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Novigrad in the evening sun. *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Project Red 2015)

Special Issue

Gamevironments of the Past.

by

Derek Fewster and Ylva Grufstedt

Issue 05 (2016)

articles

Introduction: Gamevironments of the Past – A Broad Take on Games and History.
by Derek Fewster & Ylva Grufstedt, 1

Where Did You Learn That? The Self-Perceived Educational Impact of Historical
Computer Games on Undergraduates.
by Robert Houghton, 8

Developing Time: Representing Historical Progression Through Level Structures.
by Samir Azrioual, 46

Ghost in the Cartridge: Nostalgia and the Construction of the JRPG Genre.
by JD Mallindine, 80

History and Human Agency in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.
by Vinicius Carvalho, 104

The Architecture of *Bioshock* as Metaphor for Ayn Rand’s Objectivism.
by Brittany Kuhn, 132

The HGR Framework: A Semiotic Approach to the Representation of History in Digital
Games.
by Vincenzo Idone Cassone & Mattia Thibault, 156

game developer reports

The Adventures of Ms. Meta: Developing a Historical Superhero Video Game.
by Sarah Zaidan, 205

“Who Really Said What?” – Mobile Historical Situated Documentary as Liminal Learning Space.

by Owen Gottlieb, 237

report

The Indian Indie Game Development Scene - History and Cultural Heritage as Game Themes.

by Xenia Zeiler, 258

interview

Interview with Mike Laidlaw and David Gaider at *BioWare*.

by Cecilia Trenter, 264

Ghost in the Cartridge: Nostalgia and the Construction of the JRPG Genre

Jayme Dale Mallindine

Abstract

This paper reveals an affective and nostalgic foundational component of the “Japanese Role-Playing-Game (JRPG)” video game genre through an investigation of its history and use as seen on gaming blogs, forums, and videos. As a result of new technology, like the Microsoft Xbox Console, hitting the market in the early 2000s, the term JRPG started becoming popular as consoles and computers gained the capacity to play games that were previously exclusive to either one or the other. Prior to that, the dominant producer of video game consoles was Japan. As Western-made RPGs, which were generally made for computers, became increasingly more available for console play as a result of console-computer convergence, the term “JRPG” became a way for gamers to distinguish games that “felt” similar to RPGs made for Japan-made consoles in the 80s and 90s. Now the “Japan” aspect of the genre’s name is a way of negotiating identity and memory in a rapidly changing technological landscape, rather than being used specifically to identify a game’s country of origin. This genre, which runs counter to typical genre organizational schemes based on either game-play mechanics or narrative themes, further illuminates how memory and nostalgia can affect how players categorize their gaming worlds.

Keywords: video games, Japanese Role-Playing games, JRPGs, history, memory, nostalgia, genre, Japan, console games, computer games, Role-Playing Games, RPGs, fan studies

To cite this article: Mallindine, J. D., 2016. Ghost in the Cartridge: Nostalgia and the Construction of the JRPG Genre. *gamevironments* 5, 80-103. Available at <http://www.gameenvironments.uni-bremen.de>.

Introduction: Are Japanese Role-Playing-Games Japanese?

The video game genre of Japanese Role-Playing-Games (JRPGs) is a bit peculiar. Not only is JRPG the only genre prominently defined by a specific country, it is also the only genre mirrored by another geographically specific category, the Western Role-Playing-Game (WRPG). Other genres, such as “Shooters” or “Platformers”, do not

sub-divide into countries of origin. A Platformer is a Platformer regardless of what country the game comes from. Similarly, a Shooter game may have First-Person or Third-Person camera angles, but First-Person Shooters are not generally considered the spiritual opposite (and opposition) to Third-Person shooters. The peculiarity of the genre's naming continues. In the case of JRPGs, the use of the adjective "Japanese" isn't necessarily related to the actual country of Japan. Unlike Japanese pop music (J-pop) or Japanese horror films (J-Horror), there is a lack of consensus on whether JRPGs have anything directly to do with the country of Japan at all.

