

Geemu On! A Preliminary Study Of Indie And Doujin Game Development In Japan

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Abstract

This paper is a brief summary of a preliminary exploration of certain aspects of independent video game development in Japan. Initial interviews were conducted with researchers and indie game developers over a two-week period in Tokyo. Independent game developers from Kamakura were also interviewed as part of the research. Initial fieldwork was geared primarily toward *doujin* level game development and distribution. My key research question focused upon the religious and spiritual dimensions of *doujin* games. However, after conducting interviews it became clear that developers did not consider the Western frame or classification of religion and spirituality in their development but rather incorporated aspects of tradition, culture and values within their work.

Keywords: gameenvironments, Japan, Video Game Design, Asia, Doujin

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Historic Overview

Japan is home to the some of the largest console and game production companies in the world. Along with Nintendo, Sony, Square Enix, and Capcom, there are a myriad of companies producing Triple-A games that are sold globally. This billion-dollar video game industry began in the early 1970s, based upon a number of key global and local developments. It was through the Japanese electronic and toy corporations that arcade games, home gaming consoles, then personal computers were introduced and supported within the nation (Picard 2013, 1). Unlike other Asian countries within this study, the Japanese culture embraced and supported these initiatives. By the late 1970s, home gaming consoles produced by Nintendo, Epoch

and Hitachi (among others) captured the Japanese market and allowed for the exporting of video games and video game consoles to the emerging gaming market, particularly in the United States (Donovan 2010, 154-155). Due to its importance as an economic driver for the nation, video game playing within Japan has been supported and encouraged and there was little stigma associated with video game playing or *geemu* (Japanese video games).

By the 1980s and up into the 1990s, Japan was the leading nation in hardware and software development (Picard 2013, 4). This industry flourished for decades and had a legacy of producing some of the most important games and gaming developments on the planet. This large industry had an enormous impact upon the gaming culture globally and specifically within Japan itself. When home computer sales began to increase, and game console sales began to slow, a new market emerged supporting Japanese video game producers. For the gaming industry, home computers were viewed as a new tool to sell their games and an important emerging market (Donovan 2010, 158). High sales of home PCs, like NEC's PC 8001, allowed for a massive new market to emerge for the gaming industry. However, companies like Nintendo continued to develop the gaming console and were able to sell them for less than a computer, creating a new form of home entertainment system that was promoted as an alternative to the home PC.

New PC sales combined with the expanding console market created a huge influx of customers that wanted games. By the early 1980s, there was a need to develop new and exciting games to help the market continue to develop and to keep the new customers engaged and buying products. To facilitate this sudden growth, Nintendo opened up to independent game developers but put high demands on the production process and had ultimate veto power to stop any game from being used

on their system that was *bishojo* (pornographic) or low quality (Donovan 2010, 159). Independent game development quickly expanded to help meet this production need, creating a large influx of indie developers and indie companies. For detailed interviews from the earlier years of game development, see <http://shmuplations.com/>.

In a 2010 survey, Japan was unique when compared to other gaming cultures within Asia in that home gaming consoles and not PC are still by far the most popular method of video game play. However, due to software and hardware issues, indie developers were better able to create games specifically for the PC market. Game sales and console sales continued to increase within Japan significantly over the next 20 years. Initially indie developers also sold their games through comic markets and large comic shows. This allowed for a new form of game development to take hold in Japan, often viewed as fan based or *doujin*. By the 1990s *doujin* games were one aspect of the large independent market developing within Japan. Although most *doujin* games do not receive wide sales, there are exceptions with some *doujin* developers becoming very successful. Primary examples include *Tsukihime*, *Higurashi When They Cry*, and *Touhou Project* (Hichibe and Tanaka 2016, 44).

