Japan paradoxically being put into an inferior position under this dynamic, they can also claim a kind of unique otherness to bolster a sense of national identity (Iwabuchi, 1994, 2002).

Self-Orientalism and the anti-Japanese racism in the 1970s and 1980s in the U.S. in reaction to Japan's manufacturing dominance has resulted in Japanese cultural industries becoming self-conscious about the viability of their media products in American markets. Unlike consumer electronics, such as the global position of the Sony Walkman, Japanese media presents

its connection to Japanese culture more explicitly. As a result, Japanese cultural producers fear that this will alienate American consumers (Consalvo, 2006).

Japan itself has developed a brand associated with futuristic technology, unique aesthetics, and mystified traditions. Some of these impressions developed in response to Japan's rapid rise as a major economic power producing electronics and cars. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, Japan became known for its popular culture. By the time the Japanese government coined the term "Cool Japan" for the sake of nation branding, fans in Asia, North America, and Europe had already formed their own communities around their consumption of Japanese anime, manga, and video games (Dalio-Bul, 2009, Valaskivi, 2013).

Despite the international success of Japanese popular culture, Japanese producers are ambivalent about the potential success of their products in foreign markets. Self-Orientalism also positions Japan as a unique society between its Asian neighbors and the West. Much of Japanese cultural critique in the late nineteenth and twentieth century argue for Japan's cultural uniqueness (Iwabuchi, 1998). This sense of uniqueness contributes to self-consciousness as to how their products will be received in the West. When localizing products for the U.S. market, Japanese producers still tend to be wary of turning off mass audiences with cultural references that are too alienating (K. C., personal communication, May, 2021).

How Japan views itself in relation to its Asian neighbors and its major ally, the U.S., informs creative industries' approach to cultural exports. Despite the success of Japanese cultural exports to its Asian neighbors in the postwar era, creative industries in Japan did not consider their cultural exports to have achieved the status of global media products until they were successful in the West (Iwabuchi, 2000). Iwabuchi argues that Western markets are viewed as more indicative of global success because of how Japan positions itself between its Asian

neighbors and the U.S. in the postwar era. Japan's relationship with its neighbors is also ambivalent because of tensions over pre-World War II imperial Japan's brutality. Japan's Asian neighbors view it as a formerly hostile nation that never properly apologized for its post-war crimes. Even with the success of Japanese popular culture in Asian markets, international relations between Japan and its neighbors remain strained (Stokes, 2016).

Over time, however, this self-consciousness has lessened somewhat. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, anime became much more popular in North America. As a result, increasing amounts of Japanese cultural odor have become appealing to American audiences (Iwabuchi, 1998). This recalls Benjamin's (1923/2012) positioning of translations as products of time. He calls translations the afterlife of a work because they come after the work. Yet it is not just the target language that marks a passage of time for a work. Benjamin states:

> Established words also have their post-maturation. What might have been the tendency of an author's poetic language in his own time may later be exhausted, and immanent tendencies may arise anew out of the shaped work. What once sounded fresh may come to sound stale, and what once sounded idiomatic may later sound archaic. (Benjamin, 1923/2012, p. 77)

The source language is not static and changes over time. Benjamin emphasizes how language itself is a living, changing entity. The original and the translation are both subject to growth and changes over time. The same principle applies to culture, and changes in source and target cultures have contributed to changes in localization practices over time. One notable change is the increase of foreignized localizations that embrace Japanese cultural references instead of erasing them.

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For example, the game discussed in the introduction of this chapter, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, is infamous for a domestication-oriented localization. Infamously, mentions of the Japanese dish ramen were replaced with hamburgers in the first game. Time was thus a factor in the decisions made during the game's localization. When one of *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*'s main translators was asked about his choice to Americanize the Japanese cultural references, he explained, "At the time I didn't feel [ramen] was that insinuated into the fourteen-year-old crowd, that they would know it immediately" (Mandiberg, 2015, p. 125). Mandiberg speculates that the localization team may have made different decisions had the game been released three or five years later. The 2004 opening of the restaurant Momofuku Noodle Bar in New York City was already bringing ramen to food magazines and American food culture (Gustin, 2016). As more elements of Japanese culture have become popular in the U.S. and Canada, the degree to which localization teams try to smooth over traces of Japanese culture is decreasing.

3.2.2 History of Japanese to English game localization

Localization of Japanese media has progressed significantly from the 1980s when Carl Macek adapted and tied together three different, unrelated anime series into what would be called *Robotech* in order to reach syndication. This series is infamous as an example of large-scale modification of not just content but also the narrative of Japanese media to satisfy American standards (Yang, 2010). Only a decade and a half later, the *Pokémon* craze of the late 1990s would elevate creatures designed from Japanese ideas of cuteness (kawaii) into the mainstream of American culture (Allison, 2003). Initially, Nintendo of America was skeptical of the viability of characters with a cute design in the American market. The company suggested some changes to designs to better suit their perception of the American market (HelixChamber, 2020). The cute designs ultimately prevailed, however, and the *Pokémon* series has become

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internationally successful with its original cute designs used worldwide (with some minor modifications for cultural reasons).

The general trend in Japanese to English game localization from the 1980s to the twenty-first century has been for the practice to gain priority in the overall game development process. Early on, localization was conducted toward the end of the development process, or after the game was finished (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). In the past twenty years, the localization process has been shifted to earlier in game production. High-budget games that are expected to sell well may even have localization occurring alongside game development, resulting in "simship" releases where a game is released worldwide in multiple languages and regions (Achkasov, 2017; Dunne, 2006; Gambier, 2016; Schäler, 2010).

Priorities of modifications made during localization have shifted from removing most traces of Japanese culture to allowing some elements that have become more familiar to Americans over time. The popularity of anime has played a large role in this shift because American audiences have become gradually more familiar with some Japanese cultural elements over time (McKevitt, 2010, 2017). Even so, many localization professionals and the Japanese video game industry in general still prefer a domestication strategy for localizing video games for English-speaking markets.

The importance of time is apparent in the history of one of the most prominent Japanese game publishers, Square Enix (formerly Squaresoft). They have played a significant role in popularizing Japanese RPGs outside of Japan (Fenlon, 2011; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2004). Best known worldwide for the popular *Final Fantasy* series, Square is notable for pushing into North American and European markets more aggressively than other Japanese game publishers

(Consalvo, 2009). Considering their significance, reviewing the development of their localization process provides a case study of how the localization process has changed over time, in general.

Initially, localization was an afterthought after a game had been released in Japan. In the early 1990s, two of the translators who did some of the most well-known localization work at Square were Ted Woolsey and Kaoru Moriyama. Woolsey's involvement marked a shift from native Japanese to native English speakers for localization at Square. During this era, limited computer memory required the amount of English text in a game to be minimal so that the data could fit on the game's cartridge. According to Moriyama, "Usually, the 'beautifully translated' version of the text had six to eight times more letters than we can afford for screen text… So the toughest job was to chop them off and squeeze them back into the allocated area" (Collette, 2003). Furthermore, translators often worked under a time crunch. Woolsey's work on some games such as *Final Fantasy VI* (released outside of Japan as *Final Fantasy III* in 1994) and *Chrono Trigger* have been praised for their quality compared to other localizations at the time despite the many limitations he worked under (Fenlon, 2011).

Two games served as the impetus for Square to invest more resources into localization. First, *Final Fantasy VII* was so successful outside of Japan that localization at the company can be viewed in terms of pre- and post-*Final Fantasy VII*. Released in 1997, *Final Fantasy VII* was a breakout success worldwide. Up to this point Japanese RPGs had not sold well outside of Japan. *Final Fantasy VII* popularized the genre in international markets. According to those familiar with the game's localization, the game was successful *despite* its localization (Adler, 2020; Parish, 2012b). The sole translator working on the game, Michael Baskett, had to contend with numerous technical issues. For example, the formatting functions of the text he was translating made it impossible to spellcheck. Baskett was working in Square's North America

headquarters, and communication with the game's development team was difficult (Fenlon, 2011). As a result, *Final Fantasy VII* is now remembered for its successful transformation of the genre as well as memorable errors in the game's dialogue and menu text.

The challenging and difficult localization of the 1998 Square game *Xenogears* convinced the game's main translator, Richard Honeywood, to push for further change in the localization process. Localization expanded from a single person task to an entire team effort. One of the additions to staff were editors, who looked over translated text and polished it to sound more fluent in English. Honeywood pioneered development of best practices for the localization process, which included technical concerns like text formatting and issues of consistency with terminology specific to a franchise. Square also increased the size of its internal localization team. These adjustments made during the late 1990s led to closer coordination between localization teams operating simultaneously in Japan and the U.S. (Fenlon, 2011).

Even with the increased investment in the process, localization staff went through some growing pains during the next era of consoles featuring increased processing power that brought new possibilities for storytelling in games. As the PlayStation era shifted to the PlayStation 2, new challenges arose for localization professionals. Released in 2001, *Final Fantasy X* was the first game in the *Final Fantasy* series released on the PlayStation 2. The technical capabilities of the new console presented a new dimension to localization: voice overs (Mackey, 2016).

Voice overs added an entirely new audiovisual dimension to games. In addition to translating text, localization professionals had to learn to translate dialogue that would actually be spoken. This usually mapped onto the visual aspect of voice overs: lip flaps. When characters speak, their lips should ideally be synchronized with the spoken dialogue (Mackey, 2016). This is apparently more of a priority for Americans than it is for the Japanese (Fenlon, 2011). Spoken

Japanese naturally has different lip movements than spoken English. Adapting to this new dimension of localization was another major challenge for Square's now expanded localization team.

In *Final Fantasy X*, specifically, the way in which the characters were animated placed limitations on English dialogue. The development team had not accounted for the need to change lip flaps. Veteran translator Alexander Smith explained the issue:

> We had been aware of that when we were working on the original translation, but we didn't realize how serious they were about not having the English voices go over the length of the Japanese voices at any point. Because the way that the game engine was triggering sound files was tied into the same system that it was using to trigger action on the screen, so if you had a sound file that went overboard by even half a second, it could throw off the entire scene and you could get a crash. (Mackey, 2016)

As a result, the localization team had to work within very strict limits when writing spoken dialogue. This eventually led to some oddities such as the main female character's voice actor saying "yes" in English having to be sped up because the original expression in Japanese, "un" (a short confirmatory sound), was significantly shorter. This particular challenge became another learning experience for the localization team.

The issues with the voice overs in *Final Fantasy X*'s English localization recall past challenges from a decade earlier. While there was communication between the localization and development teams, the latter group had still not considered how the game's engine could affect localization efforts (Mackey, 2016). The issue with lip flaps being more salient to American audiences also highlights an important cultural difference that localization teams identified (Fenlon, 2011). The aforementioned problems led to considerations for localization becoming

embedded even further into the development process. Even if this issue had not occurred, the shrinking of the Japanese market and increasing profitability of the global game market made this further integration necessary (Parish, 2012a). The localization process continues to evolve in response to such trends in the video game market.

3.3 "Change it to keep it the same"

In practice, how does a localizer make changes to a game to maintain the quality of the gameplay experience of the original? As discussed earlier, a perfect translation is impossible. Benjamin (1923/2012) argued that linguistic translation is difficult because of the myriad means through which different languages represent and express ideas. Languages are too different in structure and their representation of the world to be equated word by word (Schleiermacher, 2012). The Japanese and English languages already differ in their grammar, syntax, and writing systems (Saint-Jacques, 1987).

Invisible localization is at the heart of the idea of modifying a game to maintain the assumed original gameplay experience. As discussed earlier, this approach has two aspects that both prioritize making the gameplay experience as smooth as possible. The first aspect focuses on removing or replacing Japanese cultural references that are deemed alienating to foreign audiences (Jayemanne, 2009). The second aspect is assuring that modifications to the game are not immediately apparent to the player. The first aspect addresses cultural differences, and the second prioritizes smoothness of the gameplay experience.

The strategies used by localization teams to modify cultural references in games resemble the translation studies concepts of domestication and foreignization discussed by Venuti (1995). Generally, Japanese to English game localization has prioritized the former for similar reasons: an English language localization that prioritizes fluency and easy-to-understand text in the

game's menus and dialogue is easier to sell to a mass audience. Certain kinds of food that might be unknown to American audiences, such as rice balls, might be changed to something considered equivalent to American audiences. An early episode of the *Pokémon* animated series infamously changed rice balls to jelly donuts. The rice balls themselves were not visually altered, resulting in a strange and confusing spectacle for the audience (Luster, 2019). Game localizers, on the other hand, would likely change art assets to match a change in dialogue.

Both of the following examples exhibit varying degrees of the two major aspects of invisible localization. Primarily, they display how domestication and foreignization can guide modifications of game content during localization to preserve what localizers consider to be the original gameplay experience. In the first case, the domestication approach is used to change a game's setting from Japan to the U.S. The original Japanese game relies on word play and puns, which the localization team attempted to replicate in English. The foreignized game, on the other hand, features a game that is set in Japan with a cast of high school students. Since the game's setting is so reliant on Japanese culture, the localization team instead kept the Japanese cultural elements in the game.

3.3.1 Domestication: Making the unfamiliar familiar

Many Japanese game producers prefer scrubbing games of Japanese cultural references that they believe could confuse or alienate American audiences. This approach assumes that players are not familiar with Japanese culture and are not interested in this (many fans do not fit this profile, which will be discussed in Chapter Four). As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the visual novel game series *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (*Gyakuten Saiban*, meaning "Turnabout Trial" in Japanese) made by Capcom exemplifies the domestication approach to game localization. Much of the changes made to the game were affected by the budget for the

localization. Changing the setting from Japan to Los Angeles meant editing some details such as the Japanese soup-like dish ramen to hamburgers (Mandiberg, 2015). The limited budget allocated to the game led to some graphics not being changed, which meant that the Japanese cultural odor lingered regardless (Iwabuchi, 1998).

As stated earlier, localizations vary widely depending on the game, producer, and budget. Mandiberg's (2015) analysis of the extensive changes made during *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* during its localization provide further context for the decisions made. For one, the version of the game localized into English was an updated port (on Nintendo DS) of the original game (on the Gameboy Advance). Secondly, the localization team worked closely with the game's producer in Japan, Capcom. They also had access to the development team via the producer. Mandiberg also notes that the sales expectations for the game were low, and the budget for the localization reflected this. The overall goal of the game's localization was to produce a seamless (in terms of hiding national borders) gameplay experience where players would not be confused by unfamiliar cultural elements.

Ultimately, the *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* series has gained a dedicated audience outside of Japan. The game's changed setting is often treated as a joke among fans of the game. Even so, the games themselves still feel like cohesive experiences. The gameplay focuses on finding clues and solving puzzles to uncover the truth that resolves a court case in defense attorney Phoenix Wright's favor. In the English version, puns in character names still provide humorous clues as to what role the character could play in a particular case. Smith's goal of changing the game to maintain the experience has arguably succeeded. Currently, Capcom considers the Ace Attorney series to be one of its top sellers worldwide ("Game Series Sales," 2021).

As stated by localization veteran Smith, his and others' decision to adapt the *Phoenix Wright* games' setting to something familiar to American players was based on his belief that the game's target audience would not be familiar with certain Japanese elements (Mandiberg, 2015). The most recent game released in the series, *The Great Ace Attorney: Adventures*, was originally released in Japan in 2015 and eventually released worldwide in 2021. This game stars an ancestor of the series' protagonist in Meiji Era Japan and features a localization that keeps the Japanese setting. For the most part, this game's localization takes a foreignization approach and portrays the main character traveling between Japan and England. Considering that the game is set more than a century before the rest of the series, the localization team may have felt more comfortable keeping the setting in Japan. Keeping the setting in Japan might have also seemed more plausible for a game released almost two decades after the first *Ace Attorney* game was localized. Other localization teams have similarly taken advantage of the increasing popularity of Japanese culture to produce foreignized localizations that embrace a game's Japanese setting (Faiola, 2003).

3.3.2 Foreignization: Embracing the unfamiliar

The *Persona* series by Atlus is set in Japan, featuring teenagers in high school. Since the release of *Persona 3* in 2006, the series has embraced the Japanese setting in the English localization. Despite the assumption by many in the industry that players would be alienated by unfamiliar culture, the *Persona* series has cultivated a fan base partially because of this approach (Vitale, 2020). Like the *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* series, the localization team for the *Persona* series aim to maintain diegetic consistency of the game world. How they go about doing this, however, is very different.

Starting with the third game in the series, *Persona* games shifted from Americanizing the game's setting to embracing the games' Japanese setting. Namba explained this shift in the following manner:

At the same time, especially with the Persona games from Persona 3 onward, the games had so much Japanese content that our goal was to try to maintain that to… I wouldn't say educate, but maybe introduce Japanese culture to western game players. (Moore, 2015)

This approach is a stark contrast to that of the *Phoenix Wright* localization team. Instead of smoothing over cultural differences, he aims to bring players closer to Japan— a perfect example of foreignization. Whereas Smith feared that unfamiliar cultural references would alienate players, Namba decided to take the risk of introducing players to an unfamiliar culture.

The *Persona* series has since gained a dedicated fanbase and has had notable success in worldwide sales (Vitale, 2020). Part of Namba's success may be due to timing. While the first *Ace Attorney* game was released in the U.S. in 2005, *Persona 3* was first released in 2007. Despite the difference between their release dates being only two years, that was enough time for Japanese popular culture to have become popular enough in the U.S. The period from 2005 to 2007 also aligns with an increasing interest in the U.S. and Canada in Japanese culture, mainly through anime, video games, and manga (Faiola, 2003, Iwabuchi, 2015). This marks a shift in the global context of Japanese popular culture in the West.

Even with its different view of how to handle markers of Japanese culture compared to the localization team for *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, the *Persona* series still prioritizes making the player feel comfortable in the diegetic game world. In the localizations of *Persona 3*, *4*, and *5*, the characters are assumed to be living in Japan and speaking Japanese, even if the

player reads and hears English. One way in which they accomplish this approach is to have characters in the game use honorifics, just as they would in Japanese. Honorifics, which are an indicator of relative status, are difficult to translate from Japanese to English. For example, a student would add "san" after a fellow student's last name (generally Japanese refer to others by their last names) unless they were close friends. A direct analogue to the Japanese language's focus on relative status and politeness does not exist in English. Despite the initial strangeness of honorifics being used in English, they cue important character dynamics, which helps players to understand the world in which the game takes place.

Figure 3. *Screenshot of dialogue from Persona 5*. Here, a character uses a Japanese honorific "-san," which indicates respect. Even though English does not have a close equivalent, these honorifics are kept to give players a sense of Japanese cultural dynamics.

The most recent game in the series, *Persona 5*, has continued the practice of foreignization. Critical reception of the game has been incredibly positive, and the game has even broken records for rankings of games in its genre (Birch, 2017; Garcia, 2017). Namba

(2017) claims that the game is the "best English rendition in the history of Atlus USA thus far."
The game was also one of the largest localization projects undertaken by Atlus.

The success of the *Persona* series and its foreignization approach is a case where the
cultural odor makes the games more appealing to a dedicated group of players. For the localizers,
cultural odor becomes a fragrance to be embraced rather than removed (Iwabuchi, 1998). To
players invested in Japanese culture, the *Persona* series aligns with "an idealized version of
Japan disseminated through similar pop culture artifacts" (Glasspool, 2016, p. 101). Once again,
this example shows how a series' localization successfully shifted from a domestication
approach to a foreignization approach from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Foreignization in
this context also shows that some Japanese game producers are willing to take a risk against the
possibility of alienating players and that this strategy can be successful.

3.3.3 Translating the gameplay experience

Foreignization and domestication have so far been discussed like binaries. In the actual
localization process, these two strategies are means of achieving what is considered to be a
"quality localization." Ultimately, maintaining the immersive nature of the diegetic game world
is the goal of localization. Cultural markers are not the only elements of games that affect the
play experience. Localizers interviewed prioritized translations that made the player feel
immersed in a game's world. Some ways that they achieved this was by keeping track of
glossaries of specialized terms for long-running game series and avoiding direct references to a
game's control scheme (Chojnowski, 2016). Much of this work required creativity from the
localization team. As mentioned earlier, localization is also creative writing. This is the work
necessary to "change it to keep it the same." The less creative route is attempting to do an exact
translation from Japanese to English. Creativity, according to localization professionals

interviewed, made the difference between a good and bad localization. A bad localization does not draw on the creativity of the localization team to make changes while keeping the game the same. A good localization ideally navigates this balance to create what localizers consider to be necessary changes.

A 'bad' localization disrupts the seamlessness of the gameplay experience and immersion by exposing the fact that the game is from another country. The most obvious type of bad localization is a translation error, especially when it inhibits gameplay in some way. Interfering in the player's gameplay experience opposes the industry's goal of replication the player experience of the original, since the original game likely did not have such errors (Schules, 2012).

The most basic localization errors can occur in the game's interface. The text box, a common element of a game's interface, primarily contains text to communicate with the player. Narrative text and character dialogue, for example, are often displayed in dialogue boxes on the screen. If the game's programming properly accounts for text box length, then text will always be formatted to stay within the box. If the localization team does not have access to the development team, however, then doing this is more difficult. Localizers interviewed considered text box flowing outside of boxes as embarrassing and a sign of sloppy localization.
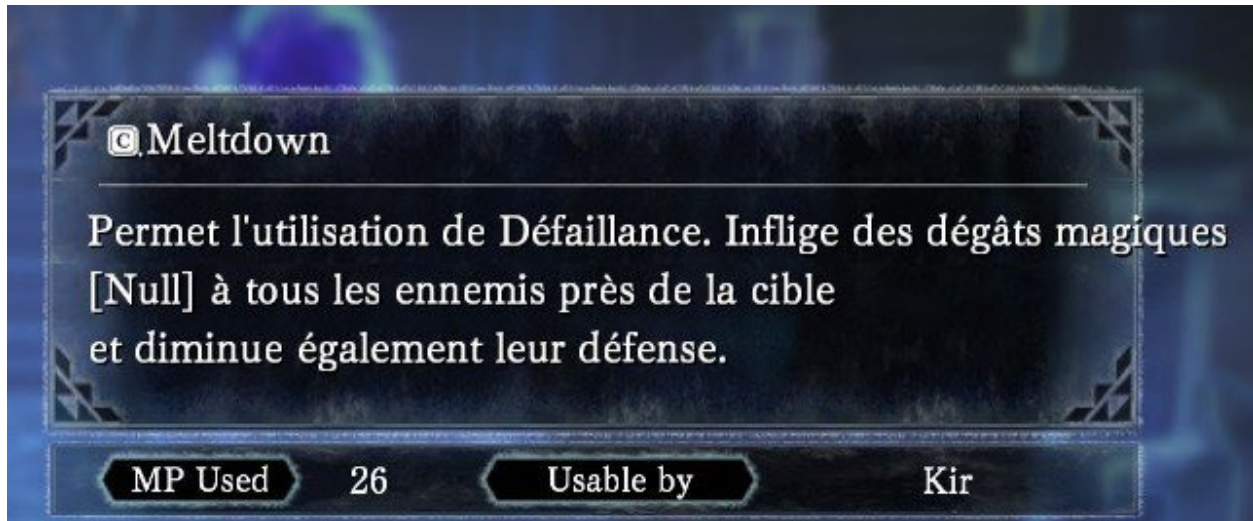
Figure 4. *Text improperly formatted in a dialogue box.* From French localization of the game *I Am Setsuna*.