While putting "Japanese" as an adjective in front of something seemingly indicates that the "something" in question was made in Japan (or at the very least was made by a Japanese person or company), this simply isn't the case for JRPGs. For instance, Engadget, a technology blog network, ran an article in 2012 by Kat Bailey listing three video games made by North American and French developers worthy of receiving the JRPG title, stating "[these games are] a reminder that an RPG doesn't have to be developed by the Japanese to be a "JRPG."" Jason Schreier, a journalist for Kotaku, a popular gaming news source, published an article called "Proof that American Gamers Really DO Want Japanese RPGs" that implied the same thing. While leaning more towards the qualifier of "JRPG-style" than out-rightly labeling Western-made games as JRPGs, Schreier slips in his language once, claiming that not only are Westerners interested in *playing* JRPGs, there are also plenty of "Westerners making JRPGs" (2013).



Figure 1. *Ghost in the Cartridge*. Illustration by Kyle Armstrong.

So if JRPGs don't need to be made in Japan or by a Japanese entity, why label it Japanese in the first place? The answer to "What's Japan got to do with it?" becomes clearer when taking into account collective memories that some gamers have compiled regarding the history of gaming in the West and, more specifically, the history of console gaming from the 1980s onward. By investigating both the remembered history of digital Role-Playing-Games and by analyzing the use of the term "JRPG" as seen in posts and comments on online platforms, such as Kotaku and Escapist.org, preliminary research shows the use of the term "JRPG" in-part stems from a nostalgic and temporal association of JRPGs with a period in gaming history that existed before consoles and computers technologically converged.

Video Game Genres

While appearing to be composed of seemingly intuitive sets of differences, the amazing breadth of potential game genre taxonomies point to their imprecise nature. While this isn't an issue limited to categorizing digital games, video games in particular seem to struggle with adequate classifications. Arsenault covers the large range of categorizations available in "Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation" (2009). Highlighting the fluidity and impreciseness of video game genres by putting excerpts of game categorization systems side-by-side from four different gaming information sources (MobyGames, AllGameGuide, Metacritic, and GameSpot), Arsenault shows how each source categorizes game genres differently. Not only that, individual games can be labeled entirely different things depending on who's doing the labeling. A prime example is *American McGee's Alice*, which Arsenault (2009) identifies as being labeled as four different genres across four different gaming magazines.

The lack of formal categorization isn't only affecting popular writing. Scholarly writing fairs no better at being consistent across sources. With no formal organizational structure set in place, researchers often resort to continuously creating their own taxonomies. These taxonomies range from focusing on the unique interactive nature of games instead of relying on film/literary genres (Apperly 2006, Wolf 2001), to classifying games along theoretical axes of progressive/story-based versus emergent/rules-based (Juul 2005).

For all the inconsistencies, there remains hope for a common thread. The unifying factor for all these categorical systems is not the final taxonomy or the criteria for separation, but rather the *desire itself* to break into sections the complex ecosystem of the video game industry. Genre as a tool, regardless of whether it's brandished by

popular, industrial, or academic figures, is “a way of breaking down the vast continent of video games into more manageable provinces”, an attempt to “impose order onto a chaotic, messy and fluctuating mass of terms” (Arsenault 2009). Rather than assuming some of these categories are more or less objectively accurate or reflective of reality, these deconstructions are based on the intentions and beliefs of the taxonomist. For instance, are the categories being used to help a researcher figure out which games are most educational for the purpose of giving curriculum suggestions? Is a policy advisor trying to determine which types of games have relationships to violent behavior? Are the genres being used to make a philosophical statement about the unique status of games as an interactive and kinesthetic medium? Or are the comparisons and contrasts highlighted in order to create sales pitches and expand sales markets? The categories that emerge from these intentions are all necessarily different, not because of the information or data at hand, but because the question being asked leads to different emphases being placed on different parts of the gaming experience.

Genre creation finds a parallel in a story about a group of blindfolded women who want to learn what an elephant is like. Each one feels a different part, but only one part. One feels the ear. One feels the tusk. One feels the tail. At the end they all compare notes only to find they are in complete disagreement! How is it possible, they reason, for each person to have a completely different understanding of what an elephant is by touching the same exact elephant? How you describe a game and, subsequently, how you describe a genre, depends on the part of the elephant you’re attending to. These categories aren’t random or pulled out of the ether (for a genre to make a difference there has to actually *be* a difference) but the categories aren’t purely objective either. Rather than focusing on the legitimacy of different criterion, the question this research asks is *why* attending to that specific part is so important? What were the conditions that resulted in the separation of JRPGs from other RPGs in

the minds of some gamers? What are these gamers attending to, and what difference does that attention make?