Indie and Doujin Game Development in Japan

With a dominant culture supporting the gaming industry and viewing *geemu* as an acceptable practice, it is no surprise that Japan developed a huge network for indie developers. Although at times this has been controversial, since the dominant culture promotes working for the larger Triple-A's and contributing to the betterment of the overall Japanese economy rather than being independent. Structurally, to support the large gaming industry, Japan provides high level university training in digital design and game development, dedicated gaming institutes of technology, and college level

the *doujin* system was not for profit or financial success. The main reasons for a high level of independent development was “the purpose of production, the diversity in genres, the autonomy of development activities, the flexibility of production process, the short production periods, the relationship between developers and players, and the unconcluded game software debugging” (Hichibie and Tanaka 2016, 44-45). In interviews with indie game developers, Shules identified many of these same issues and highlights the blurring boundary lines between indie and doujin (Shules n.d.).

My interviews also found that many *doujin* game developers created games simply for the joy of playing them. “We do it for fun. It’s a game! Have fun and play!” It seemed that this fun of gaming was what brought them into the indie/doujin development scene, with many of the interviewees identifying games that they played when they were younger that created the desire in them to start designing their own games and working in small circles with likeminded people. Often it was not just playing games that motivated them to become indie game designers, but it was one game they experienced that changed how they viewed games and created the desire in them to try and replicate what they had experienced. These games included games designed by Shindenken (Kanagawa Denshi Gijutsu Kenkyuujo) like *ARGATHA*; Games designed by EZAKI (Studio DNA); Hamazaki Factory; Hekiraku-ya; and OGSD Storyteller Circle.



Figure 1. Example for a doujin game.

Boku ha shinsekai no Kami ni naru

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IX9PMM2SkqU>

Agartha <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRD7dJYQKUA>

Qualia <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peNatUJ8Xdw>

Games designed by Ezaki <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jS059XV1Is>

For my research focus I was drawn toward *doujin* gaming because they

“unabashedly do not efface themselves of their apparent Japaneseness – cultural odor, in the terminology of Koichi Iwabuchi – unlike indie games, which often do scrub themselves of their cultural odor in order to be viable products in a global marketplace” (Vogel 2017, 34).

I was also interested in the mythic, religious, and spiritual content of *doujin* development. This cultural aspect became particularly evident in the Touhou Project (Project Shrine Maiden), which includes aspects of Shintoism and Japanese folklore within the games.

Project Shrine Maiden was developed by Team Shanghai Alice, which is in fact a single *doujin* game developer that goes by the name of ZUN. The game is structured around strange activities occurring in *Gensokyo*, an imaginary place that is inhabited by both humans and supernatural beings (*yokai*). A key focus of the game is a Shinto shrine (based upon an actual shrine known to ZUN) and supernatural beings based upon Japanese folklore. The Shrine Maiden guard the boundary between the human and spirit world and must fight off evil *yokai*. ZUN originally made the games for the Japanese PC market (PC – 9801) but later games were developed for the Windows platform (18 games over a fifteen-year period). The Guinness World Book of records has identified the series of games created by ZUN for Project Shrine Maiden as being the “most prolific fan-based shooter series” ever created (Loxely 2013).

Each game from ZUN within this series has Japanese myths, folklore, and stories included in the content. What was the value of including it in the game? In one way (materially and also at the shrine) this was a form of religious revival. The shrines used by ZUN as a model for his games are based upon real shrines, with many gamers and *doujin* developers travelling to visit them. This boosted the economies of the local shrines and also may have reinvigorated a younger gaming generation with a desire to participate in some form of Shintoism. Fans also now hang out at the shrine and sell their own *doujin* books and material.

included in the games were not as serious as in the *real* tradition. It also seemed that ZUN (and other doujin game developers) are tolerant of all of the religious traditions within Japan and often bring them into the game so that they co-exist with each other within the gamescape.

Conclusion

Many of the *doujin* and indie developers interviewed recognized that there are problems with gaming. In many cases, the gameenvironment becomes addictive and can create a number of social problems. However, by developing games it also provided meaning to their lives and allowed them to have fun, to play, and to meet likeminded people. This is what mattered to all of the developers interviewed - it wasn't about money or even fame; it was about fun. The indie/doujin game environment also creates a unique space where a form of hybridity between ancient traditions and modernity can occur. This allows for flexibility and cultural experimentation in a playful, not so serious manner, presenting new cultural models and developing old traditions in new ways. This seems to be possible in different forms of game development because it is a game and can be viewed that way despite its significant cultural impact.

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