Another localization error that operates on a deeper layer of text is affects how textual

instructions orient the player in the game's world. When dialogue or text that informs the player

is translated incorrectly, the player is prevented from progressing in the game. In the worst case

such errors can prevent game progression entirely. Dietz (2006) termed these kinds of errors as

"linguistic plot stoppers." Many of these kinds of mistranslations are in older games or games

whose localizations had a limited budget (Mandelin & Kuchar, 2017). This kind of error is

especially detrimental to immersion. The player will either be prevented from progressing or will

have to stop playing to look for information outside of the game.

At an even deeper level, text informs players of details important to establishing the

game's world. Schules' (2012) analysis of the Nintendo DS game *Lux-Pain* is a notable example

of a localization error at this level. The game's localization not only has English grammar

mistakes and typos, but it also creates confusion as to the game's setting due to mistakes made in

text for important story segments. Confusion as to whether the game is set in the U.S. or Japan

impedes the player's immersion in the diegetic game world. Schules argues that language itself is

a component of gameplay. His argument points to the complexity of the gameplay experience.

Localization affects not just text or the narrative, its influence touches all elements that contribute to the emergent experience of gameplay.

Aside from these technical localization issues, the greatest challenge in localization is transferring meaning between languages. In this case, 'bad' localization as defined by localization professionals was a translation that tried to be too faithful to the text itself instead of the meaning it communicates. A word-for-word localization was considered a failure. One interviewee stated:

> It's not like literally translating things word for word. We're also not about "oh, just forget about what the Japanese said. Let's go do our own thing" either. We want to be faithful to the Japanese, but being faithful in localization doesn't mean doing word to word translation. (E. F., personal communication, March, 2019)

Here, he alludes to a balancing act that localization professionals manage as part of their work. A word-for-word translation may seem like a faithful translation; however, this kind of translation is not the goal of game localization.

A veteran translation summed up his philosophy on translation in the game localization context:

> I think the number one reason for a poor translation—and I'm not talking about an inaccurate translation. It can be very accurate, but it'll just read flat and not be interesting.
>
> The number one reason is not that the translator did not have the skill to do it; it's that they didn't take agency. They didn't take that extra step to make the changes that needed to be made, which is—it's an egotistical thing to say, and it's exactly antithetical to the—we want the original with no gussying up and no censorship and that sort of thing

that people make a lotta noise about. Yet, my argument in defense of changing things is that if you don't recreate the experiences…

…if you directly translate, you're sabotaging the scene. You're actually not doing justice to the original. It's better to mix things up and change things around. (Veteran Localizer, professional communication, June, 2016)

A bad localization, according to the interviewee, is one where the translator does not exercise their agency to go beyond a word-for-word or literal translation. Not every game localization project gives the localization team the time or budget to completely express their agency (Schules, 2012). The quoted interviewee had started on smaller projects with less freedom at first and was gradually promoted based on their good work. Even with the limitations that they faced early on, they took advantage of the freedom they had on projects to distinguish the localized text and their work.

A good localization endeavors to change the original Japanese game to maintain the gameplay experience of the original. The *Final Fantasy X* example shows how this strategy was used to change dialogue in an important story cutscene. The translator (and other members of the localization team) must make the choice to exercise his or her creative agency. In doing so, they endeavor to move beyond a word-for-word translation and engage with the deeper meaning communicated by the game text. This requires taking risks because localizers draw on their own experiences and interpretations of the game text to make creative decisions.

Good localizations are the result localizers having the freedom to creatively edit the game text:

I think you have to find out that word is making the Japanese dialogue work in its own

terms and then find a way to make the English dialogue work on its terms, not rely on the

storytelling methods of the Japanese texts, which, often, really don't fly in English. It's

not that the text is bad, although, sometimes it is, but in a perfect world, even, with a

really well written original text, you can't use the same tricks that they use because it

doesn't compute when you bring it over to English. (Veteran Localizer, professional

communication, June, 2016)

However, using one's agency to make changes in service of the game text is risky. This

interviewee further pointed to the fact that players would have their own interpretations of game

localizations. Overstepping and making players feel as though the localization strayed too far

from the original could also happen. When the effort is successful, a particular game will often

be remembered for having a localization that went above and beyond expectations.

An example of an excellent localization that received praise from players and critics alike

is the game *Vagrant Story* (2000). The localization team took advantage of the fact that the

game's setting was based on medieval Europe. In this case, the English language had an

association with this setting that Japanese lacked. Their approach to the game's English script

was to "make it Biblical," which meant adopting a Shakespearean style for the game's dialogue

(Learned, 2017). They described their work on the game as maintaining the meaning of the

original Japanese script while enhancing the English script:

You can call that "improving" on the original script, but the original was fine in

Japanese—great, even. You could also call it giving it our own spin, or even needlessly

embellishing, but everything in the English is directly inspired by the Japanese text and

characters. At the end of the day, we just took what was there and did our best to write the way we would have expected to see in that story had it been originally written in English. (Learned, 2017)

The Japanese script was not badly written. They embellished the English dialogue based on a seemingly artistic desire to make the game more interesting to themselves and English-speaking players. Despite *Vagrant Story* having a low print run and not becoming a best-seller, the game is still remembered for its English localization among game players and press (Robinson, 2017).
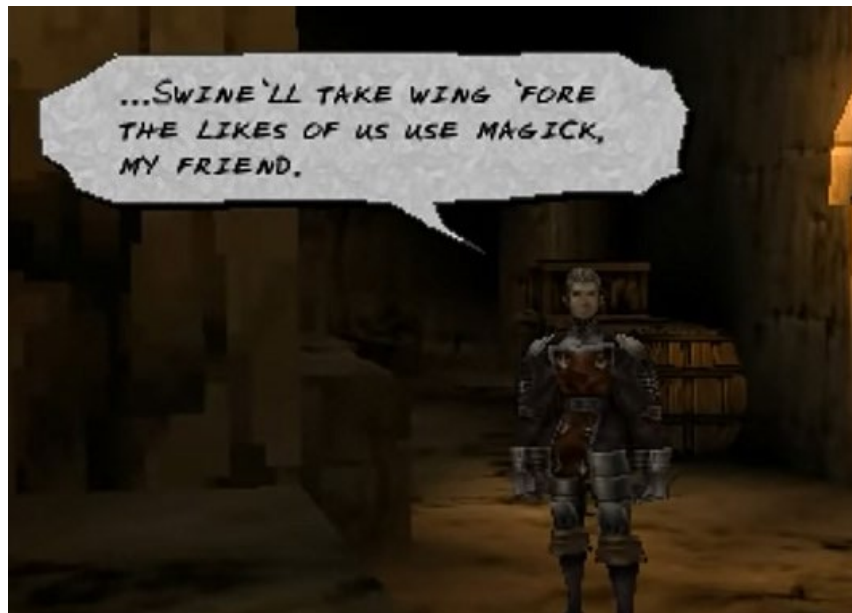
Figure 5. *English dialogue from Vagrant Story.* The localized used stylized English to embellish the narrative.

The successful localization of *Vagrant Story* points to a philosophy expressed by an interviewee: "change it to leave it the same" (Veteran Localizer, Personal communication, June, 2016). Since localization professionals are trying to preserve the gameplay experience and not the text itself, they justify changing text and other assets of games to serve this purpose. This approach carries some risk and requires that the localization team have the time, budget, and freedom to make such changes.

Good game localizations aim for fidelity to a game's world. *Vagrant Story*'s localization connected the game's setting to existing intertextual associations that English-speakers have with Shakespearean writing. Smith's later work on *Final Fantasy XII* took a similar approach. As a major entry in the long-running *Final Fantasy* series, *Final Fantasy XII*'s localization had a large budget. The main creative team behind this game was the same as *Vagrant Story*, which gave Smith and his team a great amount of creative freedom as well as access to the game's developers (Game Developer Staff, 2009; Learned, 2015; Robinson, 2017). Much of their creativity focused on increasing immersion in the game's world by modifying dialogue.

An example of this approach can be seen in a scene that occurs early in *Final Fantasy XII*. A non-player character (NPC) is explaining how the player can ride a chocobo (a large bird used as a mode of transport throughout the *Final Fantasy* series) to quickly get to another city. A member of the localization team for the game explained their overall strategy as the following:

> We like our immersion, and we don't wanna break the fourth wall and that sorta thing, and so that is a change that we'll practically make to a lotta Japanese games because Japanese can be very, very comfortable with breaking the fourth wall and having a character go, "If you press the B button, you can—," and that sort of thing. (Veteran localizer, personal communication, June, 2016)

Japanese players expect a different level of immersion in their games. Avoiding breaking the fourth wall is a consideration made for American players whom the localizers believe value immersion more. References to the actual controller the player is using are rewritten to sound more natural in the game's world.

Differences between expectations of immersion between Japanese and American players affect the phrasing of this tutorial about riding chocobos. The NPC dialogue explaining how to

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use this mode of transport was modified in English to sound more natural in the game's world. In the Japanese version, the NPC addresses the player and presents this mode of transportation as something new. The localization team modified this scene to instead focus on the main character's perspective. They argue that this character, having lived in the game's world, would already know about this creature. To maximize immersion, they consider the player and the character they are controlling to be the same. The tutorial still gives the player the necessary information to understand how to use this specific mode of transport, but the localization rephrases the conversation to avoid breaking the fourth wall.

Figure 6. *Dialogue from Final Fantasy XII.* The dialogue is rephrased to present new information to the player while also connoting that the character who inhabits this game world is familiar with it.

Overall, interviewees showed an emotional investment in the localization process. Additionally, some members of localization teams are players themselves. Another interviewee worked on retranslations of older games. He felt that he needed to respect the game text because he had played these games growing up (R. P., personal communication, November, 2020). His

attachment to his work was related to emotional attachments he had formed when he was younger (Anable, 2018). Overlap between players and producers is more common in the game industry than other creative industries (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). This means that in some cases, localization professionals approach the games they work on from the perspective of a player.

3.4 Conclusion

The task of the localizer is to employ his or her creativity to paradoxically make changes to a video game to create a rough equivalent of the source culture's gameplay experience for the target culture. To accomplish this, they not only translate text in a game, they also creatively rewrite text. Games differ widely, even in the same genre, and no perfect way of localizing a game exists. RPGs are an excellent case study for studying localization because they contain far more text than most other game genres. As can be seen with the case of Squaresoft in the 1990s, the RPG genre also drove innovation in localization practices in the Japanese game industry.

A multitude of factors determine how localizers approach their task. Since video games are produced primarily for profit, game producers will be less likely to allocate resources to localization if they believe that a game will not sell well in a foreign market. Japanese producers are also self-conscious about the potential for their work in foreign markets despite the success of anime and manga globally. This self-consciousness has made domestication a preferred localization strategy from Japanese to English. Foreignization, which embraces Japanese cultural elements in games, has become increasingly popular in the past two decades. Part of the reason for this change is the increasing popularity of anime and manga in North America.

Despite these changes, localization still prioritizes invisibility, which goes beyond domestication and foreignization. Invisibility hides the work of localization from the player to

ensure a seamless, immersive gameplay experience. Invisibility is also a mark of quality in localizations. Localization errors can take the player outside of the game, which breaks immersion in the game world. Invisibility in a technical sense is a basic measure of quality; whereas creativity is more complex.

Ultimately, a good localization is one in which the translator takes advantage of creative affordances. The term transcreation describes this practice well because the goal of game localization is not to simply convey meaning in the target language exactly as it was presented in the source language. Word-for-word translations of in-game text tend to be dull and lifeless. Japanese and English are different enough from each other that expressions often cannot be translated exactly. How creativity is applied differs depending on the localization team, the game they are localizing, and the available budget.

Fidelity to the diegetic game world sets video games apart from other kinds of media. Immersion during the gameplay experience operates through a high level of interactivity and the controller to pull players into a game's world. Localization aims to maintain this immersion as much as possible. Toward this end, they change the game to preserve this experience.

Chapter 4 The "Official" Unofficial Fan Localization of Mother 3

4.1 Introduction

In 1999, Asian cinema scholar Markus Nornes wrote a polemic against what he saw as "corrupt" translation. "All of us have, at one time or another, left a movie theater wanting to kill the translator" (Nornes, p. 17). His polemic focused on foreign film, specifically, how translators used subtitles in foreign film. Corrupt subtitles, he argued, were driven by capitalism to create a product that can easily be consumed by the masses. The result was subtitles that "dumb[ed] down the text, erase[d] linguistic and cultural otherness, and elide[d] the artful moves of screenwriters" (Nornes, 2018, p. 13). This phenomenon is present even outside of translation into English, the lingua franca of the world. He also identified examples where translations from English into Japanese experienced a loss of deeper meaning in translation. Corrupt subtitles were a worldwide phenomenon, it seemed.

The contrast to corrupt subtitling practices is "abusive" subtitling. Nornes (1999) used the term abusive because he saw this kind of subtitling as throwing conventions out the window. "The abusive subtitler assumes a respectful stance vis-a-vis the original text, tampering with both language and the subtitling apparatus itself" (Nornes, 2004, p. 464). While tracing the history of subtitling in cinema, he described earlier eras where approaches taken to subtitling had been experimental as translators sought to best relate the feel of the film in its original language to its new audience. Notably, he deemed fan-made subtitles (fansubs) edited into anime as contemporary abusive subtitle practices. Fansubbers attempt to overcome the inevitability of loss in translation by breaking conventions and rules that official releases must follow. To Nornes,

these subtitles operate in the spirit of earlier traditions by using translator's notes to explain the cultural context of certain terms, experimenting with fonts and font sizes, and placing subtitles in areas other than the bottom of the screen. Anime fans do not produce fansubs for profit, but rather to expand access to anime series that they care about. Furthermore, their motivations are not driven by a capitalistic pursuit of profit (Denison, 2011). This orientation further distances them from what Nornes considers to be corrupt subtitling.

More recently, Nornes (2018) has revised his view of subtitles from corrupt versus abusive to the more positive terms "sensible" versus "sensuous". Sensible translations possess "a blind dedication to 'common sense' and the 'rule of convention'" (p. 13). In contrast, sensuous subtitles place the "spectator in touch with the feeling of the foreign film, with otherness, with the materiality of language" (p. 13). He also acknowledges how sensuousness is associated with the erotic and describes sensuous subtitling as involving the sense of touch. Touch implies that both the translator and viewer can become more intimate with media content. A translator taking a sensuous approach to subtitling is arguably engaging in a more intimate relationship with media—a more emotional relationship.

This chapter focuses on the emotional investment of fans and how this drives their approach to creating unofficial translations of media. It uses the case of fan-directed game localization of the Game Boy Advance game *Mother 3* to explore how fans engage with texts at this deep, intimate level. In contrast to localizers, who usually have access to the game development team to help with inserting new language into the code, ROM hackers must reverse engineer a game's code. Translating the game means not just replacing text, but also finding and manipulating the text within the code. This process requires becoming intimately familiar with a

game's programming code. Fan localization cannot occur without ROM hacking. To translate the text, the game's code must be hacked and understood.

4.1.1 Finding the text: Reaching Japan

The *Mother 3* fan localization is another example of the kinds of liminal spaces fan communities occupy. Denison (2011) situated anime fans that produced their own subtitles of Japanese broadcasts at the "liminal edge between fan creativity and piracy" (p. 450). Likewise, Hills (2017) described this liminal space as "intersecting 'informal' and 'formal' economies" (p. 80). The *Mother 3* fan localization occupies a similar space, yet the dynamics between the industry and fans in the context of video games is different from that of anime and manga. Whereas fans have been an important part of popularizing anime outside of Japan and have used their experience gained doing work like fansubbing to enter the industry, video game fans of Japanese-produced console games operate separately from the industry. Producing a fan localization of a game places one's work in a legal gray area, and such work would be a detriment, rather than an advantage when trying to enter the industry (Muscar, 2006).

The labor required to not just translate a game, but to hack it (called ROM hacking) is sensuous subtitling in the context of video games. Nornes (1999) lauded anime fansubbers for taking experimental approaches and breaking conventions. Similarly, ROM hacking and fan localizations (usually referred to as fan translation) of games rely on experimental approaches and actively go against conventions of the console video game industry (Consalvo, 2013b). ROM hacking requires reverse engineering a game and digging through programming code to find the text that needs to be translated. This process is highly experimental because the location of text within a game's code varies widely across games (Muñoz Sánchez, 2009). Throughout the course of the fan localization project this chapter studies, the main translator for *Mother 3*,

Clyde Mandelin[8], documented his experience of becoming intimately familiar with the game's

code to not just translate text but also to hack the game so that he could replace the Japanese text

in the game's various interfaces. The intimacy described by Nornes (2018) is reflected in the

close, affective relationship that fans formed with the *Mother* series' world and characters as

well as the work of the fan localization team. This team had to become intimately familiar with

the game's code to insert translated English text.

The *Mother* series is a series of Japanese role-playing games (RPGs) created by writer

Shigesato Itoi and published by Nintendo. The first game in the series, *Mother*, was released for

the Famicom system (Nintendo Entertainment System in U.S.) in 1989. The game stood out from

other RPGs at the time because of how it parodied genre tropes. The game also featured a unique

setting—a fictional version of the US. While the game was localized and scheduled to be

released in the US, its release was eventually canceled (Parish, 2014b). This localized version of

the game was eventually released in 2015 for the Wii U Virtual Console, allowing players to

download and play an official localization of the game (McWhertor, 2015).

Japanese Name	Localized Name	Release Year (JP)	Release Year (NA)	Translator
Mother 1	*EarthBound Beginnings*	1989 (Famicom)	2015 (Wii U Virtual Console)	Phil Sandhop
Mother 2	*EarthBound*	1994 (Super Famicom)	1995 (SNES)	Marcus Lindblom
Mother 3	—	2006 (Game Boy Advance)	—	Clyde Mandelin

Table 1. Release dates of *Mother 1*, *2*, and *3* in Japan (and US where applicable).

The next game in the series, *Mother 2* on the Super Famicom (Super Nintendo

Entertainment System in US), was the series' debut outside of Japan. Titled *EarthBound* in the

US, this game also took place in a fictional version of the US. Like its predecessor, its narrative

featured satire and parody of RPG genre tropes. Another reason that this game (and its

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[8] Mandelin often goes by the nickname 'Mato.' Some blog posts cited in this chapter use his nickname.

predecessor) stood out among other RPGs at the time was the fact that the game's script was solely written by Itoi. During this early period in the game industry, game narratives were often written by game designers. As a writer, Itoi created charming and unique characters and story for the game. Most importantly to English-speaking players, the sole translator employed by Nintendo to work on the game, Marcus Lindblom, did his best to faithfully translate the game's unique humor from Japanese into English (Meyer, 2013)[9]. While the game did not sell well in the US, it did develop a cult following of fans devoted to the series.

The final game in the series, *Mother 3*, was released on the Game Boy Advance in 2006. Most notably, this game has never left Japan. There are likely many reasons why the game was not localized for foreign markets. A primary reason is that *EarthBound* did not sell well in the US when it was released in the mid-1990s. Nintendo has also been infamously quiet about their reasons for not releasing the game. Others have speculated that certain elements of the game were deemed too controversial for English-speaking audiences (Doolan, 2019). For example, the game features characters known as the "Magypsies," who seem to be gender non-binary and present male and female characteristics (Davis, 2016). Nadia Oxford (2019a), a game journalist writing about the game's lack of Western release, speculated that Nintendo considered such content too objectionable for English-speaking audiences. Without official acknowledgement from Nintendo, however, fans and game press look for any information they can find to try and interpret Nintendo's intentions.

The lack of an English release of *Mother 3* is what led to the eventual creation of the fan localization project a few months after the game was released in 2006 (Parkin, 2008). *EarthBound* fans had been following the release of *Mother 3* since its announcement in the late

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[9] In the following years, Nintendo would establish their internal localization team, nicknamed Treehouse. The nickname refers to the team's infamously secretive mode of operation within in the company (Schreier, 2014).

1990s. As the game's release drew near, the fan community labored to show their enthusiasm to Nintendo. Leading up to this point, English-speaking fans of the series wrote petitions, organized letter drives, and directly contacted Shigetsato Itoi in attempts to convince Nintendo to localize the game in the US (Caron, 2008). This led to tensions between fans, who wanted to play the game, and Nintendo, who believed that the game would not be profitable (Doolan, 2019).

The fan localization project for *Mother 3* began November 2006, six months after the game had released in. By this point, rumors from Nintendo and a confirmation in an interview with a member of Nintendo's Treehouse localization team confirmed that the game would not be localized (Caron, 2008). The beginning of the project was declared by a member of the community, Reidman, who referred to their project as "Do-It-Yourself Devotion."

> In 1995, Nintendo of America released EarthBound into our grubby, teenaged hands. We came for the fart jokes, but we stayed for the zen of a game that was well ahead of its time. Everything about EarthBound was brilliant. What's more is that everything somehow managed to get better with age. (Reidman, 2006)

The *Mother 3* fan translation project thus began with a declaration of love (not war) from the fanbase. However, the fanbase did not begin the project by focusing on the negative implications of Nintendo's actions. Maintaining an ambivalent position in relation to Nintendo served as an important part of the fan localization team's strategy throughout the two years they worked on the game. Fans thus began their work as a labor of love. This declaration showed the emotional attachment that fans had formed with *EarthBound* and the *Mother* series overall.

4.1.2 Games as affective texts

The emotional attachment that players formed with the prequel to *Mother 3*, *EarthBound*/*Mother 2*, is worth discussing in the larger context of studying video games.

Discourse in the video game community and game studies scholarship tends to focus on the computational aspects of games at the expense of the more emotional and embodied elements (Anable, 2018). Anable argues for paying more attention to the affective and representational elements of games. Players do more than play games, they also connect emotionally with them (Van Ommen, 2018). The gameplay experience is an intimate one, and this intimacy is reinforced through the input device (controller or otherwise) that players use. Furthermore, Japanese RPGs tend to take more than twenty hours to finish (Kalata, 2021). Even when consumed across many different play sessions, RPGs provide ample time for forming attachments with a game's world and characters. Focusing on affect provides a potent lens through which to view the activities of players, fans, and amateurs (Jenkins, 2006).