Methodology

While there is currently broader academic disagreement on how to go about defining game genres (Clark, Lee and Clark 2015), this research focuses primarily on a “bottom-up” analysis of how a population perceives genre differences and similarities. In addition to a published text on RPGs (Baron 2008), I conducted discourse analysis on fan communities found through a snowball sampling method altered to work for digital sources. I started with web communities with commenting systems that encourage members to communicate with one another, specifically video game news websites and forums Kotaku and Escapist Magazine. “Why Do People Care About JRPGs” (Schreier 2012) and “Proof That American Gamers Really Do Want Japanese RPGs” (Schreier 2013), both blog posts on Kotaku written by Jason Schreier, received 374 and 361 replies respectively. “JRPGs and WRPGs: Can they be considered different genres?”, a forum post on Escapist Magazine (Foolery 2013), received a smaller number of comments (totaling only about 40), but the comments themselves were overall longer and in-depth than the relatively truncated comments found on Kotaku. I then followed the trails and links participants on those sites used in their posts, focusing especially on other fan-made sources, to see the types of rhetoric and proof that served as touch stones in the discourse. Many of these links were from other well-known fan sources, such as Extra Credits’ video “Western RPGs vs Japanese RPGs” (Extra Credits 2012), whose video series on JRPGs has been viewed over half a million times on Youtube.

Due to the collaborative foundation of game fandom, it is not uncommon (and even recommended) for researchers studying virtual realities to collect online data on

forums and blogs (Boelstorff et al. 2012). For fans of video games, collaboration and connectedness are essential parts of what it means to be a fan, and it makes sense that tech-oriented game players would connect and communicate via the Internet. As Jenkins (2004, 4) notes, “[...] consumption [of video games] has become an increasingly collective process”, a point that Newman expands upon in his book, *Playing with Videogames* (2008). Newman argues that the insights and theories formed in these online communicative spaces affect the social contexts within which games are played and understood, making analyses of these spaces important for understanding how video games are affecting patterns of thought outside of the digital space. Since the goal of this research was to determine not simply an objective history of the JRPG genre, but instead to inquire into the thought patterns and discourse surrounding the use of the genre, focusing specifically on easily accessible online conversations and posts to gain a better understanding of the JRPG genre was a particularly well-suited research method.

While the method was appropriate for finding sources deemed pertinent by the communities in these JRPG discussions that may otherwise have been hidden or difficult to locate, some drawbacks include the sampling bias inherent in using any version of a snowball sampling method. For instance, forums and websites are often designed to attract specific players and types of players. Kotaku, for instance, has a reputation of being fond of JRPGs due to their News Editor, Jason Schreier, writing a regular column called “Random Encounters” dedicated to exploring the JRPG genre. My initial pool of sampling data was therefore most likely skewed towards favorable attitudes towards JRPGs. Additionally, there are many active video game players who may not read these forums or blogs, much less actively participate in the conversations. As a result, this study should be seen as an entry point and inquiry into the conversation of genre creation and JRPGs, rather than a statistics-dependent survey of the entire gaming community.

Other limitations exist. Because of the extreme specificity of my research and the speed at which online conversations happen on these websites, many of the conversations and threads I observed had already ended. This meant I was unable to ask follow-up or clarifying questions. Additionally, since posts were often several months or even years old, my observations cannot be seen as being indicative of the possible changes that have taken place on these websites.

Despite these shortcomings, this method of data collection is extremely relevant to my research question for one primary reason: it directly mirrors the way an interested person would access information on JRPGs via the web. Using information that was publically accessible meant that I could reenact how someone curious about the definition of "JRPG" would arrive at a conclusion, a great method for discovering how a particular community is presenting and disseminating particular discourses and definitions. Any Internet user with preliminary knowledge of game genres and how to use Google could come across the same information I did, making these sources great material for seeing how genre definitions are being constructed and spread to others who were not participating in the original conversations.

Hardware History: Console vs. Computer RPGs

Initial evidence points towards the term JRPG gaining popularity to replace the genre of "Console RPG" after consoles and computers gained the capacity to play games that were previously exclusive to either one or the other, especially after new Microsoft technology (the Xbox console) hit the market in the early 2000s. While published histories of the RPG genre, such as Matt Barton's *Dungeons and Desktops* (2008), use the term "JRPG" to retroactively label Japanese-made RPGs that were published in the late 1980s and 1990s, there's not yet a plethora of substantial

evidence to prove the term was widely used during that time period. In fact, previous academic articles on video game genres fail to mention the JRPG or WRPG category at all, though some make mention of the “PC Style” RPG (Arsenault 2009). As one gamer, LG, comments on the post “Why Do People Care About JRPGs?” on Kotaku, “It’s funny you mention [80s and 90s games] because when I was growing up [in the 80s and 90s] there wasn’t a distinction [of “Japanese” vs. “Western”] for me at all” (Schreier 2012).

While the official origin of the term and its historical usage are currently unmapped, the use of the term is logical when considering the historical development of RPGs and the gaming market as a whole. RPGs as a genre began in the mid-1970s on computers and were inspired by pen-and-paper role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Barton 2008, 13), *Wizardry* (1981) and *Ultima* (1981) being two well-known early Western-made computer RPG examples. The RPG video game genre also became popular in Japan on consoles, so when consoles began to gain popularity during the 80s and 90s, Japanese game developers created and exported several popular console RPGs to North America – famous examples being *Dragon Quest* (1989) or *Final Fantasy* (1990). Due to the “Great North American Video Game Crash of 1983”, leading to the generally accepted death of the American-made gaming console market, Western RPG developers primarily focused on making RPGs for computers (Barton 2008). The result was that “RPG” as a genre was developed independently on two different platforms in two different countries at the same time.ⁱ

How “Console” became “Japanese”

The presence of the Microsoft Xbox in the early 2000s, the first American company since the 1980s to succeed in an overwhelmingly Japanese-dominated console market (Kent 2001, 575), resulted in Western RPG developers steadily focusing more

of their energy into producing RPGs for consoles. Due to similarities between the Xbox and the Microsoft PC internal architecture, it was easier to adapt games between the two technologies, making it economically feasible to release games that operated across both consoles and computers (Barton 2008). Suddenly, gamers who had been playing primarily Japanese-made RPGs on Japanese-made consoles were inundated with games that, while also labeled as RPGs, seemed extremely different from the RPGs they were familiar with.

As a way to begin distinguishing between RPGs and to communicate game preferences, the terms JRPG and WRPG were introduced to mirror the out-dated genre divide between console-based RPGs, which had typically been made by Japanese developers, and computer-based RPGs, which had typically been made by Western developers. As one gamer on Escapist.org, Ghost rider409895, puts it “Really, I think it is just poor naming (likely based on old ideas where the US and Japan were realistically the only places pumping out massive games and what Japan and the US RPGs were like at the time) which has lead us to want to associate a game style with a location” (Foolery 2013). The reason for dividing JRPGs from other RPGs is then partially historically coincidental, reflective shorthand for a time where Japanese console developers dominated in a market where Western developers had floundered.

Defining the JRPG Genre

The term JRPG has led to fans trying to answer a seemingly uncomplicated question: what exactly *is* a JRPG? A forum participant began a thread on Escapist.org (Foolery 2013) by posing the question “JRPGs and WRPGs: Can they be considered genres?” Beginning with the statement, “Got this idea from another thread” (implying it was a subject of conversation somewhere else), the original poster goes on to question

whether or not RPGs need to be defined by either a “J” or “W”. The first few responses revolve around bashing the geographic separation. The Madman, the first responder, says, “The whole jrpg/wrpg thing I think is rubbish. Why the hell does everything outside of Japan get labeled as ‘western’, which itself, let’s be honest here, basically implies USA.” The next responder, alphamalet, agrees, “I don’t understand why we need to make a distinction on where the RPG was made, they are all RPGs! It perpetuates this whole East vs. West talking point that quite frankly I am pretty sick of.” While both of these posts are aggressively critical of regional divides, their anger at regional separations indicates that the authors assume the term “Japanese” is in place strictly to indicate the region where the game was made.