Jones (2008) also emphasized the importance of viewing games not just as texts, but also as launching points for social experiences outside of the game itself. His focus on the social echoes the work of the Internet scholar Baym (2000) and media scholar Radway (1991). Baym examined online communities formed around media texts. Like the Usenet group that she participated in and studied, Starmen.net served as a central hub for *EarthBound* fans through its forums and updates on news related to the series. Radway discussed the numerous interactions between readers, their social contexts, and the texts that they read. What Radway and Baym describe in their studies are interpretive communities. Even before Internet access was widespread, communities of fans collectively engaged with media texts through discussions and other fan works (Jenkins, 2006). Another important point in their work was how they studied forms of media that were viewed as having lower cultural value in the mainstream. Video games, and the niche genre of Japanese RPGs, have similarly been viewed as a less serious cultural form (Alderman, 2016; Shanley, 2017). Much of the work of game studies in the past two decades has

aimed to break through mainstream conceptions of video games as a lower, less important form of media.

This chapter highlights the emotional foundation of fans' connection to media. The fan-made localization of *Mother 3* is a case study of how fans engage with game localization. Video games are post-Fordist, experiential commodities that provide a subjective experience for the player (Kline, Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2003). Jenkins (2013) and others have studied fan communities, especially their early adoption of Internet technology to create social spaces and distribute fanworks among one another (Booth, 2010; Gray, Sandvoss, & Harringon, 2017; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). More recently, Anable (2018) and others have argued for the importance of understanding the affective connection that players and fans form with the media that they consume (Lukács, 2010; Van Ommen, 2018). This connection is especially notable in the case of video games because they are interactive, which encourages players to invest heavily in characters.

The Internet has provided a means for *EarthBound* fans across the globe to come together and create fan communities such as Starmen.net and EarthBound Central. This is an example of the decreased distance between fans and producers in the twenty-first century (Postigo, 2003). Fans' experiences playing the game brought them together as "dedicated, meaning-making, community-based players" (Jones, 2008, p. 10). The paratexts, such as guides, fanart, and fan fiction that they created as well as the efforts of Nintendo and other official channels constructed what Jones calls a transmedia universe. *EarthBound* fans are notable for consciously working to take up space in this universe to the point that game press tends to discuss *EarthBound* and the *Mother* series in the context of its fans more often than its creators (Caron, 2008; Davis, 2016; Kohler, 2017; Parkin, 2008; Plante, 2019; Schreier, 2013; Wright, 2020).

The *EarthBound*/*Mother* fan community is an example of a cult video game fandom. Cult media are distinguished from others by the perceived distance of the media from the mainstream (Hills 2005, 2017). Furthermore, cult fans establish their identity as something apart from the mainstream (Jancovich, 2002). In this case, *EarthBound* is a 'cult classic' because it was not immediately popular. The game did not sell well upon its original releasee in 1995 (Meyer, 2013). As a result of initially being underappreciated, the game has earned a status as being distinct from more popular, mainstream Japanese RPGs such as *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest*. The game's appeal has also increased over time due to its status as a nostalgic, 'classic' RPG from the 16-bit era (Holmes, 2013). The fact that *EarthBound* is the second game in a series with entries that have mostly stayed in Japan further increases the appeal of the game as an underappreciated classic RPG (Frear, 2016; Plunkett, 2013; Webster, 2013).

The manner in which the *EarthBound*/*Mother* fan community announced, discussed, and released an unofficial English language patch for the game *Mother 3* was informed by the emotional connection that fans had formed with the game and its world. They justified their actions through a discourse of taking ownership of the game text (Reidman, 2006). Justification was necessary because of the precarious legal position of fan translation (Hills, 2017). While fan translating a game is not illegal, creating a fan translation in the form of a patch that can be applied to a downloaded ROM image of a video game implies that that ROM image will be distributed. Fan translation is not explicitly piracy, but it is implicitly connected to piracy (Muñoz Sánchez, 2009; Muscar, 2006).

4.1.3 Video games as affective media

Past research on translation of entertainment media has focused mostly on literature and film. Video games are a newer form of media and game-focused scholarship is also relatively

young. Examining older forms of media such as literature and media can be helpful as points of comparison. Nornes' (1999, 2004) discussion of corrupt and abusive subtitling is reminiscent of Venuti's (1995) criticism of invisible translation and how capitalism affected literary translation. Venuti's criticism focused on capitalism as enacted through English-language book publishing. Like film translations that prioritize subtitles that are palatable to the masses, English-language publishers favored domesticating translations that obscured the foreign origins of literature to present a fluent translation meant to appeal to the mass reader market. Comparing his work to Venuti, Nornes notes important differences between translating film versus literature:

> …but the media we are looking at—literature and cinema—are completely different. With literature, the original text is displaced in toto; with cinema, one of the joys of the subtitled film is the fact that one is brought into the presence of the foreign original and its culture and linguistic milieu. (p. 14)

In contrast to translated literature, subtitled film still exists alongside the original audio of the foreign original. Video games, on the other hand, are significantly different from film because the elements of narrative are embedded in game code and the game's interfaces that determine how such information can be read by the player (Mandiberg, 2012; Muñoz Sánchez, 2009).

The way in which text is displayed in video game localizations is more like literature than film. Like literary translations, video game localizations write over the Japanese text and usually leave very few traces of cultural references that may be confusing to players (Honeywood & Fung, 2012). However, fan-made localizations may leave in Japanese text, especially if that text is a graphical asset and thus more difficult to replace than text. Fan localizations are also applied to the original game ROM through a process of overwriting. Typically, the English text is inserted into the original game ROM using a patch. A patch applies changes to the game's

programming code without fundamentally changing its overall code (Stevens, 1993). They insert

text into the code in such a way as to ensure that the player can see it in narrative dialogue,

interfaces, and other parts of a game (Muñoz Sánchez, 2009).

Video games are interactive in a direct, dynamic sense that requires constant feedback

from the player. Events on screen change in response to the player's input through a peripheral

such as a controller or keyboard. Whereas most films have a run time between ninety minutes

and three hours, video games, especially roleplaying games (RPGs) can require as much as forty

hours to finish (Kalata, 2021). Reading through a book can easily take up more time than a film;

however, the interactivity and multimodality of games sets them apart from literature. Games use

audio, video, text, and images and combine them into a comprehensive experience.

Another part of the significant time investment required by RPGs is how they encourage

players to invest in characters. Van Ommen (2018) adapts the concept of "tinkering" from

robotics to describe how players must manage character parameters in games (Katsuno, 2011).

Tinkering involves interaction with technology and allows creativity and experimentation. In

RPGs, tinkering involves "statistical progression and creative customization" that "are often at

the core of creating a personalized experience" (Van Ommen, p. 23). Every player's experience

is unique because of the choices they make in building their characters. Making these decisions

connects the player to the character in an intimate manner, which encourages emotional

connections. Players can become invested in their characters in terms of tinkering with them as

well as the role characters play in a game's narrative. In sum, tinkering is a major part of the

interactive experience offered by RPGs.

Interaction and emotions are related. The concepts of affect and affect theory provide

means to explore the motivations driving players in the *EarthBound* fan community as they first

campaigned for Nintendo to localize *Mother 3*. Anable (2018) criticizes game studies scholars for neglecting the representational and emotional aspects of video games in favor of focusing mostly on the computational aspects of the medium. Affect theory in the humanities draws on neuroscience to explain reactions to the world around us outside of rationality (Shaw & Warf, 2009). Despite debates as to whether affect and emotion are different phenomena or not, this chapter will be referring to both when discussing affect (Leys, 2011; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

In her study of fan fiction communities, Wilson (2016) contextualized fans' reception of media texts as affective reception. They not only respond to content that they watch, but they also respond to it emotionally. Among fanfiction communities, they often refer to "feels" as emotional responses to content in media and the fiction derived from it. The *EarthBound* community does not discuss its emotional attachment to the game as frankly as the subjects of Wilson's research. However, they do refer to their love for the game as "devotion" (Reidman, 2006). Additionally, they emphasized the importance of faithfulness to the text. This faithfulness has two main priorities: respecting Shigesato Itoi's writing and maintaining consistency with *EarthBound*'s English localization.

EarthBound/*Mother* fans' formed an emotional attachment with the series by playing *EarthBound* (*Mother 2*), released in 1995. As an RPG, the game's long narrative intertwined with gameplay provided many opportunities for connecting with its characters and world. These elements were impacted by the game's localization, which was central to the gameplay experience. This localization has also shaped how fans of the game have come to view it as an important RPG classic. Examining this localization more closely will show which elements of the game fans engaged with, and how the narrative written by Shigesato Itoi was mediated through Marcus Lindblom's localization (Meyer, 2013).

4.2 EarthBound as an 'authentic' text

4.2.1 EarthBound as a "good" localization

The foundation for English-speaking *EarthBound*/*Mother 2* fans was the localized release of the game on the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) in 1995. Notably, the game was set in "Eagleland," an obvious parallel to the United States ("EarthBound's Marketing Campaign," 2009). This fantasy version of the US was a creation of the game's creator and writer, Shigesato Itoi. This setting distinguished the game from other RPGs at the time that tended to be set in fantasy or science fiction settings. More importantly, the game's localization was considered high quality compared to other games released at the time (Meyer, 2013). The localization met the following criteria for being a good localization from the perspective of fans: fidelity to the original text, cohesiveness of the game world, and courteousness on the part of the game's lone translator, Marcus Lindblom.

Much of the game's popularity is attributed to its unique humor and setting. Advertising for *EarthBound* adopted the game's style of humor to grab players' attention. For example, one ad claimed that "this game stinks" ("EarthBound's Marketing Campaign," 2009). The main *Nintendo Power* article describing the game adopted a humorous, over-the-top assumption that the game would be a bad influence on players. The beginning of the article declared, "The scenes from Nintendo's new *EarthBound* depicted in the following pages may shock you, stun you, and leave you wriggling and gasping like a beached trout. We suggest psychiatric guidance for players who continue beyond this point" (Arakawa, 1995; "Nintendo Power issue 73," n.d.). The odd humor in the article seemed to be highlighting *EarthBound*'s own unique brand of humor attributed to the game's creator, Shigesato Itoi, and the localization produced by Marcus Lindblom (Mandelin, 2016; Meyer, 2013).

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Figure 7. Text from Nintendo Power issue 73 article covering *EarthBound* (Arakawa, 1995; "Nintendo Power issue 73," n.d.).

Ultimately, *EarthBound* did not fare particularly well in terms of profits and sold fewer than 150,000 copies in the US and Canada ("EarthBound Series Sales," 2009). Some reasons the game may have underperformed were its release toward the end of the SNES console cycle in the US. *EarthBound* used a quirky, colorful, and simplistic art style that looked dated compared to other SNES games released around that time. During this period, the new Sony PlayStation and Nintendo 64 consoles became the center of video game coverage. *EarthBound* slipped into obscurity as video game magazines shifted to discussing and hyping the new consoles and their revolutionary graphics. For many who had played the game and enjoyed it, however, the game left a strong impression that would eventually spawn a cult following (Holmes, 2013).

The game's cult popularity is notable as a contrast to its initial failure sales-wise. Many who praise the game attribute a significant part of its appeal to its localization (Plunkett, 2013; Schreier, 2016). As discussed in Chapter Three, one of the markers of a "good" localization for

many players and professionals working in the industry is a sense of authenticity evaluated through quality. *EarthBound* was released on June 5, 1995, after eight or so months of localization work (Mandelin, 2016). Mandelin notes that contrary to most localizations of the time, the game's publisher Nintendo invested a significant amount of time and money into the game's localization. Work on the game was coordinated between four locations in Japan and Nintendo of America's headquarters in Redmond, Washington.

The result of this investment was a game with text that clearly expressed the narrative and dialogue. The game is often praised for its distinct humor, which comes from the unique writing of Shigesato Itoi and Lindblom (Meyer, 2013; Schreier, 2016). Itoi, famous in Japan as a Renaissance man who was at one point ubiquitous in Japanese media, created the *Mother* series with the intention of offering something different from other games at the time. His deeply emotional style of writing is respected by Japanese and American fans of the series ("Shigetsato Itoi learns," 2013; "Shigetsato Itoi talks," 2013). In the case of *EarthBound*, his writing style explored deep emotions alongside quirky humor (Holmes, 2013). The game's localization also sought to replicate the uniqueness of Itoi's writing style in English. Marcus Lindblom explained the unique challenge of translating the game:

> The thing that's really weird about EarthBound is that I was trying to translate someone's view of what the US is like from the outside — someone who, obviously, isn't American. I had to take an outsider's view of the US and turn it into something everybody here would play and understand. That was one of the more difficult things to do. (Meyer, 2013)

EarthBound, as an English-language localization of *Mother 2*, featured a localization that was a mediation of Itoi's imagining of the United States that itself is likely mediated through Japanese media.

Like anime fans, video game fans who are aware of a game's Japanese origins place a high value on a game's localization being authentic to the Japanese original (Cubbison, 2005). At the time when *EarthBound* was released, localization was still relatively low priority for many Japanese game developers and publishers. According to Mandelin (2016), *EarthBound's* localization cost significantly more than a more typical localization of the time. Many in the fan community consider the English localization to be a faithful translation of the original despite the game having to modify and edit certain visual elements that were considered inappropriate for Americans. The changes and modifications are viewed as understandable limits placed on Lindblom that were characteristic of the era in which the game was released (Meyer, 2013). Nintendo's content policies at the time significantly limited alcohol references, sexual content, and religious themes in games (Grealy, n.d.; Mandelin, 2018a). Other games released in this era feature similar content modification. *EarthBound* stands out for having a compelling narrative despite these limits.
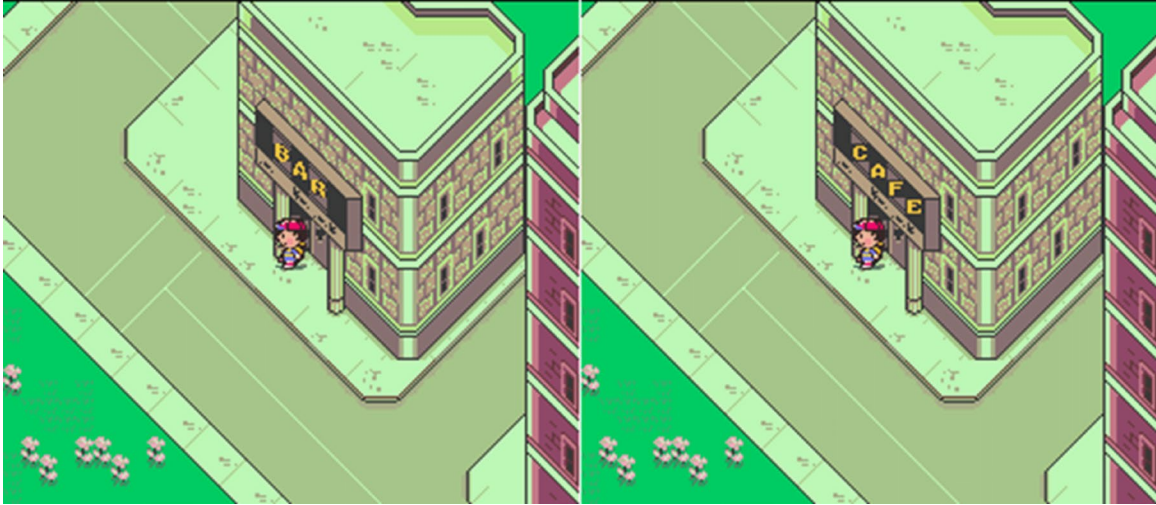
Figure 8. An example of graphical asset modification in EarthBound's localization. Left: Japanese version and US version on the right. The English localization had the graphics edited to say café to remove alcohol references.

Another element of a "good" localization is maintaining cohesion in the diegetic game world. Compared to other games at the time that were released on Nintendo hardware, *EarthBound* featured a script with minimal grammatical errors. Errors in language in a game affect more than the narrative, they can also be detrimental the gameplay experience. Schules (2012) examined the game Lux-Pain, where he found that errors in translation generated confusion as to whether the game was set in Japan or the US. The effects of this confusion increased as the game continued, negatively impacting the player's immersion in the game world. *EarthBound*, on the other hand, maintained a sense of cohesion throughout its story. Reviews of the game often mention that the game balances its brightly colored, humorous elements with more serious developments in the narrative (Frear, 2016; Plunkett, 2013; Webster, 2013).

Time was also an important factor in the game's increasing popularity after its initial release. Despite the game's initial failure in the market, it steadily gained fans in the years that followed. Nostalgia led people to play older games during later console cycles. Nintendo's own games that referenced many of its IPs also refocused attention on *EarthBound*. Two events in the

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late 1990s brought more attention to *EarthBound* and reinvigorated the game's fandom. One was the inclusion of the main character of the game, Ness, in the crossover fighting game, *Super Smash Bros.* for the Nintendo 64. The character's appearance alongside other more popular characters such as Mario brought more attention to *EarthBound* (Destructoid Community, 2021). Another event that helped to bring fans together around a collective goal was the announcement of a sequel to *EarthBound*, *Mother 3*, for the Nintendo 64 Disk Drive. This game's troubled development would eventually lead fans across platforms, rumors, and cancellations until it eventually debuted on the Game Boy Advance in 2006.

Finally, Lindblom himself made contact with the fan community more than a decade after the game's release (Mandelin, 2016). His embrace of the fandom created a bridge between the industry and fans, despite Lindblom no longer being employed by Nintendo. Lindblom, as the sole translator of the game, embodied a sense of authority over the game even outside of Nintendo. His willingness to speak to the fandom also contrasted heavily with Nintendo remaining distant and silent in response to fans' appeals for the series.

EarthBound's English localization's status among the fan community as a legitimate text affected how they approached the *Mother 3* fan translation. The fan localization team similarly prioritized authenticity through quality, consistency with *EarthBound's* localization, and collaboration with the larger fandom. The decade before *Mother 3's* release was marked by the online fandom increasingly coming together to advocate for the game. Fans' attachment to *EarthBound* fueled their anticipation for its sequel as it moved across platforms and even came close to cancellation.

4.2.2 Mother 3's "Timeline of Hope"

The decade after *EarthBound*'s release was a rollercoaster for the franchise and its non-Japanese fans. The series would go from having a promised sequel on the Nintendo 64 to complete cancellation, which was then followed by rumors of a revival in the next console generation. Throughout this period, the online *EarthBound* fan community coordinated actions such as petitions to convince Nintendo to release *Mother 3*, in whichever form it would eventually take, outside of Japan. A member of the ROM hacking team summarized their efforts:

> It's also important to understand our history as fans. We've been waiting for this game through 13 years of delays, downgrades, and cancellations. We've organized countless petitions and events in support of the *MOTHER* series, and despite the attention and support we've received from the gaming community, Nintendo has consistently ignored us. (Caron, 2008)

The ways that *EarthBound* fans in the late 1990s and early 2000s followed the development of *Mother 3* mirror the development of anime fandoms around the same time. Both groups navigated language barriers at a time when Internet access was still relatively new to find the latest information on the media that they consumed straight from the source. Clyde Mandelin, who was the main translator for the fan translation, described this period as "a cycle of hope, hype, and disappointment that has repeated more times than I can count" (Mandelin, 2018b).

The collective actions that the fandom undertook to bring attention to their cause were purposeful and goal-oriented. In 2002, they started a petition to get *Mother 3* released outside of Japan. This petition was explained as "we just wanted to explain to Nintendo that there are a lot of *Mother* fans who love the game still kicking. And screaming" ("*Mother 3* Petition," 2006). To distinguish themselves from other online petitions, they created their own custom platform for

petitions. In addition to written signatures scanned from PDF forms, they also included artwork. The final, printed version of the petition was then sent to Nintendo's offices in the US and Japan, a popular video game magazine, and the game's writer, Shigesato Itoi (Caron, 2008). This period of time has been meticulously archived and organized under the label of "MOTHER 3's Timeline of Hope" (Mandelin, 2018b). The fact that Starmnet.net, *EarthBound* Central, and Mandelin have meticulously archived and organized the history of the game and its fandom also indicates the dedication of the *EarthBound* fandom. Their organized actions aimed to show their enthusiasm for the game to Nintendo.

Throughout this period, Nintendo assumes the role of antagonist in opposition to the *EarthBound*/*Mother 2* fandom's demands. The fandom's appeals to Nintendo show that they understood the power that Nintendo holds over the media that they consume. As the *Mother 3* fan localization project will show later in this chapter, fans navigated the precarious liminal space they occupy in order to avoid receiving a cease-and-desist letter from Nintendo (Hills, 2017).

Interestingly, Nintendo has acknowledged *EarthBound* fans on multiple occasions. The former CEO of Nintendo of America, Reggie Fils-Aime, has been asked the question so often that the entire situation has become somewhat of a recurring joke (Wright, 2020). Furthermore, Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of the Super Mario Bros. series and an executive at Nintendo, has acknowledged the petitions in a few of his interviews (Reidman, 2006). Despite the high visibility of the *EarthBound* fandom and their persistent demand for an official localization of *Mother 3*, Nintendo has maintained its silence on the status of a possible *Mother 3* localization. This dynamic between Nintendo and fans is further impacted by the distance between English-speaking fans and Japan. Nintendo acts as a gatekeeper between Japanese media and foreign

audiences interested in consuming that media. The strategies employed by *EarthBound*/*Mother 2* fans to navigate this dynamic in the liminal space they occupy are similar to that of anime and manga fans, which further sheds light on how fans negotiate their consumption of transnational media.

4.3 Accessing the original, Japanese text

Fans of Japanese media not only consume media but come to imagine Japan through that media (Consalvo, 2016). Considering how content is mediated through translations, the relationship that they form with this media depends significantly on how content is localized (Carlson & Corliss, 2011). This dynamic also exists with consumers of other kinds of Japanese media, such as anime. In fact, players' consumption of games in the late 1990s and early 2000s has many similarities to that of anime fans. In both cases, the Internet effectively reduced the distance between these fans and desired media texts in Japan. Anime fans and video game fans have both operated in what Denison (2011) and Hills (2017) describe as liminal spaces between official and unofficial and legal and illegal. Anime fans have been able to leverage their experience to influence the industry. Video game fan works that modify game texts, on the other hand, are barriers to entering the console video game industry. Examining how anime fans and video game fans have worked outside of official channels to access Japanese media highlights how video games as media differ from anime and manga. Fans must adopt different practices to adapt to these diverse media spaces.