A few posts down on the same Escapist.org forum, another poster admits to confusion. “Do you categorize [JRPGs] by design [aesthetic] style, or where the game was located?” asks piinyouri. The answers after this range broadly, from people claiming anything from a type of art style, a style of game-play, to a type of in-game geography. Each assertion is inevitably met with naysayers who bring up games that have been labeled as “JRPGs” that fall outside whatever genre markers others have been offering up. Even though many people make clear that JRPGs are not simply RPGs made in Japan, one interesting consensus seems to be that you can “just tell a JRPG” when you play it. Simply put, “no one would mistake them for each other”, even though players don’t really know or agree on what specific attributes make up a JRPG to begin with.

This confusion appears elsewhere. Kotaku, a website that hosts a weekly column called “Random Encounters” dedicated to JRPGs and written by Jason Schreier, posted a primer on JRPGs titled “Why Do People Care about JRPGs?” (Schreier 2012). In response to his own question, “What’s a JRPG?”, Schreier states “by its strictest definition, a JRPG is just a role-playing game made in Japan: a Japanese role-playing

game. [But] in many ways, the genre has evolved to become something more than just 'a role-playing-game made in Japan'. Schreier goes on to say "JRPGs are JRPGs because they feel like JRPGs [...] *you know it when you see it* [my emphasis]." While the community responses to this article range from *I hate/love JRPGs* to *I can't believe you forgot to mention [insert game name here] to these are things I think should be added to the answer of 'what makes a JRPG a JRPG'*, there seems to be no disagreement with Schreier's statement about "feelings". While everything else about his article became subject to intense scrutiny, his argument about "feelings" is left well enough alone.

What does a JRPG "Feel" Like?

The acceptance of vague "feelings" by gamers who clearly think very critically about other statements is made easier to understand by a video series by Extra Creditsⁱⁱ (2012) about JRPGs. In the first video in the series, which is referenced by posters in both the Escapist.org and Kotaku dialogues, Extra Credits begins by claiming a question they "get asked constantly" is the difference between JRPGs and WRPGs. They start the video with a brief history of RPGs that roughly parallels the one at the beginning of this article, with JRPGs developing from console technology and WRPGs originally developing on the computer. The continue on to claim current video game genres are wrong because they are based almost entirely on superficial surface elements rather than on the reasons why people play the game in the first place:

"[Defining games based on surface mechanics would be like] defining film genres by types of cinematography, or literary genres by formulaic plot tropes [...] Genres and all things are actually defined by what the audience desires to get out of interacting with them. We go to a Romance for a different reason than why we go to a Comedy or a drama. We can identify a romance by the emotions it tries to invoke in us, not by its editing style, and the same is true of games." (Extra Credits 2012)

What this means is that *Extra Credits* believes people play JRPGs and WRPGs for the different types of affect these games engender for the player, an affect that can't be limited to the creator's geographical location or art style. Their differences are not in their game mechanics, or camera style, but in the desires and feelings a genre plays to. This emphasis on "feelings" falls in line with the other opinions and statements previously mentioned on Kotaku. According to the forum conversations on both Kotaku and Escapist.org, a player will, regardless of the art style or the game-play mechanics, recognize a JRPG by *how it makes them feel* when they play it. But what exactly is that feeling? Extra Credit goes on to make claims about the core reason people play RPGs, namely that JRPGs immerse players in a carefully crafted story while WRPGs allow players to immerse themselves into another identity that's not embroiled in an obvious, intricate, pre-fabricated story line. While not mentioned in the *Extra Credit* series, another feeling also comes into play with JRPGs: the feeling of nostalgia.

Nostalgia and Video Games

While seemingly at odds with the future-oriented, innovation-focused industry of technological development, video games have a long history of being nostalgic artifacts. Nostalgia, "the yearning to return to a place—to a state of being" (Fenty 2008, 22) is a particularly salient feeling with video games, where change is not only inevitable but also expedited. This is seen for example from Nintendo's branding, which constantly draws on nostalgic familiarity with previous incarnations of franchise favorites like Mario from *Super Mario Bros* (1987) or Link from *Legend of Zelda* (1986-present) (Taylor, Whalen 2008, 1), to the popularity of classic game emulators such as Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator (Payne 2008), to the high rate of sales for retro games sold on the Virtual Console on the Wii, and the wide range of classic game emulators on mobile devices (Taylor, Whalen 2008, 3).

Research has also indicated that nostalgia often plays a huge factor in whether or not fans accept or reject a new installment within a well-known gaming franchise. For instance, Whiteman in "Homesick for Silent Hill" examines fan responses to the release of Konami's *Silent Hill 4* (2004) finding that gamers argued for or against the authenticity of the new iteration of the *Silent Hill* franchise in ways that privileged nostalgia. The struggle about whether *Silent Hill 4* should be considered an "authentic" *Silent Hill* game or was not tied to fans' nostalgic understanding of the past. If the game didn't *feel* like the games they knew from earlier franchise iterations, then it wasn't considered an authentic iteration. Similar to how genres are created, what playing a *Silent Hill* game "felt like" was different depending on what part of the game players were paying attention to. My work grows from that research, casting a broader net than a specific franchise or game to show how entire genres could potentially be products of nostalgia created in response to both technological and social change.

At PAX East, a yearly convention "focused on the culture and community that is gaming" (*What is Pax?*), four JRPG enthusiasts/professionals (including Jason Schreier from Kotaku) held a panel discussion centered on the question of "Do JRPGs Still Matter?" (MMOreporternetwork 2013). The panel primarily addressed concerns about whether or not JRPGs are outdated and irrelevant, opening with Jason Schreier, the head of the panel, stating, "There seems to be this opinion in general in media forums and the gamer community that JRPGs are obsolete in some way, that they're antiquated, that the mechanics are a little too old, and they're kind of irrelevant in this day and age". A little bit after Jason Schreier tells the crowd "I'm sure a lot of you guys are in the same boat as us in that you might have grown up with JRPGs and you might have grown up in the Super Nintendo Era or the Playstation era", the panel discusses the "The Nostalgia Question". Are JRPGs only desirable to those who grew

up with them or for those nostalgic for a previous time? For the panelists, there is an apparent longing, or at the very least appreciation, for the past in the way they answer the opening question: "What is your favorite JRPG?" Every video game the panelists mention, *Lufia II* (1996), *Xenogears* (1998), *Suikoden II* (1999), and *Final Fantasy VI* (1994) are games that were released on Japanese-made consoles in the 1990s, pointing towards the panelists inherent association of JRPGs with their childhood gaming experiences.

This "longing for the past" tendency is reflected in other author's *dislike* for JRPGs as well. Mattie Brice, an independent game developer, writes: "[JRPGs feel like] a weight that I constantly rationalize carrying. I just feel too old for them now" (Brice 2012). While Brice's article focuses primarily on analyzing problems they see for modern games in the JRPG genre, the critique also reads like a "coming of age" story, with JRPGs being a style of gaming associated with an earlier period in gamers' emotional development that needs to be let go of. Other writers admit to playing "only JRPGs" when they were children, and lament the fact that less and less JRPGs seem to be coming over from Japan (Winterhalter 2011). Regardless of whether or not Japan truthfully intends to stop sending RPGs over to the US,ⁱⁱⁱ there is a deep fear that JRPGs will disappear, as evident in defensive headlines such as "Do JRPGs still Matter?" and "JRPGs are Not Irrelevant". The defenders of JRPGs seem to feel as though the game industry has "grown-up" or "moved on" in ways that ostracize and leave out players who remain faithful.

Can the Past be a Future? – Final Thoughts and Further Research

The JRPG genre, which runs counter to typical genre organizational schemes based on either game-play mechanics or narrative themes, illuminates how memory and nostalgia can affect how players categorize their gaming worlds. While the JRPG