The rapid spread of the Internet and related technology provided fans with means to appropriate texts for their own use. As a result, they could also perform their own translations and localizations of Japanese media texts. Such technology significantly reduced the distance between non-Japanese fans and Japan (Jenkins, 2006). Before the Internet was widely available,

most information that was available from Japan was drip fed through video game magazines (Rignall, 2015). Anime fans similarly had to rely on people who could travel to Japan or at least had contacts in the country to attain anime TV series recorded on VHS format. Internet technology made accessing information straight from Japanese sources far easier. For anime fans, this meant that they were closer to what they viewed as the authentic, unsullied text of an anime series that may have been edited or censored before being released in English-speaking markets (Cubbison, 2005). *EarthBound* fans used the Internet to gain more information on *Mother 3* before its release in Japan (Mandelin, 2018b). Both groups took advantage of new technology to bypass informational middlemen, which were mostly enthusiast press or the media producers themselves, so that they could access the source of the media they consumed.

The Internet allowed for easier distribution of information and media as well as communication with others over significance geological distances. Even before widespread Internet access, anime fans took advantage of VCRs to record and distribute anime broadcasts. Distribution networks formed among science fiction conventions and anime clubs (Leonard, 2005). The Internet rapidly expanded this existing distribution network, allowing fans to download, edit, and share anime episodes soon after they had aired in Japan. Another practice that was transformed by the Internet and related technology was that of fansubbing. While anime fans had succeeded in adding subtitles to anime recorded in the VHS format, more advanced digital technology enabled inserting subtitle text into video files (Cubbison, 2005). Japanese comic books, called manga, were also increasingly translated by fans with the proliferation of image editing software. These "scanlations" featured English text edited onto scans of Japanese manga straight from the magazines in which they were published (Lee, 2009, 2012; Manovich, Douglass, & Huber, 2011; Zanettin, 2019).

The practices of fansubbing and scanlation allow fans to access the coveted, original cultural text. There were three main reasons for these practices. The first was to provide access to anime and manga series outside of Japan. As Japanese media gained popularity in the West, distribution companies sprung up to buy the distribution rights for various series in regions outside of Japan (Daniels, 2008). Even so, anime with less mainstream appeal may not be considered by these companies. Fansubbing filled these gaps. Secondly, fansubs sought to ameliorate the issue of time; there was a period of lag between a company getting the rights to distribute an anime or manga series and when consumers actually had access to them. Fansubbing was much faster because it used video files recorded directly from the original Japanese broadcasts (Cubbison, 2005; Denison, 2011).

A third reason for creating unofficial translations of manga and anime was to provide alternatives to series that were heavily modified or censored in their regional releases. In the US, anime and manga distributors would often modify elements considered offensive, such as sexual content, violence, and religious references (Daniels, 2008). Fansubbing and scanlations were viewed by some as being closer to and more respectful of the original Japanese text. Fans who were interested in Japan increasingly desired to be as close as possible to what they imagined as the original text that Japanese audiences watched or read (Cubbison, 2005).

For video games, the motivation to produce a fan translation was often the result of a game simply not being localized. The first major fan translation of a console Japanese RPG was *Final Fantasy V*, which had not been released outside of Japan at the time (Consalvo, 2013b). Video game translation requires hacking and is significantly more resource intensive than fansubs' video files or scanlations' image scans (Lee 2009, 2012). A fan-made translation of a game requires what is called ROM hacking, a process that requires reverse-engineering a game's

programming code to find how and where the game's text is stored (Muñoz Sánchez, 2009; Muscar, 2006; Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011). Such text includes story dialogue, menu text, and sometimes subtitles for cinematic cutscenes. This process can range in difficulty depending on how the game was programmed originally. One of the difficulties of localizing *Mother 3*, for example, was the fact that text was not neatly organized in the game's programming code. Furthermore, numerous hacks and alterations to the code were required to make displaying the Latin alphabet within the game's various interfaces properly (Mato, 2008).

Fansubbing, scanlations, and ROM hacks are examples of technology giving fans more control over media production. This does not mean that production was completely democratized, however. From the perspective of animation studios and media firms in Japan as well as publishers in other countries, distributing fansubs and scanlations are acts of piracy (Cubbison, 2005; Muscar, 2006). In the past decade, these companies have increasingly cracked down on the distribution of fansubs and scanlations (Hodgkins, 2020; Manry, 2010).

The legality of ROM hacking is more ambiguous. Console video games are developed as closed systems. Unlike PC games, which grew out of a culture of open-source access to games' programming code, console games are controlled by the hardware manufacturers (Postigo, 2003). This model has been in place since Nintendo entered the American video game industry in 1985. Publishers are held to strict standards before they are allowed to produce and sell software for video game console platforms. ROM hacking defies this arrangement, which leads to tension between fans and video game producers. In many cases, fan projects that aim to modify console games have been forcibly stopped with cease-and-desist letters from either game publishers or console manufacturers such as Nintendo and Sony (Kim, 2019; Muñoz Sánchez, 2009; Perry, 2016; Van Allen, 2020).

In the anime industry, anime distributors have been able to establish a sort of compromise by working with anime fans. The streaming video website Crunchyroll originally hosted fansubs. After entering agreements with Japanese and non-Japanese producers, the website has become a hub for official subtitles of anime. In many cases, episodes of shows are released simultaneously with the Japanese broadcast. Making anime available in a timely and easy to access manner reduces the appeal of piracy (Denison, 2011; Lee, 2011). Part of the reason that Crunchyroll was able to partner with Japanese anime producers is likely connected to earlier periods of anime fandom. A few North American distribution companies, such as A.D. Vision, were founded by fans who wanted to expand the reach of anime to their own countries ("A.D. Vision," n.d., Leonard, 2005).

Such an arrangement does not exist in the video game industry. In a few cases, fans have opened localization companies that work freelance (Consalvo, 2013b). Outside of these smaller firms, larger hardware and software producers possess most of the power in the industry. A company such as Nintendo, for example, either uses their internal Treehouse team or they outsource localizations to trusted outside firms (Schreier, 2014). If a game publisher has no intent of releasing a game outside of Japan, players normally have no option except to import the game from stores that specialize in Japanese imports. In these cases, the language barrier provides varying levels of challenge for players. The language barrier is especially limiting in the case of RPGs, a genre that relies heavily on text.

Creating an unofficial translation such as *Mother 3* goes against the intentions of video game producers regardless of fans' motivations. Fans want to play a game in their native language, but game publishers may not see the game as being profitable outside of Japan (Muñoz Sánchez, 2009). The *Mother 3* fan localization is notable not only because it gained a lot of

attention, but also because the members of the ROM hacking team navigated the liminal space in which they operated to avoid receiving a cease-and-desist letter from Nintendo (Denison, 2011; Hills, 2017). The strategies that the team used will be discussed later in the chapter.

Anime and manga fandoms in North America helped spread the popularity of anime through official and unofficial means. Fansubs and scanlations have been credited as major parts of the growth of anime and manga outside of Japan despite their illegal status (Jenkins, 2006; Leonard, 2005). Fansub and scanlation groups navigated the dubious legality of their work by providing their work for free. Most fansub groups displayed a disclaimer in their videos stating that their work was not meant to be sold for profit. Some groups claimed that they would stop providing translations of an anime or manga if it was licensed in their language or region (Daniels, 2008). Even with these ethical considerations, fansubs and scanlation were still considered piracy by Japanese producers and their affiliated distributors. However, as the Crunchyroll example shows, some fans have successfully reached a compromise with corporations in some cases. The popularity of anime in North America was built on unofficial and official sources that operated within and outside of legal boundaries (Denison, 2011).

The *Mother 3* fan localization team adopted similar ethical positions as fansubbers. The stated intention of their project was to provide a high-quality localization in the absence of an official one created by Nintendo. They framed their work as not seeking economic capital or even social capital (Mato, 2007c). Furthermore, they stated that if Nintendo decided to localize the game officially, they would drop the project and support the official product. Five years after the fan translation patch was completed, Mandelin even offered to give Nintendo his translation work for free (Schreier, 2013)[10]. An offer like this is highly unusual, since this means possibly

[10]Mandelin notes that he has been in contact with people working for Nintendo in the past. Members of the official Nintendo localization team, Treehouse, are familiar with the fan translation work (Mato, 2007b).

exposing the fan project to a cease-and-desist letter. There are a few, rare cases of fan work being used by the industry through collaboration (Consalvo, 2013b). Nintendo, however, has never collaborated in such a manner. Among the major console manufacturers, Nintendo is known for being particularly protective of their intellectual property (McFerran, 2021; Perry, 2016).

Another major difference between anime fans and *EarthBound*/*Mother* fans is that the former have established a framework for translating (via subtitles) and distributing their fan work. Online, fansubs were distributed via websites, Internet Relay Chat, and Torrent trackers. The process for subtitling anime is standardized and applied across any television program broadcast in Japan. Manga scanlation is similarly standardized, since they are all created from scanned manga magazine pages (Cubbison, 2005; Lee, 2009, 2012; Leonard, 2005; Manovich, Douglass, & Huber, 2011).

ROM hacking, on the other hand, varies widely by genre and each individual game. Games are programmed differently, which affects the difficulty of hacking its code. A website that keeps track of and distributes ROM hacks (only the patches, not the ROM files), called romhacking.net, distributes hacks as separate files from the game ROM itself (Consalvo, 2013b). Distributing the actual ROM file, on the other hand, is illegal (Muscar, 2006). While similar tools are used for hacking ROMs, the overall approach to doing so differs between every game (Muñoz Sánchez, 2009).

The affordances of video game media ultimately shape the ROM hacking scene. Like anime and manga fans, video game fans seek out media from Japan through unofficial channels when they cannot access it otherwise. However, video games are more complex than anime, distributed through video files, and manga, distributed through image files. ROM hacks that

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modify various elements of games are relatively common, but fan localizations are rare. The labor required for translating text in a game requires more sophisticated skill sets than subtitling anime or editing manga scans.

4.3.1 "Do-It-Yourself Devotion"

The *Mother 3* fan translation is an excellent case study of fan-directed localization. The team working on the game claimed ownership of the game text, *Mother 3*, to argue for the legitimacy of their work. Furthermore, the *Mother 3* fan translation project team avoided legal challenges from the publisher of the game, Nintendo. They accomplished this by being transparent and making their goals clear, establishing distance between their project and the official work of Nintendo's localization professionals, and adhering to a strict philosophy against any kind of monetary gain as a result of their labor. Their goal was not to be in an antagonistic relationship with Nintendo, but rather to persuade them to localize *Mother 3*.

The *Mother 3* fan translation project began with a clear declaration from one of the project's members:

> You might think that *8 years* of petitioning the deaf Nintendo gods would have instilled some better common sense in us, **but in our defense, we're a very optimistic lot**. Ever since Itoi announced that he was finished with the game, we've waited pensively, hoping for any scrap of an announcement from Nintendo. 6 months after the release of the game in Japan, we had pretty much gotten the picture - NoA had no plans to bring the game to us. (Reidman, 2006)

Reidman was a prominent member of the *EarthBound* community and staff of the fan site Starmen.net. His blog post seemed to speak for the fandom as a whole and marked the beginning of the fan project's navigation of the precarious legality of fan localizations. This declaration

also drew a line. Before this point, discussion of obtaining a copy of the game was limited in Starmen.net's forums. Aside from importing, the only way to play *Mother 3* was to download the game as a ROM file, which was illegal. While creating an English patch for the game is not illegal, doing so entails downloading a copy of the game. Piracy was thus an implied part of this process (Muscar, 2006).

During the project, Nintendo loomed as an antagonist that could threaten the project at any moment. This fear was based on past instances of Nintendo sending cease-and-desist letters to fan projects. Compared to other game publishers, Nintendo is more litigious. They have submitted cease-and-desist letters to people organizing tournaments for games in the *Super Smash Bros.* series, unauthorized controller modifications, and ROM hacks based on Nintendo properties (Kim, 2019; Van Allen, 2020). The *Mother 3* fan translation was arguably close to past projects that Nintendo had shut down. The fan translation team employed a few strategies to avoid explicitly violating copyright. These strategies further blurred the lines between producer and consumer as well as official and unofficial.

The caution exercised by *EarthBound* fans is somewhat similar to dynamics that developed in fansubbing communities. Some fansubbers adhered to the policy of stopping production of a fansub if the title was purchased by a distributor in their region (Daniels, 2008). However, this policy was not shared by all fansub groups. Anime fans are a large and diverse group. Whereas some fansubbers justified engaging in piracy to distribute subtitled anime video files, other groups embraced piracy completely. In contrast, *EarthBound* fans are a smaller group focused on one game series. The fan translation of *Mother 3* consisted of a group of ROM hackers and translators who had control over setting the project's operations and goals. As a result, they followed a strict policy that discouraged piracy. They also stated that if Nintendo did

decide to officially localize *Mother 3* during the duration of their project, they would immediately stop working on their fan translation (Schreier, 2013).

Transparency was maintained through regular blog updates by the main translator, Clyde Mandelin. He informed other fans of his progress throughout the process of the entire project and explained his work in detail. He often invoked his emotional attachment to the game:

I'm always thinking "Oh man, people are gonna LOVE when they get to this part" or "people are gonna crap their pants here" and just stuff like that. It's really hard to describe. I think what I'm trying to say is that as I've translated the script, I've come about as extremely close to the raw emotions invoked by the game as one can get, and that I'm trying really hard to make sure it gets transmitted to the players too. I want you guys to feel as messed up as I have. (Mato, 2007a).

Fans in the replies to his blog posts regularly shared similar sentiments.

I am glad to hear that you are making your best effort to translate the feel of the game. The charm of Earthbound was weaved into the text of the game. Translating the original Japanese verbatim to English was my biggest fear for this completely free translation. Your update puts me at ease. That said, I don't care if it takes another year or another ten years to finish. (TheRunawayFive, 2007)

Mandelin's blog posts served as a way for other members of the fan community to respond and provide feedback to his updates. For the most part, these posts expressed appreciation and support for the project.

They also distanced their unofficial fan localization work from the official work carried out by Nintendo. ROM hacking as a labor practice somewhat resembles PC game modifications. The motivations for the *Mother 3* fan translation team also somewhat match those of PC game

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modders. According to Postigo (2003), there are three main motivations for modders: artistic and

creative appeal, the ability to further engage with games they like, and the potential to use their

modding experience when applying for work with a game developer on the industry side. The

first two motives apply in the case of the *Mother 3* fan translation. The desire to ensure that the

game looks official requires artistic and creative finesse on the part of the translator and the

ROM hackers. The blog post declaring the beginning of the fan translation project also argued

that the project team were doing this labor out of love for the *Mother* series (Reidman, 2006).

Unlike PC game modding, however, fan translation and ROM hacking are not supported

by the console game industry. Mandelin argues that his work on this fan translation could make

entering a career as a localization professional in the industry more difficult (Mato, 2007c). He

discusses how he had applied for a localization position at Nintendo in the past and argues that

working on the *Mother 3* fan translation may preclude him from being hired from Nintendo in

the future:

> I'm not unknown by higher-ups at Nintendo, I applied for an opening there summer of
>
> 2006 on a lark, even had an interview with the chief localizer guy … and even discussed
>
> MOTHER 3 stuff a little bit. I didn't get the position, but they absolutely know who I am,
>
> know a lot about me, know all my contact info, etc. etc. Not good. (Mato, 2007c)

Furthermore, he states that, "I'm also pretty sure that by working on this translation regardless of

that fact pretty much means I'll definitely never, ever work there now" (Mato, 2007c). Contrary

to modding PC games bringing modders closer to PC game publishers, modding games in the

console space is viewed negatively by game publishers and developers. Mandelin, who is

employed as a translator for anime, makes it clear in his blog posts that he has no intention to

work for a game publisher in the future. He clearly establishes that he is translating *Mother 3* as a

fan instead of as a professional.

The *Mother 3* fan translation navigated the precarious liminal space between creativity

and piracy by working within both neoliberal and gift economy frameworks (Denison, 2011;

Hills 2017). First, they had a strict policy of not making money from the project. Second, they

encouraged others in the community to import a copy of *Mother 3* to support the series.

Mandelin was clear about his desire to avoid making any kind of profit from the project: "I don't

want any money involved with this project, donations or otherwise. Money makes things icky,

and makes it seem much more illegal in companies' eyes probably" (Mato, 2007c). Avoiding any

monetary gain from the project provided their work more legitimacy as a labor of love within the

online video game community of fans and players. Encouraging support of the *Mother* series and

related merchandise established legitimacy within the capitalistic system of the video game

industry. Their skillful navigation between these two spaces likely contributed to the success of

the project.

4.4 The official unofficial localization of Mother 3

4.4.1 Sensuous ROM hacking

The *Mother 3* fan localization stands out from other fan projects because of its insistence

on quality equivalent to an official localization. This strategy gives the localization a sense of

authenticity that is not usually present in fan projects. Furthermore, Mandelin's role in the

project is worth focusing on because he is also a professional translator for anime distributors.

He operated in the space between industry and fandom when working on this project, and his

experience shows the differences between the two spheres of popular culture. Ultimately, the

Mother 3 fan localization is an example of sensuous translation and the blurred spaces between

cultural producers and consumers. The distinctions between the two are more complex than the former seeking profit and the latter being motivated solely by love for a media product. The fan localization team worked in both spaces to establish authenticity for their project.

Nornes (1999) described what he would later call sensuous subtitling as "tampering with both language and the subtitling apparatus itself" (Nornes, 2004, p. 464). The sensuousness of the *Mother 3* fan translation is present in the labor required for hacking a ROM and translating text contained in it. Much of this labor is described by Mandelin as a harrowing tale of trial and error (Mato, 2008). As discussed earlier, ROM hacking involves becoming intimately familiar with a game's programming code. Aside from Mandelin, other prominent members of the team were Reid Young (Reidman), Jeffman, sblur, Harmony7, and Byuu. Young estimated that around twelve individuals worked on the project in total (Caron, 2008).

Over the course of the project, Mandelin posted regular updates on a Starmet.net blog. His updates provided in depth explanations of his work on the project. These updates tracked the various triumphs and setbacks he encountered along the path to completing the translation patch. Two themes that emerged in Mandelin's blog posts were the importance of the fan translation's quality and his goal to remain faithful to the *EarthBound* localization in his translation (Mato, 2008).

The actual labor of conducting a fan localization of a game consists of two parts. First, the game's script must be translated from Japanese into English. This is the easier part of the project. The second part is reverse engineering the video game's programming code to locate where the game stores the text that needs to be translated. As mentioned earlier, the difficulty of this task can vary widely depending on the game (Muñoz Sánchez, 2009; Pérez-González, 2019). Once the text is located, ROM hackers usually determine how to reprogram the game's various

interfaces to be capable of displaying the Latin alphabet. This task can be difficult even for

internal localization teams operating with the support of a game's publisher (Mackey, 2016).

The way in which text is displayed in software is determined by the programming code

that exists alongside it. In *Mother 3's* code, display routines determined how text was displayed

in the game's various interfaces. One of the challenges the team encountered was having enough

space in the game's memory to fit English text. They also had to modify the display routines to

allow for variable width fonts. A major difference between Japanese kana (as well as Chinese

characters) and the Latin alphabet is that the former are rendered in the same width.

Modifications to display routines required working at the level of assembly language, a deep

level of programming code that is close to machine code instructions that are the basis of

computing ("Assembler language," 2014). Young described this work's difficulty as being "like

trying to teach someone to speak another language by tweaking bits of their DNA" (Caron,

2008). ROM hacking *Mother 3* thus required delving deep into the game's code.

All this work was done with the goal of producing a fan localization that was as close as

possible in quality to an official localization. The team drew on industry standards to inform their

localization decisions. In his blog, Mandelin repeatedly states that he aimed to produce a

localization that was exactly like what a Nintendo localization of the game would have

hypothetically looked like (Mato, 2007c). The importance of this goal to the project also

highlights the somewhat paradoxical position that the team occupied in relation to Nintendo. On

the one hand, members of the fan localization team were careful to distance themselves from

Nintendo. The final version of the translation patch includes an extra screen when the game starts

up that states that it is not to be sold for profit and that it was the effort of a team doing the work

for free. The strategies that the team employed to establish the localization as authentic show

how they operated in a space between industry and fans. Their labor was not for the sake of profit, yet they still abided by industry standards as markers of quality.

Figure 9. New graphic added to Mother 3's title screen. This extra title screen added to the fan localization patch emphasizes that the patch is a free product not made for profit. It also provides information on the version number and the fan localization project website.

Another way that the team sought to make the *Mother 3* fan translation authentic was by drawing on the *EarthBound* localization to guide their decisions. The font used in the final version of the patch was designed to look like the font used in the English version of *EarthBound*. Translations of terminology were based on *EarthBound*, as well. Even some graphics that were changed in the *EarthBound* localization and were featured as cameos in *Mother 3* were changed to match the English localization. During localization, a statue of an octopus was changed to a pencil so that the translated pun it referenced would make sense to English-speaking players. The scene in which this reference to *EarthBound* appears is minor, yet ensuring that even this small detail matched *EarthBound* instead of *Mother 2* was important to the localization team. This strategy was another way of establishing authenticity of the fan localization. Adhering to the English localization also shows how fans view the *EarthBound* localization as an authentic text (Mandelin, 2016). A good *Mother 3* localization not only

featured a good translation, but also referenced the localization work of Lindblom that English-speaking players were familiar with.
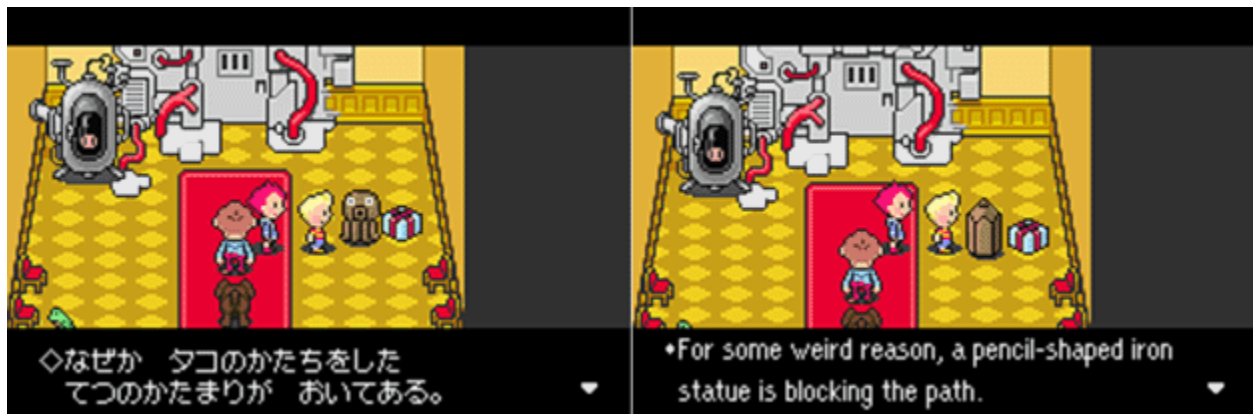
Figure 10. *A comparison between the original Japanese and fan translation of Mother 3.* Left: Unedited image from *Mother 3* showing an octopus statue, a reference to *Mother 2.* Right: The edited *Mother 3* fan localization graphic that references the graphical asset change in *EarthBound*'s localization.

4.4.2 The space between official and unofficial

This case study is also an opportunity to examine the blurred lines between fans and producers. As the project's main translator, Mandelin operated in another kind of liminal space. In this case, he was translating as a fan and drawing on his professional experience. His role in the project is an example of the increasingly blurred lines between fans and producers that the Internet has made possible. As discussed earlier, fan localizations occupy a liminal space between legal and illegal, official and unofficial (Hills, 2017). In his blog updates discussing the localization project, he discussed both his professional experience as a translator and emotional connection to the series. He described his motivation for working on the game in terms of the pride he took in his translation and coding work as well as his dedication to the *Mother* series and the *EarthBound* fan community (Mato, 2021). His blog posts not only provide a record of his labor on this project, they are also a narrative showing the intimate nature of fan localization work.

In this context, four major areas of difference separate official translation work and fan translation. Deadlines and expectations are two major differences. For an official translation project, deadlines are strict and time for project completion is usually very tight. Fan translations rarely have set deadlines; however, the expectations of fans can be unrealistic. Many in the *EarthBound* fan community were not aware of how much labor was required for ROM hacking and translations. Since Mandelin was posting in a blog with an open comment section, complaints and impatient comments were mixed in with supportive ones (C. Mandelin, personal communication, February, 2018).

Official translations usually give the translator access to resources such as glossaries and developer notes. Sometimes the original creator, whether an individual or development team, are also available. Having this kind of support means that reverse engineering programming code is not needed (Mackey, 2016). After a translation is finished, fan translators also have some flexibility and can upload updates or fixes to their work easily. The *Mother 3* fan translation patch has received updates after its initial release in 2008 (C. Mandelin, personal communication, February, 2018). Recently, another update to the fan translation patch was released to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of *Mother 3*'s release (Mato, 2021).

4.5 Conclusion

Sensuous translation, as described by Nornes (2018), breaks industry conventions and engages with foreign origins of media in an intimate matter. The very act of creating a ROM hack is sensuous translation. The fact that ROM hackers must work with text and game code shows how game localization is inherently technical. The fan localization team for *Mother 3* had to not only translate text but insert it properly in code. They also had to ensure that the code ran

correctly so that text appeared properly in the game's interfaces. Linguistic translation and computer programming are both required to complete a game localization.

Despite adhering closely to industry standards, the *Mother 3* fan localization is different from an official release in one key manner: access. Fan localizations almost always require the game's ROM file, an emulator to run the game software on a platform other than the console it was developed for, and the patch file itself which often requires software to apply the patch to the ROM (Altice, 2015). Furthermore, one must have the technical knowledge to ensure that the game is patched correctly and that it can be played using an emulator. *Mother 3* is accessible to highly enthusiastic fans that have followed the series, and most people playing it are likely aware of the fact that the game was never officially released outside of Japan. Expanding the audience for the game outside of dedicated fans is unlikely, since the game is not available in a retail store or on a cloud platform such as Steam. Such technical barriers will always separate even the most passionately developed fan localization from something that the game's developer or publisher could produce. The closed console system, unlike more open PC game development, has gatekeepers who discourage modification of games. ROM hackers break these rules in order to provide access to the game beyond national boundaries. Consalvo (2013) appropriately describes this work as "unintended travel" (p. 119).

The discourse surrounding the production of the *Mother 3* fan localization provides a clear example of the complexity of fan and producer relationships in the twenty-first century. Fan-created translation, which is driven more by passion than profit, does not exist entirely outside of capitalist frameworks. Hills (2017) argues that cult film and cult fandom still operate within neoliberal frameworks and defined neoliberalism in this context as "a historically specific culture of capitalism" (p. 81). The *Mother 3* fan localization illustrates how video game fans

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navigate this space. The fan localization team operated within capitalist frameworks even as they provided a free product. They used the well-received localization of *EarthBound* as a foundation for their own work, which connected their work to the official product that fans already knew. Though creating a ROM hack defies Nintendo's intellectual property rights, the *Mother 3* fan localization team aligned themselves with industry standards. This strategy reinforced their desire for an official localization that never arrived.

Perceptions of officiality and authenticity were crucial aspects of the discourse surrounding this fan localization. Unlike other fan translation projects that sought to make a game available in any manner possible, the *Mother 3* fan localization team adopted the style of the original game and industry standards to imbue the project with a sense of authenticity and quality (Consalvo, 2013b; Mandiberg, 2018; O'Hagan, 2017). The standards of Nintendo's internal Treehouse localization team were what fan localizers aspired toward. Mandelin even once stated that the team was motivated to create this localization because they feared that if they did not, another group would produce one of lower quality (Mato, 2007b). Denison (2011) observed similar competitiveness in fansub communities. Providing a quality product was not enough. Fans acting as producers are further driven to provide the best possible product. Some fans do so while claiming that the official English translation is not authentic, as in the case of *Fire Emblem: Fates*. The *Mother 3* fan translation, on the other hand, wanted to create something as close to 'official' quality as possible. Establishing authenticity in this case is even more important because of the status of fan localization projects as being outside of the closed console system. Other fan localization projects have made compromises, such as leaving some Japanese text graphics in the game ("Translations - Star Ocean," 2016). The high quality of the *Mother 3* fan localization distinguishes it from other fan localizations.

Localization, official or unofficial, means access to the text and an expansion of characters and worlds with which fans have formed connections. As a result, some fan communities will go to great lengths to have access to any sequel or related text. Even now, many fans in the *EarthBound* community hope for the possibility of an official localization of *Mother 3*. The *Mother 3* fan localization released version 1.3 of the fan translation patch in April 2021 for the fifteenth anniversary of *Mother 3's* release (Mato, 2021). This update comes after the version 1.2 release seven years before. Benjamin (1923/2012) credited translation with giving texts an afterlife. The *Mother 3* fan localization similarly gives *EarthBound* and the *Mother* series enduring relevance. Though unlikely, someday Nintendo could release an official localization for *Mother 3* on the Nintendo Switch Online service. Fans continue to hold out hope, and as a result, *Mother 3* continues to be discussed in online game communities. Even now, the story of this game's unintended travel outside of Japan continues.

Chapter 5 Discursive Constructions of Japanese Games through Genre

5.1 Introduction

Game journalism differs from news journalism in many ways. Due to its roots in enthusiast press, it lacks the rigorous journalistic standards present in more traditional journalism. Game journalists operate between players and the industry as the mediators of information about games. Most game journalists are players and some journalists also transition into the industry and vice versa (Perreault & Vos, 2018, 2020). The closeness of game press to the audience (players) and game producers defines the dynamics of game journalism. Game developers possess valuable information and will only share such information with sources that they trust. Even as game press has transitioned from its early magazine-based era to less centralized online sources such as YouTube, Instagram, and other social media platforms, game journalists still play an important role in mediating discourse about video games between the industry and players (Barkl, 2011; Carlson, 2009; Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009).

Video game journalists set the agenda for many players. With their access to industry insiders in an industry that is infamously secretive, game journalists can influence what large communities of players think about games (Danesi, 2017; O'Hagan & Chandler, 2015). As mediators of value between the game industry and players, game journalists writing for game magazines and websites have been crucial sources of information for players. One of the earliest examples of game press playing this role is *Nintendo Power* magazine, which functioned as a marketing tool for Nintendo of America. It focused on informing players of what games were

worth purchasing as well as how to play them (Cifaldi, 2012). Journalists do not tell others what to think, but they do influence how players talk about games online and elsewhere.

Video games are post-Fordist commodities, and their value can be mediated and remediated through discourse (Kline, Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2003). With video games, hype for future games is particularly important. A large part of game journalism is previewing games that are still in development and reviewing games that have recently been released. Game journalists thus play a key role in communicating the value of games to players by influencing the discourse surrounding any particular game. In the case of Japanese video games, specifically those of the role-playing game genre (RPG), they can communicate the value of localized commodities from Japan.

Game developers and publishers do not share valuable information about new games with journalists for free, however. Public relations and perceptions are crucial to their success. Much of the information that they provide to journalists is attached to strict guidelines. When a new game is released, game publishers usually send out early copies for various game magazines and websites to play and review. Game reviewers operate under review embargoes that limit what information about games they can publish before the game's release. Some examples of these limits are forbidding reviewers from sharing details about story spoilers. Publishers may also ask that reviewers avoid technical details such as game mechanics (Totilo, 2013; 2021).

Breaking embargoes or otherwise defying game publishers can result in blacklisting, in which a game company refuses to communicate with a specific game magazine or website. Nintendo cut contact with a Portuguese game news website after it leaked designs of new, yet to be revealed Pokémon before the official release of *Pokémon Sword* and *Shield* in late 2019 (Phillips, 2020). Publishers have also punished game news sites for their reviews of games. A

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Spanish game website was blacklisted by Square Enix in 2016 because they had given *Final Fantasy XV* a review score lower than the average on the Metacritic aggregator site. They were also accused of providing lower scores than other Spanish language game websites. Whether the accusations were accurate or not, the website lost access to early review copies of Square Enix titles. Furthermore, blacklisting can result in losing access to interviews with developers working for certain game publishers (Schreier, 2016). Game media outlets must retain positive relationships with game firms, lest they lose access to valuable information, early game reviews, and even developer interviews.

The past two chapters have discussed Japanese localization conducted officially and unofficially. In those cases, localizers focused on narrative, game mechanics, and immersion in games. This chapter, on the other hand, shifts perspective to discourse on a larger scale about Japan and the video games it produces. As discussed previously, cultural differences between Japan and anglophone countries transcend language and aesthetics (Iwabuchi, 1998). The experience of gameplay itself is influenced by cultural contexts (Lepre, 2014). Past chapters also examined moments where the localization process breaks down, both in the case of problems encountered during the process or games not being localized at all.

Furthermore, this chapter interrogates how game journalism discourse 'translates the translation,' so to speak. Through varying types of video game coverage, game journalists weave narratives for new game releases. With Japanese games, journalists also traverse language barriers to bring players information from Japan. Over time, English language game journalism has crafted narratives about games from Japan. In the 1990s, when *Nintendo Power* was prominent, Japan was framed as a place where video games flourished and were even ahead of the rest of the world (Tilden, 1988).

Japan itself is a brand. Nation branding is beneficial to a country's capacity for soft power, defined by Nye (2004) as a country's capacity to persuade rather than coerce others on the international stage. Soft power is exerted through culture, political ideology, and national policy instead of military might. The proliferation of Hollywood film worldwide is one example of the US's significant cultural influence on the rest of the world. Japan's soft power successes, in contrast, have come from domestic visual media such as manga, video games, and anime (Sakamoto & Allen, 2011). Each of these different kinds of media developed in the postwar era: the father of manga, Osamu Tezuka (who was inspired by Disney) began publishing his work in the 1950s; anime flourished after the end of the war; and video games combined the resources of Japan's toy makers with its highly developed digital hardware market (Aoyama & Izushi, 2003; Napier, 2005; Schodt, 1986).

Game journalists also play games, which is a major part of their job. Game reviews, one of the most prominent aspects of game journalism, are evaluations of new and upcoming games. In many cases, specific journalists are assigned a game to play for a review (Zagal, Ladd, & Johnson, 2009). They then evaluate a game, usually in the form of a published article that addresses different aspects of the game such as narrative and gameplay. These evaluations are inherently subjective and feed into larger discourses about games, genres, and the cultures that created them. The necessity of playing games sets game journalism apart from other kinds of journalism. Game journalists, to some extent, must be experts at games to review them. Even if they are not reviewing games, they must be skilled enough to play the games that they cover.

The focus of this chapter is the role-playing game (RPG) genre. As discussed in previous chapters, RPGs have driven innovation in Japanese to English video game localization because of their large scripts (O'Hagan, 2009b). They also have great potential for forming affective

connections with players because they are usually designed to take at least forty hours to finish. Characters in RPGs, whether they are preset or created by the player, engage in a long narrative mixed with gameplay elements such as combat, puzzles, and exploration (Schules, Peterson, & Picard, 2018). RPGs mix storytelling and player interaction in many ways. The ways in which different game creators address the intertwining of gameplay and story in RPGs lay at the root of a fairly recent debate as to whether Japanese RPGs are considered "real" RPGs or not.

In the case this chapter examines, discourse about Japanese games shifted from mostly positive in the 1990s to negative in the late 2000s. In his analysis of the valence of discussion of JRPGs in game press, Pelletier-Gagnon (2018) identified 2007 as the year that negative impressions overtook positive impressions in number. This change was the result of shifting dynamics in the industry, such as the prevalence of HD television technology. The seventh console generation began with the release of the Microsoft Xbox 360 in late 2005. The competing PlayStation 3 was released the next year. Both consoles boasted powerful graphical processors that took advantage of new HD TV technology and supported games with crisp, clear graphics that rivaled former generations of gaming ("Seventh generation of video game consoles," 2022). HD game development also caused video game development costs to rise significantly. Game development budgets jumped into the hundreds of millions, rivaling that of major motion picture production (T.C., 2014). As a result, many Japanese companies struggled with rising development costs.

Prior to the HD console era, a common practice among Japanese developers was to use proprietary engines to develop games. In the new HD era, however, this was a costly and inefficient practice. The increased computational power of game hardware required more labor to create every element of a game, from models to environments (Theodore, 2016). Large game

developers such as Electronic Arts and Activision Blizzard were able to adapt to such large budgets. Japanese developers, on the other hand, struggled with these ballooning costs. The beginning of the HD era of games was thus marked by many Japanese game developers trying to catch up with developers in Europe and North America. In the meantime, the input and quality of games from Japan declined somewhat (Parish, 2014c; Te, 2015). Furthermore, the Japanese home console market was shrinking (Reuters Staff, 2008; Saint, 2010). Japanese game developers needed to increasingly focus on non-Japanese markets for success (Tabuchi, 2010).

Non-Japanese players and journalists' reactions to Japanese developers struggle during the early HD console era coalesced into a narrative describing Japanese game development as being in decline. Such discourse was encouraged by one prominent Japanese game developer, Keiji Inafune of Capcom. After making comments about the decline of Japanese game design at the 2007 Tokyo Game Show, Inafune became a recurring figure in English-language game press (Ashcraft, 2012; Carless, 2012; Gach, 2012; Gilbert, 2009; Kohler, 2012; Pitcher, 2013; Yin-Poole, 2010). He also led an initiative at Capcom to incorporate aesthetics and elements in games and even work with Western developers to appeal to players in the West (Crecente, 2009). His remarks coincided with the change in impressions of Japanese RPGs identified by Pelletier-Gagnon (2018).

This narrative coalesced around the RPG genre. Japanese RPGs, which were more prominent on console platforms such as the Sony PlayStation, became the focus of criticisms of Japanese games as a whole. Many game journalists, who are themselves players and fans, have formed affective connections with RPGs from Japan. RPGs have been popular in Japan since the late 1980s; however, the Japanese RPG with the most worldwide success has been the *Final*

Fantasy series. A major moment in the success of Japanese-style RPGs outside of Japan was the release of *Final Fantasy VII* in 1997 on the Sony PlayStation (Kalata, 2021).

The release of *Final Fantasy VII* was a media event. The first entry in the *Final Fantasy* series on Sony's new PlayStation console, *Final Fantasy VII* took advantage of the increased storage capacity of CD technology. The result was impressive visuals featured in elaborate cutscenes known as full-motion video (FMV). Outside of the cutscenes, the game used low-polygon 3D graphics to portray characters and the game's world. The marketing and advertisements for the game, however, used the FMV scenes effectively to entice players. One of the commercials proclaimed, "More than 200 animators and programmers. A multi-million-dollar production. Over two years in the making!" (Lifestream.net, 2014).

Most importantly, players—many who would later become game journalists—emotionally connected with the *Final Fantasy* series and other prominent Japanese RPG series (Parish, 2014b; Webster, 2011). Nostalgia for popular Japanese RPGs from the 1990s is continually prominent in video game discourse. Companies such as Square Enix frequently release remasters and remakes of their older popular games (Friscia, 2022). Retrospective articles discussing older games and comparing them to newer ones are also plentiful in game press (Frank, 2017; Juba, 2019; Oxford, 2019b).

The discursive shift in which Japanese RPGs were separated from "real" RPGs (primarily of Western origin) is tied to the affective connections that players and game journalists have made with games through the 1980s and 1990s. A decade after *Final Fantasy VII*'s worldwide release, RPGs from Japan were less positively received by game journalists and players (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2018). A parallel to *Final Fantasy VII*'s success is the disappointment of *Final Fantasy XIII*, another game that was highly anticipated and released as the first entry in

that console era. Unlike in 1997, Japanese RPGs now had competition from RPGs that had previously been exclusive to the PC platform, such as *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* (Zagal, Ladd, & Johnson, 2009). The Xbox 360, created by Microsoft, bridged the gap between console and PC markets that had mostly been separate since the 1980s (Byford, 2014).

This chapter discusses the importance of game journalism to players' perceptions of Japanese video games by scrutinizing how game journalists contributed to discourse in which the RPG (soon to become the *J*RPG) became a synecdoche for Japanese video games as a whole. It draws on work by Pelletier-Gagnon (2018), who conducted a textual analysis of video game reviews between the years 1992 and 2014. This chapter also draws from poststructuralist conceptions of genre based on work by Mittell (2001) and Apperley (2006). They both argue that genres as categorizations are not inherent in texts but are instead constructed discursively by industry and audiences. Mittel explains how, for example, the Saturday morning cartoon block was a construction of television program scheduling that eventually affected how media producers in the US viewed all animation. In this context, game press plays an important role as a mediator between audience and industry. Their position is also liminal in the sense that game journalism, audience, and industry are blurred and overlapping.

This chapter first elaborates on the role of game journalism before delving into the history of game journalism and documenting its beginnings in the 1980s. *Nintendo Power* magazine was one of the most successful game magazines in the 1990s and illustrates how game journalists influenced player perception of games in the era of game magazines. This chapter then shifts to discussing the transnational history of the RPG genre in Japan. Inspired by classic Western RPGs like *Ultima* and *Wizardry*, Japanese RPGs developed their own aesthetic and narrative tropes (Barton, 2007a).

Game press reactions to *Final Fantasy XIII* show how game journalists reinforced discursive constructions of Japanese RPGs as a separate genre. Separating RPGs of Japanese origin from RPGs in general marked them with a cultural stench (Iwabuchi, 1998). Whereas fans (as discussed in Chapter Four) of anime and other Japanese media viewed such traces positively, game journalists began to perceive Japanese cultural influences as a stench. Aesthetic choices in JRPGs were compared to other Japanese media, such as anime, to further distinguish them from Western RPGs. Examples of such aesthetic choices are less of an emphasis on realism and stylized animations in combat contexts. Whereas Western RPGs generally present combat realistically, Japanese RPGs focus on the spectacle of combat. For example, combat sequences tend to be elaborately animated in JRPGs using conventions that originated in anime and manga, such as dynamic camera angles and motion lines (Garcia, 2021; Schules, Peterson, & Picard, 2018).

This association includes more than visual or linguistic markets of Japanese culture, however. Japanese RPG game design conventions were also marked as inferior to Western RPGs that supposedly stayed true to their tabletop roots. Some examples of these design conventions were the preference for pre-established characters instead of allowing the player to create their own avatar to traverse the game's narrative and epic, sprawling stories with the goal of saving the world (Garcia, 2021; Kalata, 2021; Rojas, 2012; Schules, Peterson, & Picard, 2018).

Through mediated discourse, game journalists created a new sub-genre of games that rebranded Japanese games for players and readers. Games produced in Japan are, in some cases, seen as representative of the country as a whole. This chapter examines how Japanese RPGs became synecdoche for all Japanese game development. Much of the scrutiny directed toward JRPGs is related to their divergent development from Western RPGs. Schules, Peterson, &

Picard (2018) succinctly describe major differences between the two approaches to RPGs when they state that "JRPGs tell a story, while WRPGs place players in a story" (p. 114). Such differences in narrative construction are at the root of the discursive construction of the JRPG. Game journalists' highlighting JRPGs as different from other RPGs also framed Japan as different from Western game developers.

5.2 What is video game journalism?

On the most basic level, the purpose of video game journalism is to "tell people about games" (MacDonald, 2014). It plays an important role in managing the value of video games as experiential post-Fordist commodities (Consalvo, 2007; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003). Just as localization mediates this meaning between languages and cultures, video game journalists mediate the perceived value of video games to players (Carlson, 2009). Entertainment commodities' value is largely derived from the meanings that they communicate. These journalists provide invaluable knowledge about video games to players who may not have access to such information otherwise. Exclusive information about games, which Consalvo (2007) refers to as gamer capital, is an essential currency to game press and fans alike.

Game press fills several roles by informing players about industry developments: previewing games that are new or still in development, reviewing new games, and providing guidance on how to progress in games. Unlike other forms of entertainment, video games require a certain degree of skill to progress through the game and its narrative (Stacey, 2017). Part of the job of game journalists entails investing a large amount of time in games so that they can be knowledgeable enough to write reviews for them. Their expertise and access to information gives them a high amount of game capital, which originates from the industry and is valuable to the player audience.

Out of these three main functions of game journalism, reviewing games is most relevant to this chapter's analysis. Game reviews are ideally thorough evaluations of a newly released game that assesses the game in terms of playability. Game reviews tend to focus on a game's gameplay mechanics, its visuals, its narrative, and its audio quality. Game reviews prioritize assessing whether players should invest money and time in a game. Considering how reviews can affect a game's commercial success, review scores have occasionally been a source of tension between press and the industry.

Tension over game reviews highlights how game journalism differs from news journalism: First, game magazines began as enthusiast press, and second, the game industry has a significant amount of power over most journalists and game news outlets (Fisher, 2012). Game producers worldwide are incredibly secretive and are reluctant to reveal information about the inner workings of game development (O'Hagan & Chandler, 2016). They offer access to exclusive information worth high amounts of game capital. During the magazine era of game journalism, game producers also provided most of the advertising, giving them leverage over reviews of games they published. In order to secure exclusive access to information ahead of other magazines or websites, game press must appease game producers in many cases. Many games still receive low scores in reviews; however, a major blockbuster game being badly reviewed may lead to some pushback from the developer (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009).