genre emphatically reinforces the media’s Japanese origins, gamer communities like those found in my Kotaku or Escapist.org materials are not in complete agreement about whether JRPGs need to have anything to do with Japan at all. Instead, by noting what *part* of the game-playing experience they are paying attention to, rather than compiling a new list of genre classification criteria, we discover that the feeling of “nostalgia” plays a role in how these gamers are defining their gaming environments. The “Japan” aspect of the genre’s name instead becomes part of how identity and memory is being negotiated in a rapidly changing technological landscape, rather than just a simple geographic maker. The gamers on Kotaku and Escapist.org not only associate JRPGs with previous Japanese-made console RPGs from the 80s and 90s, they also expect new JRPG games to inspire the same feelings they had while playing those older games. Although not statistically salient due to the small sample size, by analyzing the discourse on Kotaku and Escapist.org, as well as other sources found through an altered snowball sampling method, this research reveals a path for future areas of inquiry involving the relationship between nostalgia, innovation, and games. What does it mean for a genre or a game to be innovative if the experience of playing it also has to “feel the same” as games that have come before?

This has larger industry implications, especially for an industry marked by exponentially fast technological and social change. Our understanding of game genres is that games within them should be similar, but tempered by innovation and originality (Arsenault 2009, 166). While this is true of all genres, video games especially are closely tied to the technological focus on newness and novelty. It would then be particularly difficult for a type of game to be considered as thriving when they are also associated with the past so strongly that “innovation” itself seems anathema to the core reason consumers are interacting with those games in the first place. The same thing that defines the genre (that JRPG games *feel* like a similar

experience to older console RPG games) can then be twisted to also be the reason for the genre’s imminent demise. For instance, BioWare co-founders, Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk, have claimed that JRPGs are on their way out because of a lack of evolution within the genre: “[JRPGs deliver] the same thing over and over. They make the dressing better, they look prettier, but it’s still the same experience” (Burch 2009). But what if the whole purpose of the JRPG genre is to feel that same experience? To have a feeling while playing similar to the feeling when playing older games already released? The assumption that players only want to play games that inspire new or novel feelings is a limited understanding of games and the complex reasons players are interacting with them.

Accusations concerning the demise of JRPGs are happening within a broader conversation concerning the future of the Japanese game industry at large. Prominent news sources like *The New York Times* have claimed that the entire Japanese gaming industry lacks innovation, lamenting Japan’s fall from being at the forefront of gaming originality (Tabuchi 2010). In another article titled “Japan used to rule video games, so what happened?” published on The Verge, an online American technology news and media network, Sam Byford (2014) argues that the way to save Japan from a declining gaming industry is by taking a cue from Western developers and cultivating an independent (“indie”) game development culture.

Whether or not the conversations about the decline of the JRPG genre and the decline of the Japanese gaming industry are causal or even correlated, there is some similarity in rhetoric. Both JRPGs and the Japanese gaming industry are associated with previous moments of greatness in video game history, and both are being decried as lacking in originality and in need of taking notes on how Western indie developers are doing things. In addition to falling into historically problematic language (i.e. the West “saving” Japan from itself), it paradoxically clashes with the

tendency for indie games to “embody a fundamentally nostalgic logic” (Juul 2015). If Western-made indie games utilize the language of nostalgia and are ostensibly innovative, how can they also save the “overly past-oriented” gaming industry in Japan or the “un-evolved” JRPG genre?

Broadening our understanding of how people emotionally interact with video games could be a way to move us beyond the currently dominant and troublesome dialogue that praises only “Western innovation”. Further research about the relationship between nostalgia and innovation, and how that relationship affects perceptions of video game development, needs to be done. What does it mean for a game, franchise, or genre to be “innovative” versus “nostalgic”? Are there other aspects of game-play and the gaming experience we should attend to in order to further nuance our appreciation for this digital story-telling medium? The past may very well be the key to opening up possibilities for gaming’s future.

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ⁱ The relationship between Japanese and American game developers, and how that relationship influenced RPGs specifically, is most likely more complicated than this paragraph would have the reader believe. Further research, like the work done by Mia Consalvo (2007) needs to be done to fully understand the influence developers had on each other across national boundaries.

ⁱⁱ Extra Credits is an online web series presented by game designer James Portnow, animator/narrator Daniel Floyd, and artists Allison Theus, Elisa "LeeLee" Scaldaferrri, Scott DeWitt, and Dan Jones discussing issues pertinent to video games and game studies.

ⁱⁱⁱ The three JRPGs that Winterhalter references as proof that Japan is no longer interested in the Western audience were all eventually released in the United States.