Writing on the game news site Gamasutra, Keza MacDonald (2014) asked what the point of video game journalism is in an environment where anyone can create a platform to talk about games. He highlights how YouTube videos and Twitch streams can be far more financially successful than any game press website, even when they are only featuring older games. Furthermore, MacDonald argues that game journalists should pivot away from just providing

information about games and try to make a more meaningful impact on game culture. He specifically suggests writing in such a way as to make players "think differently about something" (para. 8). He then points to the importance of reporting on video game development culture—examining and critiquing how games are made.

One area that he suggests game journalists expand into is reporting on more than the game itself, but also on how they are developed. As mentioned earlier, game companies generally tightly control information about their internal operations (O'Hagan & Chandler, 2016). This phenomenon is present in both Japan and the West. Journalists and players rarely get an unfiltered view into how game development itself is carried out. For example, Jason Schreier (2021) has reported extensively on the toxic crunch culture at the game developer behind the blockbuster game *Cyberpunk 2077*, CD Projekt Red. His criticism of the company's culture not only provides reasons for why their latest game had so many issues, it also calls attention to the larger issue of crunch time in the game industry. Schreier's work is an example of how game journalism can be more critical and evolve beyond simply covering games.

This new role of game journalism described by MacDonald (2014) is a contrast to the traditional role of video game journalism, which has been to announce new games (usually when the game is still in development), preview games before their release, and then review them ("Indeed Editorial Team," 2021). New platforms like Patreon have made investigative reporting like Schreier's (2021) possible. For the most part, however, game journalism websites are still beholden to the game industry. Funding websites is also less stable than subscriptions and advertisements in the print era. Many game websites have shut down over the past twenty years despite the quality of coverage they have offered (Bailey, 2020; McWhertor, 2013).

Other issues affecting video game journalism are conflicts related to cultural shifts in the video game community. Before Internet access was widespread, access to information on game releases in Japan was gated through video game magazines (Carlson, 2009). Similar to how other Japanese content such as manga and anime were mostly obtained by anime clubs before shifting to widespread distribution on the Internet, players interested in the Japanese side of video games were limited by distance and the language barrier (Cubbison, 2005; Lee, 2011). Game magazines were the only sources of information on the video game scene in Japan (Kohler, 2017). *Nintendo Power*, the magazine published as an extension of Nintendo of America's marketing in North America, had connections to Japanese publishing and was a central source of such information (Cifaldi, 2012). Many issues contained at least one section that offered a drip feed of coverage on games released in Japan. Some of these games would eventually be localized and released in English; however, many games during the 1980s and 1990s never left Japan. Players who could import from Japan and were able to navigate the language barrier gained access to Japanese games otherwise unknown to English-speaking players (Erika, 2016).

5.2.1 Mediators between players and industry

Game journalism's origins as enthusiast press and fandom are still apparent today (Fisher, 2012; Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the majority of game journalists are players, and some also enter the industry after making connections as journalists (Perreault & Vos, 2018, 2020). This high level of crossover is somewhat problematic for how video game press is perceived by some readers. Game journalists have been accused of merely being marketing for games instead of objective sources that evaluate games for consumers (Carlson, 2009; Perreault & Vos, 2020). Since publishers can revoke access to game press outfits that leak information or give negative review scores to a

highly anticipated game, such concerns have some merit. As a result of this dynamic, game press is always reliant on the industry and must carefully maintain positive relationships with game publishers.

The role that games journalism plays in informing players can be broken down by the kind of coverage that they present to readers. From their earliest days, game magazines offered previews of new games coming out in the future. Video game hardware and technology continually improve, which means that new games on the horizon can always promise better visuals, narrative, and other features. With its origins as enthusiast press closely tied to game fandom, game journalism relies on previews and makes hyping new games a high priority (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Perreault & Vos, 2020).

Game journalism is relevant to scholars because game journalists, as enthusiasts, are important sources of information on the game industry. Information provided by their writing can fill in gaps that emerge from the industry actors reticence about their internal operations (Mandiberg, 2015; O'Hagan & Chandler, 2016). Journalists are granted access that allows them to reveal some of what is occurring behind the curtain, so to speak. While some in the game industry are gradually beginning to collaborate more with educators for purposes such as educational games, the way in which they conduct business still relies heavily on non-disclosure agreements (NDAs). Game journalism acts as a bridge not only from industry to interested parties outside (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009) but also across regions.

For games of Japanese origin, specifically, game journalism bridges a spatial and temporal gap between non-Japanese players and Japan. Despite some high-budget blockbuster games produced in Japan using the simultaneous shipment (simship) model where the game is

localized as it is developed, many Japanese games still have a lag time between their release in Japan and international markets (Achkasov, 2017; Dunne, 2006; Gambier, 2016; Schäler, 2010).

Two websites, Andriasang and Gematsu are notable for exclusively covering Japanese game news, which fills a gap in information on Japan created by language barriers. The former was so well known among fans of Japanese games that its closing in 2012 was reported by other game news websites (Hillier, 2012; Lien, 2012). Gematsu, which was created in 2008, is currently one of the best English-language sources of news from Japan. The site is owned and almost entirely run by Sal Romano, who is also its main translator. Some of the important news items that Romano provides are translations of Japanese press releases and articles in Japanese game magazines like *Famitsu* ("About," n.d.). Gematsu thus bridges the gap between English-speaking game markets and Japan. Andriasang and Gematsu were not the first game press outlets to provide this function, however.

5.2.2 History of game journalism

Video game journalism began with magazines, which grew with the medium starting in the early 1980s. In the US, the video game market crash in 1983 slowed down game magazines. However, PC game magazines still proliferated. Much of the game magazine revival later in the decade can be attributed to Nintendo's revival of the market with the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Additionally, Nintendo of America created their own magazine, *Nintendo Power*, in 1989. Since the magazine was created by Nintendo of America, it had significant advantages over its competitors through exclusive access to valuable information. Such information was not just from the American side of Nintendo, but also from Japan. *Nintendo Power* was a hybrid effort between the Japanese and American branches of Nintendo. Because of this partnership,

Nintendo Power often offered glimpses into the Japanese game market that were otherwise inaccessible to players (Cifaldi, 2012).

From the 1980s to 2000s, magazines were the main source of game news (Barkl, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2012, 2017). Players who subscribed to these magazines gained access to information that other players lacked. This information then spread by word-of-mouth, and anyone with access to such knowledge had an advantage over other players. Hearing rumors and learning tricks from others on the playground was one way that people learned new information about games (Oxford, 2020). The Internet transformed game journalism and greatly increased access to game-related information. Game press shifted from magazines to websites and blogs. The dynamics of attaining game capital changed, yet this kind of capital is still important in game communities.

The connectivity of the Internet opened the flood gates of information on video games from outside of the US Much like other kinds of journalism, video game journalism has had to adapt to the information age. From the 1980s to 2000s, game magazines were the main force of game journalism. As video game press shifted to maintaining Internet websites, magazines gradually died out (Barkl, 2011). In the final issue of *Nintendo Power* magazine, Steve Thomason (2012), editor in chief, laments, "It's just a shame the stupid internet had to come along and ruin everything" (p. 4). By this point, numerous other game magazines had already closed. Despite having strong support from Nintendo of America, even *Nintendo Power* ceased publication after an almost twenty-five year run that started in 1988.

The shift from magazines to websites completely changed the social dynamics of game press and the larger game community. Even before social media, many game news websites maintained discussion forums (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009). Jones (2008) argues that socializing

and discussing games with others, in addition to play, are major parts of the experience of playing games (Jones, 2008). Internet access expanded players' networks from groups of friends who lived in the same community to the rest of the world via the World Wide Web. Game discussions that used to take place on the playground extended to Internet platforms such as bulletin board systems, message boards, and social media. Many of these forums were maintained by video game news websites. Dissemination of game knowledge, whether it was simply tips and tricks or cheat codes, could now reach further than any published magazine or strategy guide could manage (Consalvo, 2007; Oxford, 2020). Geographical location no longer limited the reach of game-related discussions, and game communities grew larger as a result (Barkl, 2011).

However, language remains as a barrier between Japan and other game markets. News from the Japanese industry and information about new games that have yet to be localized are valuable commodities (Barkl, 2011). As previously discussed, Andriasang and its successor, Gematsu, are notable for providing translated game news from Japan (Hillier, 2012; Lien, 2012). Even though Gematsu's audience are a relative niche within the larger online community, other game news sites also use it as source for reports on Japanese game releases and related information ("About," n.d.).

5.2.3 Nintendo Power: A Bridge Between the US/Canada and Japan

Nintendo Power provided a bridge between Japan and North America. The magazine also subtly introduced Japanese magazine design and aesthetics to English-speaking players. The magazine was a joint venture between Nintendo of America and Tokuma Shoten, a magazine publisher in Japan (Kemps, 2016). The table of contents in the first issue lists the American staff and the Japanese visual design staff for the magazine (Arakawa, 1988a; "Nintendo Power issue

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1," n.d.). Japanese game magazines of the time featured vibrant, image-heavy designs. Instead of having square columns featuring text organized in blocks, Japanese game magazines and the manga magazines that influenced them integrated text with images (Schodt, 1986). Pages backgrounds featured prominent art that guided the reader's reading of text. The Japanese-inspired visual design set *Nintendo Power* apart from his competitors.

The magazine was also a significant part of English language game press history. Part of Nintendo's successful strategy for dominance in the North American market was cultivating their target audience: young players. Unlike other, less interactive forms of media, video games challenge players and require that they complete these challenges to progress further. Players were hungry for information, tips, and tricks that would help them surmount difficult challenges in various games. Nintendo set up a game counselor's hotline and hired game experts as a resource for players to call when they were stuck in games. Their other form of outreach was the *Nintendo Fun Club* and its accompanying publication, the *Fun Club News*, established in 1987. As the membership of the *Fun Club* grew, the small publication was eventually developed into *Nintendo Power* magazine. *Nintendo Power* combined the work of the game counselors, who had also produced a guide for players, and the promotional material of *Fun Club News*. Upon its debut in the summer of 1988, the magazine established a direct line between players and Nintendo, which allowed them to promote new games and provide guides on recently released games (Cifaldi, 2012; Kemps. 2016).

Occasionally, it provided a small peek into the Japanese market. Volume 56 devoted an entire section to "Only in Japan: Games That Never Made It to America" (p. 60). They began the section with the following statement:

Although games are now being developed in many different countries, in the early days of the video game industry, they came almost exclusively from Japanese designers. You might be surprised to hear about some of the Japanese games that, for one reason or another, were never introduced here. (Arakawa, 1994)

Each game had commentary speculating why the game was not released outside of Japan. In most cases, the game featured a peripheral only available in Japan (such as a barcode reader for the Game Boy), were based on Japanese cultural concepts that were difficult to translate (such as a game based on Momotaro, a Japanese myth), or the game was based on a media property that was only available in Japan at the time. Some examples of the latter were a game based on the anime *Dragon Ball Z*. This series would not debut in English until 1996 ("The Dragon Ball Z American Debut," n.d.).

DRAGON BALLZ II

The artist who created the characters for Dragon Warrior drew the ones for the Dragon Ballz games. Dragon Ballz II is a tournament simulation, while Dragon Ballz III, for the Super Famicom, is head-to-head street fighting action.

Figure 11. *Preview of the game Dragon Ball Z II in Nintendo Power's "Only in Japan" section (Arakawa, 1994).*

FINAL FANTASY II, III, V

Although the first U. S. Final Fantasy title came from Nintendo, they all have been developed by Square Soft. The game Square published here as FF II was Japan's FF IV, but games known as FF II and III in Japan have never been released here. FF V, a 16-bit title, is selling even better than the ultra-hot Dragon Warrior V in Japan. It will be available here as Final Fantasy III late in '94.

Figure 12. Preview of Final Fantasy V. The game was not originally released outside of Japan. From Nintendo Power's "Only in Japan" section (Arakawa, 1994).

Many of the glimpses of Japanese games offered in *Nintendo Power* centered around the RPG genre. In the very first issue of the magazine, they devote a page to discussing the release of *Dragon Quest III* in Japan. They emphasize how the release of this highly anticipated game was a major event, leading to Japanese players lining up in long queues to purchase the game. This glimpse into the domestic Japanese game market also showed how RPGs were already a popular genre in the country. The *Dragon Quest* series is notable for not only influencing the RPG genre

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in the country, but also being one of the most popular video game series in Japan.

Internationally, the series has not had nearly as much success.

"DRAGON QUEST III"—the RPG released in February is the talk of Japan today! Players from all over the country are so crazy about this game that a representative of its creator ENIX proclaims, "We expect total sales of 5 million!"

Ninjas and Kung-Fu Masters are no longer heros to Japanese players since they are now being replaced by warriors and sorcerers who bravely confront dragons with their swords and shields.

Japanese players waiting in line to buy Dragon Quest III.

It is rather odd to find American born, sword and magic games making one great hit after another in the eastern country of Japan.

Figure 13. Dragon Quest 3 release in Japan. This brief note from the "World News" section in the first issue of Nintendo Power describes the popularity of the release of the game *Dragon Quest 3* in Japan (Arakawa, 1988b; "Nintendo Power issue 1," n.d.)

Some of these games would eventually be localized and released in English; however,

many games during the 1980s and 1990s never left Japan. Players who could import from Japan

and were able to navigate the language barrier gained access to Japanese games otherwise

unknown to English-speaking players. Before the Internet, however, importers could not

communicate with the larger game community. Before Internet access became widespread,

Nintendo Power was one of the best sources of coverage of the domestic Japanese video game

market. Much of these glimpses were offered through RPGs, many of which never left Japan due

to their large amounts of text and lower level of popularity in North America. It was not until

Final Fantasy VII's break out success in 1997 that the RPG genre on video game consoles would become popular outside of Japan.

5.3 Japan as a brand

Japanese soft power has been successful for decades among its Asian neighbors. However, for much of late twentieth century, the government focused on Japan's Asian neighbors who were receptive not just to anime, but also Japanese dramas and music. When Japanese popular culture gained popularity in the West, the government was relatively slow to respond. In the 1980s, the government was focused on Japan's successful automotive production. Despite the burst of the bubble economy in 1989, Japanese video game software and hardware were proliferating in the West. In the early 2000s, the government established the Strategic Council on Intellectual Property as an attempt to take advantage of varying aspects of Japanese culture from anime to food to video games (Iwabuchi, 2015; McGray, 2002; Valaskivi, 2013). The government had difficulty taking advantage of the grassroots appeal of Japanese culture abroad, with Daliot-Bul (2009) argues was largely spread by fans and business interests adapting Japanese pop culture to their respective regions. Around 2005, the concept of "Cool Japan" began to coalesce in Japanese policy.

However, despite these efforts by the Japanese government to capitalize on the success of Japanese popular culture worldwide, they have had less success than South Korea has had with popular culture like K-pop. Daliot-Bul (2009) traces this lack of success with the fact that "the contemporary global imagery of Japan is to a large extent produced by non-Japanese media" (p. 257). The discursive shift in perceptions of Japanese RPGs is an example of what Dalio-Bul describes. Similarly to the Japanese government, Japanese game producers cannot predict how

their products will be received abroad. Even with a good localization, a game is released within a larger context related to its genre, technological trends, and other factors.

Due to their emphasis on narrative, which carries many cultural elements such as aesthetics and storytelling conventions, Japanese RPGs have become heavily associated with their country of origin. JRPGs are also notable for driving the development of localization practices at some large game publishers in Japan. RPGs feature significantly more text than most other game genres, which results in relatively resource-intensive localizations. Furthermore, one of the most popular game series in the world is *Final Fantasy*, which is produced by Japanese game publisher Square Enix (formerly Squaresoft). Many aesthetic and narrative choices made in these games are attributed by non-Japanese fans to Japanese culture. Japanese games have always been inspired by the two-dimensional styles of manga and anime. Video games exist within a larger media mix in Japan, where intertextuality is prolific between manga, anime, film, and games (Achkasov, 2017; Aoyama & Izushi, 2003; Dunne, 2006; Gambier, 2016; Schäler, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, this media mix shares many aesthetic conventions. Outside of Japan, the style of Japanese animation is often simplified in reference to certain features of some anime character designs, such as large eyes and an emphasis on cuteness (Swale, 2015). However, Lamarre (2009) argues that the "anime" style is distinguished by its attention to dynamic motion, emphasis on older methods of animation, and production methods. The close connections between anime, manga, and games is also a distinguishing aspect of anime. Outside of academic theory, many observers discussing Japanese media assume that some inherent Japaneseness exists in these cultural artifacts. The *Pokémon* franchise, for example, is notable for its cute designs, bright colors, and emphasis on 2D presentation in many of its earlier games

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(Hutchinson, 2019). This assumed Japaneseness is how game reviewers and game journalists have differentiated JRPGs from Western RPGs.

This quality of Japaneseness also highlights the importance of national brands. Japanese popular culture carries traces of the original culture, even as these products undergo the processes of culturalization and localization. As discussed in Chapter Three, these traces become a pleasant fragrance to fans of Japanese media. However, what if that association with Japan becomes negative? Traces of Japanese culture instead become a stench, and media audiences see Japanese cultural influences in a negative light. In the West starting in the 1990s, Japanese popular culture became cool and attractive to youths (McGray, 2002). Anime, manga, and video games were at the vanguard of this movement and, as a result, are parts of the Japanese brand. By the mid-2000s, however, Japanese video games no longer seemed as cutting-edge as they had in the past (Byford, 2014; Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011).

Game journalists contributed to the discursive creation of subgenre of the role-playing game genre, the JRPG, in this context. Mittell (2001) argues that genres are "cultural categories that surpass the boundaries of media texts and operate within industry, audience, and cultural practices" (p. 3). When examining television genres, he states that such categorizations are not inherent in the texts themselves. Apperley (2006) examines video game genres specifically and concludes that game genres are discursive constructions of the industry and audiences. Game press is situated between these two groups, and also contributes to the discursive creation of game genres.

Furthermore, separating RPGs of Japanese origin into their own subgroup placed Japanese video games within what Pelletier-Gagnon (2018) describes as "regimes of value" (p. 142). Originally used by Appadurai (1988), regimes of value are "a system of value codification"

that can "determine the place of an object within high or low standing" (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2018, p. 142). These values are dynamic and are constantly changing. Appadurai's concept of value codification occurring helps explain the discursive construction of genre between players, industry, and game press. In the case of the JRPG subgenre, Pelletier-Gagnon argues that discourse within interpretive communities such as video game fandom and game press shifted the value associated with the subgenre from positive to negative. Whereas previously Japanese RPGs had been considered RPGs generally, they were specifically designated as JRPGs, and games of Japanese origin gained a negative association.

5.3.1 What is an RPG?

Role-playing games originated from Dungeons & Dragons (*D&D*), which was inspired by older pen-and-paper games such as war games and games focused on sports statistics (Holleman, 2019). Dungeons & Dragons was set in a fantasy world that was heavily influenced by J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings books—elves, dwarves, and orcs feature prominently in the game. The first release of *D&D* was in 1974, which coincided with the beginnings of personal computing (Barton, 2007a).

Dungeons &Dragons is a heavily rule-based tabletop game designed to allow players to act out living in a fantasy world. At the beginning of an adventure, players pick from a variety of fantasy races and classes to create their own characters. A large part of this process is rolling dice to determine a character's parameters, such as strength and wisdom. These parameters affect how the character can interact with the fantasy world. Strength, for example, affects how much damage characters can inflict during a battle. Combat is a major part of *D&D* and presents challenges for players to overcome. However, combat is not the only part of the game where a character's parameters are important. A character with high charisma could negotiate with a

shopkeeper to convince for a discount when they purchase equipment for their adventure

("Dungeons & Dragons," n.d.; Zagal & Deterding, 2018). Holleman (2019) also highlights how

D&D uses "simulated skill[s]" (p. 3). The character parameters determined when creating a

character become part of the calculations made when dice are rolled to determine outcomes of

player actions.

The referee who manages the game's rules, its setting, and calculations of outcomes via

dice, is called the dungeon master. The role of the dungeon master is to guide the other

participants through an imaginary adventure, called a campaign. The dungeon master also

presents challenges, such as combat, for players to overcome. Decisions made during the

campaign are decided using various kinds of dice, which are rolled to determine outcomes

("Dungeons & Dragons," n.d.; Holleman, 2019).

Game programmers attempted to reproduce the tabletop experience on computers. The

computer itself played the role of the dungeon master and calculate probabilities instead of

rolling dice. The result of these attempts at reproducing *D&D* on early personal computers led to

what would eventually become the role-playing game genre. The late 1970s and early 1980s was

a time when programmers were experimenting with creating all kinds of games within the limits

of available hardware. RPGs were one of many genres to come out of this period of

experimentation (Barton, 2007c; Zagal & Deterding, 2018).

The RPG genre throughout the 1980s and the 1990s had divergent paths on PC and

consoles. In the US and Canada, Europe, and Japan, the PC market thrived in the first half of the

1980s. In 1983, the console video game market in the US crashed. The crash affected Europe

less, and PC gaming continued successfully. In Japan, on the other hand, PC gaming was popular

in the 1980s before being overtaken by the console market with Nintendo's Famicom console

released in 1983. When the Famicom was brought to the US as the Nintendo Entertainment System, it revived the console game market. By the late 1980s, PC gaming and console gaming both thrived separately in the US and Canada (Wada, 2017; Zagal & Deterding, 2018).

RPGs are distinct from other game genres because they prioritize storytelling. Even early on, RPGs like *Ultima* and *Wizardry* were very different from games like *Donkey Kong* or *Pitfall*. The latter primarily challenged player reflexes and responses to on screen cues. RPGs, on the other hand, featured extensive narratives that could take hours to complete. They also contained far more text than most other games at the time. Other games tended to use text to guide the player to the next level and prioritized complex narratives less.

RPGs are also games, however, and like the tabletop games that they were derived from, they give players agency in affecting the narrative. Gameplay elements and mechanics structure how the player can interact with the game world. Computers are less flexible than the humans who play tabletop games, which limits their storytelling potential somewhat. This leads to a precarious balancing act: designers of RPGs want to give the player agency, yet also tell a story. Since the inception of RPGs in the late 1970s, strategies to manage balancing player agency (gameplay) and storytelling.

The gameplay elements of RPGs primarily involve combat, reflecting their lineage in war games and *Dungeons & Dragons*. As players progress throughout a campaign in *D&D*, they become stronger. Their experiences exploring imaginary worlds are quantified as experience points and levels. When a player gains enough experience points, they gain a level. As players' levels increase, they can also increase their characters' parameters, such as strength and intelligence. More strength meant that a character could deal more damage with a weapon in battle, which provided an incentive for players to improve. Even before computers entered the

home, *D&D* created a quantified system to help players interact with their world ("Dungeons & Dragons," n.d.; Holleman, 2019a).

Character progression is heavily tied to simulated skills (Holleman, 2019a). Holleman defines them as skills that characters in the game gain instead of the player. These skills exist in contrast to another game such as Super Mario World, where the player advanced by improving their skill in maneuvering through the world with precise jumps. In RPGs like *D&D*, players attain skills that improve different parameters such as charisma, strength, or intelligence. The player does not learn to move faster, instead their character gains levels that improve their agility or speed parameters. These parameters then affect calculations made during combat encounters (Green, 2012; Holleman, 2019b).

Another element of gameplay in RPGs since their earliest incarnations is exploration. Players not only conquered opponents in combat, they explore dangerous landscapes. Once again, this element is present in *Dungeons & Dragons*. The role of the Dungeon Master is to lead players through an entire imaginary world, which includes a variety of environments. Considering that *D&D* features a medieval setting, such as populated areas like towns or villages, natural locations such as forests or deserts, and dangerous dungeons ("Dungeons & Dragons," n.d.).

Computer RPGs, and the console RPGs that came after them, are complex systems in which the computer manages calculations in combat and other areas of the game. Green (2012) highlights how RPGs are ultimately simulations supported by mathematical models. The player has several options for operating within such systems. Maneuvering between the rules and mathematical models embedded in RPGs creates the basis of the gameplay experience, which will be discussed in the section "Playing RPGs."

5.3.2 The rise of the Japanese RPG

While tabletop gaming and PC gaming were converging in the West, Japan had its own thriving PC gaming scene. Many games being developed were precursors to Japanese-style RPGs. However, technology and cultural preferences set Japan apart from North America and Europe in two key ways: first, American computers like the Apple II were not optimized for displaying Japanese characters and secondly, *D&D*'s focus on the player themselves becoming a character in a story did not appeal to Japanese tastes (Bailey, Oxford, & Van Allen, 2021). Domestically produced Japanese PCs prioritized higher resolutions to allow for the display of Chinese characters (kanji). Japanese game developers, influenced by *D&D* and early American RPGs such as *Ultima* and *Wizardry*, eventually created their own style of RPGs that borrowed some elements of these influences while discarding others (Messner, 2017).

One of the most popular PCs in Japan at the time was the PC-8801, produced by Nippon Electric Company (NEC). Compared to contemporary models like the Apple II and Commodore 64, the PC-8801 featured a higher resolution—crucial for being able to display intricate kanji characters. In his review of the origins of Japanese RPGs, Messner (2017) argues that this higher visual fidelity encouraged a focus on visual aesthetics that would continue to distinguish Japanese games from those produced in North America and Europe.

The RPG genre that was heavily based on *D&D* eventually reached Japan. However, the work of a Dutch cultural ambassador played a larger role in popularizing RPG mechanics in Japan than tabletop RPGs. Tabletop RPGs such as *D&D* enjoyed niche popularity in Japan and they influenced some notable Japanese game developers. However, *Dungeons & Dragons* was not officially released in Japan until 1985 (Parish, 2014). Much of the influence of Western RPGs to Japanese game design can be attributed to the work of an unofficial cultural ambassador

from the Netherlands, Henk Rogers. Upon arriving in Japan, he attempted to translate what he enjoyed about Western RPGs to the Japanese market. Despite the language barrier, Rogers produced a game called *The Black Onyx*, which would become a Rosetta Stone for the RPG genre in Japan (Messner, 2017).

The beginning of the RPG genre in Japan was yet another example of Kelts' (2006) mobius strip. Rogers was Dutch, but *The Black Onyx* drew from *Wizardry*, a Canadian game. He then sought to popularize the genre in Japan through this game. Concurrently, Japanese game developers produced games that also had RPG elements, such as *The Dragon and Princess*. This game featured character-specific parameters such experience points, exploration and combat modes, and a top-down view for some of its segments (Derboo, 2013). Some early games in Japan had thus developed their own systems similar to those of *D&D*. Rogers' influence through The Black Onyx also indirectly introduced Japanese game designers to *Wizardry*. Most notably, Yuji Horii was inspired by Western RPGs when he created the first *Dragon Quest* game in 1986. Often considered the progenitor of the Japanese RPG genre, *Dragon Quest* is still one of the most popular game series in Japan.

The mix of cultural industries in Japan in the 1980s, as described by Aoyama and Izushi (2003), also influenced the creation of *Dragon Quest*. Enix, the game's publisher, recruited new developers through a popular manga magazine. One of the winners of the context, Yuji Horii, drew on *Wizardry* as an inspiration as he developed *Dragon Quest*. Compared to Western RPGs, however, *Dragon Quest* eschewed many *D&D*-related design elements to make the game simpler. Horii targeted younger players, in contrast to PC games that were marketed as productivity-related hardware for adults. The game was released on the Nintendo Famicom, a

console platform that targeted younger audiences. Additionally, the game's visuals were based on art from famous Japanese manga artist, Akira Toriyama.

Dragon Quest is often credited as the first Japanese RPG. While it was preceded by other games with RPG elements, *Dragon Quest* became a template for Japanese console RPGs. Its development and success points to a convergence between different kinds of Japanese media. Horii's experience as a computer game user and developer combined Akira Toriyama's manga-derived art style made the series a hit in Japan. Furthermore, *Dragon Quest* moved away from centering the narrative on a player-controlled character that was common in Western RPGs. Instead, the player assumed the role of a hero in a linear quest to save a princess from a powerful dragon. Furthermore, Horii simplified elements of American and Japanese RPGs for his target player audience of children. Whereas a PC game would allow the player to select a number of options for how to interact with objects in the world, *Dragon Quest* displayed a menu with interaction options when the player pressed the A button next to an object.

After the success and *Dragon Quest* of its sequels, numerous games followed that took conventions from the series while inventing their own. Most notable of these is the *Final Fantasy* series. While numerous RPGs influenced by *Dragon Quest* were being released for the Famicom, the creator of *Final Fantasy*, Hironobu Sakaguchi, sought to surpass the popular RPG. He attempted to accomplish this through aesthetics, tone, and story. In contrast to *Dragon Quest*'s cute, manga-like art, *Final Fantasy* sought a more *Dungeons & Dragons*-like aesthetic through Yoshitaka Amano's watercolor art style. Sakaguchi also aimed to have a more dramatic story that was more complex than *Dragon Quest*. In the first *Dragon Quest*, the hero sets out to save a princess from the devious Dragon Lord. In *Final Fantasy*, rescuing the princess turns out to merely be the beginning of a larger story.

Both *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* have become pillars of Japanese RPGs since their inception. Even today, *Dragon Quest* is the most popular RPG series in Japan; its most recent entry is *Dragon Quest XI*. However, *Final Fantasy* has thrived worldwide as *Dragon Quest* has remained a relatively niche title outside of Japan. Despite being promoted by Nintendo Power and giving players a free copy of the first *Dragon Quest* game, the series did not seem to resonate with many American players. Enix (before they joined with Squaresoft in 2003 to become Square Enix) released the first four *Dragon Quest* games in English, yet the series never took off outside of Japan.

One possible reason for the *Dragon Quest* series' failure to gain popularity internationally is the difference in release dates of entries. *Dragon Quest*, as an older series, had its first four entries on the Nintendo Famicom (Nintendo Entertainment System in the US and Canada). The *Final Fantasy* series got a later start, which may have been to their benefit. The first *Final Fantasy* released in English in 1990, three years after the game originally debuted in Japan. Squaresoft originally planned to release *Final Fantasy II* in English afterward; however, the imminent release of the next generation console, the Super Famicom (Super Nintendo Entertainment System) led to a change in plans. Instead, *Final Fantasy IV* was released outside of Japan as "*Final Fantasy II*." Unlike *Dragon Quest*, the second internationally released *Final Fantasy* featured cutting-edge, next generation graphics.

Over time, *Final Fantasy* became known for constant reinvention and pushing the limits of technology. *Dragon Quest*, on the other hand, adheres closely to tradition and is slow to change. The latter remains popular in Japan, and the former has become an internationally successful worldwide brand. Some of the success of *Final Fantasy* outside of Japan may have also been due to the series' RPG lineage. Similarly to *Dragon Quest*'s creator Yuji Horii, *Final*

Fantasy's creators had also been influenced by *Ultima* and *Wizardry*. The designer for the battle system, Akitoshi Kawazu, worked to replicate *Dungeons & Dragons* mechanics and translate the experience to the simpler Famicom system (Parish, 2017). Marketing materials and packaging for the first *Final Fantasy* game released in the US also used a swords and sorcery aesthetic reminiscent of art used in Dungeons & Dragons manuals. Additionally, *Nintendo Power* featured an extensive guide for the game using concept art that also used this aesthetic. While *Dragon Quest*'s box art also recalled similar themes, *Final Fantasy*'s battle system, monster designs, and character and class designs more closely resembled the *Dungeons & Dragons* style.


Figure 14. *Cover for the Final Fantasy issue of Nintendo Power.* The art used is closer to *Dungeons & Dragons* style imagery (Arakawa, 1988b; "Nintendo Power issue 1," n.d.)

Similarities to *Dungeons & Dragons* may have made the series more appealing to non-Japanese players. As discussed earlier, *Final Fantasy VII*'s success transformed the series and console RPGs of Japanese origin. The game's use of cinematic techniques borrowed from film in addition to using the increased storage of CD technology enhanced its visual storytelling. Many who grew up playing *Final Fantasy* and other Japanese RPGs of the time later became game journalists themselves (D. Q., personal communication, June, 2021). Their experiences influenced their expectations for the series' future installments.

5.3.3 Playing RPGs

As discussed in the Literature Review, the gameplay experience emerges in the interaction between player and game. RPGs, compared to other game genres, rely heavily on telling a narrative alongside the gameplay. While other genres of games have incorporated more narrative as technology has advanced, RPGs have been narrative-focused since their inception (Holleman, 2019a). However, RPGs are also interactive games, and players can be immersed in more than the story.

Balancing gameplay and narrative in RPGs is a significant challenge for game developers. Their dilemma somewhat mirrors the early debate regarding ludology and narratology in the early years of the game studies discipline. Narrative can constrain gameplay, and vice versa. A game featuring a linear narrative can tell a straightforward story. However, the player will not have much input in how the story unfolds. A more open narrative can accommodate character choices, but game designers need to design outcomes for every possible character choice.

Simulated skills are an integral part of RPG gameplay elements, whether tabletop, Japanese, or Western in origin. Many simulated skills center around simulated combat scenarios.

However, they are incorporated differently depending on the game. As mentioned earlier, the heart of the gameplay experience is how players operate within these systems of rules and complex calculations (Green, 2012; Holleman, 2019a).

Final Fantasy VII, for example, features multiple, parallel systems of progression for the characters the player controls. In his analysis of its gameplay systems, Holleman (2019a) identifies as "wide and narrow levels" (Holleman, 2019b, p. 10). After engaging in combat, characters gain experience points. When they gain enough experience points, they level up. This concept is even older than *D&D*. The highest possible level for a character in *Final Fantasy VII* is ninety-nine, which is what Holleman refers to as a "tall" leveling system. However, the game features other systems that intertwine with character levels. Characters also have equipment that they can either purchase in shops or find in treasure chests as they navigate dungeon areas. In addition to equipment, characters can use magic and other special abilities through gaining items called "materia." Different kinds of materia can be equipped depending on character equipment. Materia can also gain experience and allow characters to access new abilities. The wide variety of materia that gives players more options in combat is an example of a "wide" level system.

Players engage with these interlocking systems through the practice of tinkering. Originally used by Katsuno (2011) to refer to working with robotics, Van Ommen (2018) applies the term to playing games. Savvy players can work with the mathematical framework of a game to customize characters to their liking. Through making these decisions about character parameters, players become intimately invested in their character. Despite *Final Fantasy VII* having a set cast of characters, players will inevitably customize them differently.

Western and Japanese RPGs incorporate tinkering somewhat differently. The former tends to have the player focus on playing as a single character. JRPGs, on the other hand, tend to

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have players manage an entire party of playable characters. Tinkering in this context means not just making characters stronger, but also ensuring that they can effectively support teach other to surmount the game's challenges (Garcia, 2021).

Aside from combat, exploration is another major element of RPGs. In early Japanese RPGs, players navigated a "overworld," which was a simplified presentation of the game's world in the form of a map (designed in such a way so as to save memory on the game cartridge). The player could walk to a town, represented in a simplified pixel representation, and then enter that space. Since the world map does not show the actual scale of the objects in the world, the town is much larger than its representation on the world map. As simplified representations of a large world, such maps provided the illusion of freedom for players. Players could choose to explore and find secret areas or hidden items, though not all games rewarded players for exploration. Eventually, this technique for presenting a game world would fall out of favor when technological advances allowed game designers to create large, interconnected and explorable areas (Gan, 2010; Toups et al., 2020).

Western RPGs, on the other hand, have approached the balance of gameplay and narrative differently. Schules, Peterson, and Picard (2018) broke down basic differences between JRPGs and Western RPGs. In contrast to JRPGs' enclosed narratives, anime-inspired visuals, and linear exploration, Western RPGs tend to prioritize open narratives with branching stories based on player choice, aesthetics intended to look realistic, and open world exploration. The extent to which these features have appeared in both kinds of RPGs has shifted as game technology has advanced. Ultimately, Western RPGs prioritize the D&D experience of placing oneself in a simulated world and driving the narrative through player choice. Japanese RPGs, on the other hand, prioritize pre-established characters playing out their roles in a linear narrative.

Western RPGs prioritize player choice more than Japanese RPGs. These design differences became important points of contention in debates about the validity of Japanese RPGs as real RPGs.

5.3.4 A decisive moment: Final Fantasy VII

The history of console RPGs in general can be viewed in terms of before and after the release of *Final Fantasy VII*. The game is widely credited with bringing Japanese RPGs on console platforms to the attention of the larger player base outside of the Japanese game market (Kalata, 2021). The game sold over nine million copies in 1997 when it was originally released, which was well over any previous entry in the series (Kraus, 2006). In 2005, Electronic Gaming Monthly listed it as the sixth most important game of all time and claimed that it taught gamers how to cry—a commentary on the impact of the game's storytelling told through cutting edge graphics ("Countdown to the 10 most important games, 2009). The game's release also led to a significant increase in Japanese RPGs localized into English on the PlayStation, from numerous Japanese developers and publishers aside from Square (Parish, 2018).

Final Fantasy VII's release was more than the debut of a game, it was a media event. *Electronic Gaming Monthly* featured an exclusive interview with Seth Luisi, the main producer for the game at Sony Computer Entertainment America, who promised that the game was a completely immersive experience (Lane, 1997). *GamePro* magazine offered a preview of the Japanese copy of the game in its May issue and featured the game as its main cover feature in October (Rousseau, 1997a, 1997b). It also devoted a section of its magazine to offering an early walkthrough of the game. Next Generation magazine praised the game's cutting-edge graphics ("Grand finale," 1997). The game received rave reviews and arguably contributed to the success of Sony's entry into the video game console market (Parish, 2018). The first issue of *PlayStation*

Magazine highlighted *Final Fantasy VII* by providing a thorough guide to the early game, complete with detailed maps of the game's prerendered environments ("Final Fantasy VII: PSM," 1997). The success of this game led to its developer Square (later Square Enix) to focus on pushing the limits of technology in their games. *Final Fantasy VII*'s success set the trajectory of the series for the next two decades. Players began to expect that every *Final Fantasy* game would feature cutting edge graphics, cutscenes, and narratives (Kalata, 2021). Such high expectations continued to frame most *Final Fantasy* releases afterward, especially those at the beginning of a new console generation.

The key to *Final Fantasy VII*'s impact is its approach to cinematics. The prior six games had run on cartridges, which had limited storage capacity. The PlayStation's CD-ROM had two important advantages over cartridges. First, the data storage capacity of CDs was significantly more than any cartridge-based technology of the time. Secondly, games could use multiple CDs. *Final Fantasy VII*, for example, was spread across three discs. CDs were cheaper to produce, and game developers could prioritize using each disc for key story cinematic scenes that took up large amounts of space. Much of the storage space on the third and final disc of *Final Fantasy VII* is devoted to the game's long, cinematic climax.

Final Fantasy VII borrowed cinematic conventions from film. Screenshots of the game featured in game magazines focused on the spectacle of combat and the CGI cutscenes in their coverage of the game ("Grand finale," 1997, Lane, 1997; Rousseau, 1997a, 1997b). Its advertising heavily emphasized these parts of the game, even going as far as to compare the game to a movie. Television commercials declared that game was even better than a movie. It was not coming to theaters: it was coming to a player's home (Lifestream.net, 2014). The game's advertising used players' experience of film to entice them to try the game. The game's opening

features a sprawling view of the city of Midgar, central to the game's story. This cinematic sequence is accompanied by game composer Nobuo Uematsu's musical score. Taking advantage of the PlayStation's capabilities, the game's opening cinematic shows the player a sense of scale not previously found in most games (Leone, 2018). Game magazines played a key role in communicating these aspects of the game to players.

Why was distinguishing Japanese RPGs so important to video game players and game journalists? The relevance of this distinction can be traced to the origin of the computer RPG genre. The RPG genre was originally created to replicate the tabletop gameplay experience on a computer. Japanese RPGs were inspired by these games; however, they lacked the *Dungeons & Dragons* roots and developed their own aesthetic conventions related to anime and manga rather than fantasy novels (that inspired *Dungeons & Dragons*) like Lord of the Rings (Barton, 2007a). After Nintendo revived the console market in the US and Canada in the mid-1980s, RPGs split between PC and console platforms. PC primarily featured Western RPGs such as Ultima, and consoles prominently featured Japanese RPG series such as *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*. The Xbox 360 allowed these two platforms to converge, which then led to a reassessment of the genre.

5.4 Unlucky Number XIII: A narrative of decline

Thirteen years after the release of *Final Fantasy VII*, history seemed to be repeating itself. By this point, the game had achieved near mythical status among players. Game journalists, many of whom also experienced the media event of the game's release, consistently listed the game high in their lists of top RPGs (Gamespot Staff, 2008; Juba, 2011; Kulata, 2008; Salbato, 2011). Jim Sterling (2011), writing from the perspective of a European player, praised the game's narrative, powerful immersion, and varied cast of characters:

I was able to comprehend a sense of immersion and narrative ambition that I just hadn't

seen in any form of entertainment before — a journey across an entire world that the

audience itself could get lost in. (Sterling, 2011)

Webster (2011) declared the game a masterpiece as part of a series analyzing games deemed

worthy of the title.

FFVII is filled with so many unforgettable, emotional scenes that it's no wonder it still

has such a large following. From the opening sequence and the bombing of the first Mako

reactor to the final battle with Sephiroth, there's a lot to take in. (Webster, 2011)

These reviews, retrospectives, and commentary pieces all shared certain themes. For the

writers, *Final Fantasy VII* had been an important part of their early gameplay experiences. It

showed them what kinds of immersive worlds video games could create. They also introduced

players to the *Final Fantasy* series, and at the time three prior games in the series were available

in English for players to experience. The claims of game magazines at advertisements at the time

were not simply hyperbole. The game had significantly impacted many players, including those

who would later write for game magazines and websites (Parish, 2012b).

Final Fantasy XIII's release, in some ways, mirrored that of *Final Fantasy VII*. First

announced at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in 2006, *Final Fantasy XIII* promised to be

a next generation, high-definition adventure that would continue the series tradition of pushing

the limits of hardware. The game was also to be the first entry in the series on the PlayStation 3

platform, similar to how *Final Fantasy VII* had been the first on the original PlayStation. After a

four-year wait, which was long for the series at the time, players' expectations were high.

In this context, *Final Fantasy XIII* was looked to as a possible savior of the Japanese

game industry. Or if not a savior, at the very least a sign that one of the industry's largest

developers, Square Enix, was still on the cutting edge of game development. The video game

market was much different than it was in 1997, however. In the late 1990s, console RPGs as a

genre stood out from other games because of their intensive focus on narrative, whether on PC or

console. As game technology progressed, other genres also began to feature more complex

narratives. RPG elements, such as character-specific statistics, also spread to other genres,

blurring boundaries between genres (Schules, Peterson, & Picard, 2018). Action-adventure

games, such as *Borderlands*, increasingly featured RPG elements such as level-based character

progression and customization (Bycer, 2014). The question of what games could be called a

'real' RPG continued to be debated and would eventually be used as a frame to discuss Japanese

RPGs.

The game press played a large role in generating hype that influenced the discourse

surrounding *Final Fantasy XIII*. Game magazines, websites, and blogs covered numerous

previews of the game. However, previews were only based on playing a relatively short portion

of the game. Square Enix provided demos in which game journalists could play through selected

portions of the game. For the most part, previews focused on the game's impressive visuals.

They also discussed the innovations in the game's combat system, which is a major part of the

gameplay experience for many RPGs.

When the game finally released, late in 2009 in Japan and in March 2010 internationally,

impressions were mixed. Most reviews agreed that the game excelled in terms of graphical

visuals produced by the PlayStation 3 hardware and the game's aesthetic style overall:

> Words can't sufficiently describe how amazing and detailed every single scene is. From
>
> the vigorous in-game footage to the luscious CGI, every part of the sophisticated visuals
>
> is both beautiful and impressive from a technical standpoint. (Barnes, 2010)

FFXIII boasts some of the most intricate and gorgeous character models ever done in a console game. Animations are so detailed that even lip, tongue, and teeth movement are perfectly synced with character speech and pronunciation. (Clark, 2010)

With such a beautiful game that contains some truly remarkable environments (including a crystal forest and some awe-inspiring cities), you'll definitely want the best visual fidelity possible. (Clements, 2012)

The game does feel like a bit of a rollercoaster sometimes with you passing through an intensely beautiful world rather than interacting with it, but even then the visual excellence of the game is really something to behold. The game is probably worth playing to see some of the amazing designs alone. (Donaldson, 2010)

However, many of these comments hint at the game having deeper problems despite its impressive visuals. Games are made to be played and not just viewed. Donaldson commented on how the diegetic game world is designed to be gazed upon, but not interacted with. Considering the interactive and immersive elements of games, looking is not enough for players.

The combat system was widely complimented as being fun and innovative:

The battle system is as highly polished, finely tuned and pretty-looking as everything else in Final Fantasy XIII. The Active Time Battle (ATB) system returns in this game but in a hybrid form, allowing characters to chain together several commands to be unleashed with the ATB gauge accrues. (Barnes, 2010)

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All of these variables make for an elegantly simple and yet strategically rich system. The speed of battles forces you to think on your toes and punishes players with the wrong preset combinations. (Clark, 2010)

Of course, a role-playing game would be nothing without a solid battle system, and fortunately Final Fantasy XIII delivers. What starts out as an extremely simple, menu-driven system slowly becomes one of the most complex, challenging systems I've ever experienced in a Final Fantasy title. (Clements, 2012)

When you're in the moment, Final Fantasy XIII's battle system is easy to understand and play – it just requires your full attention at all times and speedy decisions from the player on how to act. (Donaldson, 2010)

The best part of Final Fantasy XIII is the combat, which is successful at reducing unnecessary complexity in favor of broader strategic decisions. (Shoemaker, 2010) Despite the game lacking in other areas, the combat segments of the game did offer the player intense and satisfying gameplay. Descriptions of combat were one of the few areas where reviewers compared *Final Fantasy XIII* favorably with earlier games in the series.

Yet something was missing, reviewers claimed. Numerous reviewers argued that the game was lacking elements that made past *Final Fantasy* games fun: towns to explore, non-playable characters to interact with, dungeons with puzzles or mazes to challenge the player.

You may have heard rumors on the internets about FFXIII not having any towns and being basically a straight shot with practically no sidequests or content outside of dungeon crawling. Well, unfortunately, that is all true. (Clark, 2010)

The well-known mention of "linearity" when it comes to Final Fantasy XIII might be old hat by now, but it is a notable issue. The first 25 to 30 hours of the game are so linear, they might as well be on rails. (Clements, 2012)

The areas where it has failed to fulfil that potential – villains, sidequests, and the development of Cocoon and Pulse as actual places rather than playgrounds to fight in – are really poor. The missed potential and opportunity to build something truly special in all areas is what keeps Final Fantasy XIII from true greatness. (Donaldson, 2010)

Final Fantasy games, while generally a bit more linear than other RPGs, have historically given players an assortment of ways to approach their role-playing adventure. In sharp contrast, XIII's gameplay is as narrow and streamlined as the cut scenes are extravagant and detailed. (Kohler, 2009)

Despite the highly engaging combat system, the game lacked meaningful exploration and deeper engagement with the world. As reviewers had mentioned, the game was visually stunning. However, the world itself was lacking in depth. The player moved through impressive set pieces but could hardly interact with them.

Final Fantasy XIII, in other words, seemed to lack many elements of what many considered quintessential to RPGs. Criticisms of the game primarily discussed the game's

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linearity, its lack of non-combat areas to break up the pacing and allow the player to relax, and how the game failed to live up to past games in the series. These issues tied into a larger discussion of the quality of games coming from Japanese developers in general and further fed into the narrative of the decline of Japanese video games.

5.4.1 What is a "real" RPG?

The debate over what games qualified as real RPGs that coincided with *Final Fantasy XIII*'s release was a discursive exercise in reexamining genre (Apperley, 2006; Mittell, 2001). Japanese RPGs, previously considered simply "RPGs" by most console players, were split off into a subgenre. They were subsequently codified as having value subordinate to that of "real" RPGs produced in the West. Qualities associated with Western RPGs, such as creating one's own customized character, were considered positive. On the other hand, qualities associated with JRPGs, such as linearity, were labeled as negative (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2018). Much of this discourse emerged through game press articles across various game news websites.

In 2010, the game news website Strategy Informer interviewed the writing director for a highly anticipated massive-multiplayer RPG (MMORPG) called *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Developed by Canadian game developer BioWare, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* promised players that they could experience the Star Wars universe as their own customized character. During the interview, the topic of what constituted a 'real' RPG led to the following exchange:

> Strategy Informer: The main staple of The Old Republic has always been its story, but I'd argue that without good game play to support it, there is a lack of incentive to want to find out that story. I use Final Fantasy 13 as an example here: excellent story, but sometimes the grind or the linear game play made me struggle in wanting to see it through. What are your thoughts on that?

Daniel Erickson: Well, before I address the main point I just want to take a slightly more controversial route: You can put a 'J' in front of it, but it's not an RPG. You don't make any choices, you don't create a character, you don't live your character... I don't know what those are - adventure games maybe? But they're not RPG's. (Strategy Informer Staff, 2010)

Erickson outlined what he considered to be three key elements of an RPG: decisions that affect the narrative, character creation, and literally playing the role of an original character. *Final Fantasy XIII*, on the other hand, lacks many of these features and takes a different approach to others. Erickson's comment on the game reflected a prevalent opinion being discussed in video game press and at game conferences: Japanese video game development had fallen behind and ceased to innovate. Whereas *Final Fantasy VII* had revolutionized the genre over a decade before, *Final Fantasy XIII* failed to accomplish the same in a new, HD era (Te, 2015).

Coming from a tradition of PC RPGs that follow *Dungeons & Dragons*, Erickson was criticizing conventions that had been staples of Japanese RPGs since the first *Dragon Quest* (Strategy Informer Staff, 2010). Japanese-style RPGs tend to have a set narrative wherein the player takes the role of a set cast of characters. The influx of PC RPGs, mostly developed in the West, into the console market (in which the most prominent RPGs came from Japan) changed perspectives of the latter. Western and Japanese RPGs take two different approaches to allowing characters to play roles. The former place the player into the role of main character, and the latter has the player experience the narrative with pre-established characters. The narrative of Japanese game industry decline combined with the influx of PC RPGs led to a shift in how game press and many players viewed Japanese RPGs.

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Several reviewers for *Final Fantasy XIII*, many of them longtime fans of the *Final Fantasy* series, also agreed that the game's linearity was problematic. However, their reasons were more nuanced. *Final Fantasy VII* also led players through a linear narrative. A significant difference was in the way that such linearity was structured. "In most *Final Fantasy* titles you're merely moving from point A to point B - it's the fact that there's nothing extra to do between points A and B that's the issue," Barnes (2010) of RPG Site pointed out in his review. Clark (2010) of RPG Fan lamented, "You may have heard rumors on the internets about FFXIII not having any towns and being basically a straight shot with practically no sidequests or content outside of dungeon crawling. Well, unfortunately, that is all true." The way in which the game structured its linearity was the problem, rather than the fact that the game was linear at all.

Earlier games in the series featured optional content that existed to the side of the main narrative in order to keep players immersed in the world. Players could choose to continue following the story, or they could pursue optional content, called side quests, that diverged from the main story. In many cases, side quests offer additional combat challenges, opportunities to explore side stories that may focus on a main character, and rewards such as powerful equipment for characters. *Final Fantasy VII* featured numerous sidequests of varying length (Holleman, 2019a, 2019b). *Final Fantasy XIII*, on the other hand, did not have side quests until the last third of the game. Kohler (2009), writing for Wired magazine, summarized the game as comprising the following:

> With precious few exceptions, the first 17 hours go like this: battle, movie, repeat. There are almost no towns, nonplayable characters to chat up, extra side missions, hidden sequences, fancy equipment to save up for and buy, or reasons to run around and grind enemies for extra level-ups.

Shoemaker (2010) of Giant Bomb noted that this level of linearity is unusual for the series:

> This was the very first time I'd been allowed to veer slightly left or right of the storyline's stiflingly constrained central path, and even the handful of optional side activities that became available at this late stage of the game weren't nearly enough to offset the thudding need to progress that preceded them.

Final Fantasy XIII's issue with linearity is not inherent in that it is linear, but rather in how the game's developers offered few other options in terms of gameplay. For the majority of the game, players had little option except to proceed from point A to point B. In fact, the game's environments were designed in such a way that they were a straight line:

> The linearity is even more pronounced because the walkways and corridors you follow are usually rather narrow, and there are few extraneous tasks to provide variety--no minigames to complete, no puzzles to solve, and aside from a few key moments, no populated towns to investigate. (Van Ord, 2010)

Final Fantasy XIII's failure is primarily in how it fails to mask the overall linear nature of its storyline. Whereas past games in the series had a variety of ways to immerse the player in the world, *Final Fantasy XIII* lacks those and focuses mostly on combat and dungeon navigation.

Ultimately, the debate over what made a game a true RPG was an argument over the best way to ensure player immersion. *Dungeons & Dragons* was designed to immerse the player in an imaginary world by letting players create their own characters. Their adventures were mostly nonlinear because they explored a world crafted by the Dungeon Master, who could improvise to accommodate players' decisions. Computer games in the West sought to adapt this experience and replaced the Dungeon Master with the computer. Japanese RPGs, on the other hand, do not follow this tradition. While some, such as Erickson, judged *Final Fantasy XIII* because of its

deviance from *D&D*-based design, game reviewers judged it for its lack of variety in gameplay (Strategy Informer Staff, 2010).

Yet, the disappointment of *Final Fantasy XIII* is also related to players' expectations of a long-running series. Many of the game journalists who were most critical of the game had played past games in the series, such as *Final Fantasy VII*. Comparisons to past *Final Fantasy* games was common in negative reviews of *Final Fantasy XIII*. Even as a new game, it existed within a larger meta narrative of the *Final Fantasy* series as a whole.

The JRPG genre similarly exists within a larger meta narrative of Japanese video games. The tournament of values that separated JRPGs from RPGs in general show how genres are formed by discourse. The Japanese RPG genre as a concept is not inherent in games like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*. Rather, game journalists and players shape the definitions of genres. The bridging of the gap between PC and console RPGs coincided with a period of transition in the Japanese game industry and resulted in press and players creating a new, distinct genre.

5.5 Conclusion

The contrast between the reception of *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy XIII*, in addition to the discursive shift in the definition of the RPG genre, illustrates the significant role game journalists play in shaping perceptions of Japanese games outside of the country. Instead of translating games, game journalists interpret general industry trends and game developers' thoughts on their work. Journalists also play a crucial role in discursive constructions of genre. Video game genres are defined by the industry in many cases, but they are also affected by audience interpretation of games. Since the days of *Nintendo Power*, a hybrid magazine that combined work of Japanese and American Nintendo branches, game press has given players glimpses into the Japanese game market.

Japan is not just a country, but also a brand. The Japanese government itself has embraced the brand role and has attempted to take advantage of the success of popular culture overseas. However, they have had limited success in such endeavors. Instead, perceptions of Japanese popular culture tend to form more organically through word of mouth (Daliot-Bul, 2009). Game journalists discursively redefining RPGs from Japan are an example of how groups outside of Japan influence how the country's popular culture is received overseas.

Game journalists thus play their own role in the localization process. However, in addition to describing elements of games to players, they also influence the larger context around games. In the case this chapter examined, game journalists interpreted trends in video game development to indicate that Japanese game development overall was declining. The discursive creation of the JRPG genre attached a negative cultural odor to games that had previously been known as merely RPGs. As Pelletier-Gagnon (2018) observed, RPGs from Japan were reevaluated and lost standing.

The discursive dynamics between game journalists, players, and producers shows that a game moving from Japan to English-speaking locales is affected by more than the localizers who make changes. These games also exist within larger contexts of genre and national origin. Early magazines, especially *Nintendo Power*, helped to create a perception of Japanese games as ahead of the curve. The success of *Final Fantasy VII* elevated the status of the Japanese RPG. Shifts brought about by technological advances, however, were interpreted as an overall decline for Japanese video games. *Final Fantasy XIII* became synecdoche for the failure of the "JRPG" genre, and JRPGs became synecdoche for Japanese game development. When localized games are released in target locales, they also enter into pre-existing contexts that affect how they are received by game press and players.

Game press interprets and communicates perceptions of genres and Japan as a game producer to players in the transnational flows of culture between Japan and other regions. Whether through magazines or websites, game journalists bring news from Japan to players through game previews, reviews, and interviews with Japanese game developers. Players thus interact with Japanese games and culture not only through the games themselves, but through discourse mediated by game press and journalists, many of whom are also players.

Chapter 6 Ludological Localization: Affect, Subjectivity, and Time

6.1 Findings

This dissertation sought to account for the multiple, complex layers of meaning embedded in video games by answering Jones' (2008) call to scholars:

> It seems to me that the job of scholars looking at video games should be to illuminate those connections and boundaries, to trace the material and cultural determinants, from software code to design, to marketing, social networks of players and fans, and to wider cultural fictions and key texts, that help to shape the production, distribution, and reception—which is to say the meanings—of video games. (Jones, 2008, p. 16)

Chapter Three explored how localization professionals and the dynamics of video game developers make decisions during the localization process. Chapter Four showed how fans themselves can assume the role of localizer. The practice of ROM hacking also highlights how game localization is materially different from other kinds of media. Finally, Chapter Five emphasized how localized games exist in a larger context including genre and cultural origin that affect their reception upon release in a target locale.

Localization is a form of personalization. Japanese game developers set guidelines based on how they view the cultural norms of target locales. Localization professionals also have their own personal beliefs and philosophies as to what makes a good translation (Roy, 2018). The prioritization of invisible localization that erases or covers up Japanese cultural traces originates from the self-conscious attitudes of Japanese game producers. Japan's self-Orientalizing position after World War II reflexively positions Japan as unique from its Asian neighbors and the West.

Japanese culture itself is viewed as something special that distinguishes Japan from other nations. Despite businesses seeking profits in foreign markets, they are also cautious about how foreign markets will react to Japanese culture (Iwabuchi, 1994, 2002).

The personalization aspect of localization is enacted through decisions made by localizers. Games are customized for target locales based on how game producers and localizers perceive those markets (Roy, 2018). In the 1980s, Nintendo personalized games released in North America by removing sexual content, alcohol references, and religious symbols (Grealy, n.d.; Mandelin 2018a). This was based on an assumption of what North American audiences would accept. Individual localizers also have personal views on the best approach to localization. Based on interviews conducted with three experienced localizers, they favor fluency because they believe that Japanese cultural influences on could confuse English speakers.

'Good' localization requires creativity because of the emergent nature of the gameplay experience (Van Ommen, 2018). Localizers similarly maneuver within the bounds of linguistic rules and cultural expressions when they enact translation, culturalization, and localization (Honeywood & Fung, 2012). Much of the creative work of localization is enacted through subjective decisions determining how best to preserve the gameplay experience of the original product in the source locale. Like players who form affective connections with games, localizers also possess personal philosophies and are emotionally invested in their work. The subjective aspect of localization is as important as the computational elements of games that require localization teams to operate between multiple layers. A one-size-fits-all approach to localization does not exist, which is why creativity is so important in this field.

Localizers interviewed for this project often had their own philosophies guiding them in their work. Whether localizers take a domestication or a foreignization approach, they adjust

their overall strategies depending on the game and its context. For example, the increased

popularity of Japanese popular culture in North American influenced individual localizers'

perceptions of cultural appropriateness. The *Persona* series, for example, moved away from

domestication toward foreignization. Localizers at Atlus personalized their localization strategy

and combined Japanese and English language elements in games set in Japan (Roy, 2018).

The *Mother 3* fan localization arose out of the affective links that fans had formed with

EarthBound. Nintendo's reason for not localizing the sequel into English was related to sales

expectations. Fans of the *Mother* series, on the other hand, were interested in engaging with the

diegetic game world constructed by the game's creator, Itoi. The fan localization team argued

that their passion drove their work. Focusing on passion and eschewing commercial motivations

likely helped the fan localization team avoid legal retaliation from Nintendo.

The fan localization of *Mother 3* also illustrates how localizers must work with both

language and programming code. The main translator for the project, Clyde Mandelin, modified

both text and game code to successfully produce a localization that fans could play. He and other

members of the fan localization project also had to test the changes they made to the game code,

similarly to official localization projects.

ROM hacking is distinct from modding because it is carried out without the permission a

game's producer. Since ROM hackers do not have documentation as a guide, they must delve

deep into a game's code to understand how it works. Official localization projects in the past

twenty years preempt this problem through internationalization—designing a game's code to

accommodate other languages that may later be included (Honeywood & Fung, 2012).

Since *Mother 3* was not designed to accommodate English text, properly incorporating

the correct character set was one of the major challenges for the fan localization team. In this

case, hacking and translation were both necessary to produce a working fan translation. Mandelin and his team had to first locate how dialogue and menu text were incorporated into the game's code. They then had to remove the text so that it could be translated. Once the text was translated to English, they reinserted it into the game's code. However, they had to make significant changes to the display routines so that text would be properly placed in the game's interfaces. Localization is more than linguistic translation because localizers must modify text, code, and interfaces.

The discursive practices of game journalists show how localized games are situated in larger contexts. *Final Fantasy VII* was a genre-defining game upon its release in 1997. It introduced JRPGs to many in the West, and its success encouraged more Japanese game producers to localize games for release outside Japan. Circumstances changed a decade later, leading to the creation of the JRPG genre as separate from a general RPG genre. Any Japanese RPG released during the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 console cycle entered a less favorable context than the preceding console generations. When *Final Fantasy XIII* released, it was reviewed and evaluated in the context of Japanese games at the time, RPGs, and the *Final Fantasy* series overall. Game journalists' reviews of the game set expectations for players and fans.

Focusing on industry, players/fans, and press as stakeholders provided a lens for examining how localization operates on multiple levels. Localization professionals and game producers use personalization to tailor games to imagined audiences in the target locale. The fan localization of *Mother 3* shows how game localization occurs on multiple layers: linguistic, interface, and game code. Game journalists mediate between industry and players to interpret games in different contexts depending on technical trends and other factors. The localization

process involves the contributions of these stakeholders, who all interpret meaning as a cultural artifact flows from source to target locale.

A commonality between these different stakeholders is the affective dimension of the gameplay experience. As post-Fordist cultural artifacts, games provide experiences and communicate meaning through multiple modes, such as sound, image, and text. The full experience of the game emerges through the interaction of player and game. Such a heavy level of interaction often results in an affective link between player and game. Localizers, fans, and game press engage with games emotionally.

6.2 Conclusion

Localization lies at the heart of what makes video games such an important subject of study. Video games communicate meaning through interactivity, immersion, and intricately constructed diegetic game settings. They are software designed for entertainment and contain elements that make them similar to film and television. Text is also another aspect of the multimodal nature of games. As software, however, text in a game is governed by programming code and interfaces. Localization mediates all these elements to produce a coherent experience in a different language and culture.

Game studies would benefit from focusing more on the gameplay experience when studying video games. Anable (2018) argues that game studies has focused on computation and proceduralism at the expense of representation and affect. Narrative and ludological elements together contribute to the gameplay experience. The creative movements that players make within these limits is the essence of play and contributes to pleasure derived from play (Wardrip-Fruin, 2004). The narratives expressed in games combine with players' pre-existing experiences, resulting in the formation of strong affective connections (Van Ommen, 2018). Video games are

thus experiences that can differ widely between players and audiences (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2011, Skalski et al., 2011). Addressing the affective dimension of meaning in games will complement existing research focusing on the computational elements of games (Bogost, 2007; Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Montfort & Bogost, 2009).

Furthermore, Anable (2018) argues that the subjective and affective elements of video games are relatively under-researched compared to the computational aspects. Representation and affect are deeply connected. While ample research exists about the representational aspects of games, future research should also address the affective side of games. The ways in which players form connections with games also determine how they view representational aspects of games. The research challenge here, unfortunately, is that no one gameplay experience is the same (Van Ommen, 2018).

Media studies would benefit from focusing more on the underlying mechanics of transnational flows of media. For example, Consalvo's (2016) research on the reception of Japanese games in the US interrogates the idea of what makes a game inherently Japanese and what draws players to these cultural elements. She also illustrates how players themselves adopt cosmopolitan views of the world when they gain an interest in cultures other than their own. In delving deeper into localization, this research illustrates on how these dynamics are expressed—localization, fan localization, and game press's mediated views of localization as well as Japan itself. These dynamics influence one another, which contributes to the liminal localization process in which a game moves between cultures. As digital media has broken down geographical boundaries, audiences have increasingly explored beyond the boundaries of their own languages and cultures through media.

6.3 Future Research

A possible application of this research in the future is studying media remakes. Verevis (2005) drew on film studies scholarship to examine the financial and artistic aspects of film remakes. Film remakes retell stories in newer contexts with the advantage of technological advancement in filmmaking methods. Herbert (2018) delves deeply into the significance of film remakes and argues that they have intertextual value, financial value to producers, and artistic value as revisitations of older works. Film remakes translate older films into new temporal and cultural contexts by changing some elements of the original structure and keeping others. They seek to strike a balance between changing the original to improve it and keeping some elements the same to ground the film intertextually.

Video game remakes similarly function as translations of an original. Their technological transformations are even more prominent than film. For example, *Final Fantasy VII* proved so popular that fans spent years clamoring for a remake. From the point of view of Square Enix, reproducing the game is a difficult prospect. The original *Final Fantasy VII* featured simple, low-count polygon 3D graphics. CGI was used to create visually impressive cutscenes that made characters and settings look more realistic (Webster, 2011). This was impressive in 1997. By 2000, however, such graphics were dated. *Final Fantasy X* on the PlayStation 2 had already surpassed its predecessor with more complex character models, larger environments, and voice acting. An ideal *Final Fantasy VII* remake would change some elements of the game to enhance the storytelling and immersion while keeping other elements that played loved the same (Parish, 2018).

In 2020, Square Enix finally released a remake of *Final Fantasy VII* on the PlayStation 4. The game was a retelling of the first major segment of the original game's story. The most

notable changes made were of course in graphical quality. The new character models are impressively realistic. Another notable change was adding voice acting, which significantly changes how characters are presented in the story (Petit, 2020; Rogers, 2020; Webster, 2020).

Final Fantasy VII Remake is a substantial translation of the original game to the twenty-first century. The game simultaneously seeks to appeal to long time fans and newer players. It accomplishes this by carefully balancing changing some elements from the original and keeping others the same. The story mainly follows the same path of the original game with some notable exceptions. Square Enix seems to even acknowledge the difficulty of translating the experience of the original game to present day. A twist toward the end of the game reveals that the events in the game take place on an alternate timeline from the original game. In a diegetic sense, the original world of *Final Fantasy VII* is maintained and unchanged. The new world breaks away from the chains of fate (almost literally) and seems to foreshadow sequels that make larger deviations from the original story. *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is allowing the characters and the player to remake the story of the original and set out on a new, unknown path (Petit, 2020; Rogers, 2020; Webster, 2020).

Aside from remakes, numerous other games have been ported to new consoles or remastered with slightly updated graphics from the original. These are all examples of different levels of translation in a much larger sense. Communicating meaning becomes even more complicated with game remakes because players will inevitably compare the original to the newer version. Some games are even ported or remastered each new console generation (Billcliffe, 2019).

Whether a game is remade entirely or tweaked visually, its rerelease relies on existing affective connections players have made to the original game. Game developers must carefully

balance multiple elements of a game as they translate the original into new technological

contexts. Game press and players interpret and respond emotionally to these changes when the

game is finally released. Once again, affective connections that players form with games are

important to understanding recent trends in video games. Computational and representational

aspects of games alone cannot explain the appeal of a game like *Final Fantasy VII*. In making

the game, Square Enix sought to also remake a player's relationship to its diegetic game world.

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