

# THE INTERACTIVE CULTURAL WORLDS OF JAPAN THROUGH VIDEO GAMES

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## Introduction

There are several reasons why I chose video games as the focus of my project. They are the newest creative medium, having been brought to the forefront of the entertainment industry only 30 to 40 years ago. Because they have often been viewed as an avenue merely for children's entertainment (a notion that I am happy to say is slowly fading away from commonplace thought), and due to the constant evolution of technology pushing the capacity for what game developers can create, there is an alarming scarcity of concrete, academic analysis on the medium and its now booming industry. My hopes are to not only add more to the growing pool of discussion around the medium, but to raise awareness and perhaps even an appreciation for what I believe to be a very special and worthy addition to the various art forms.

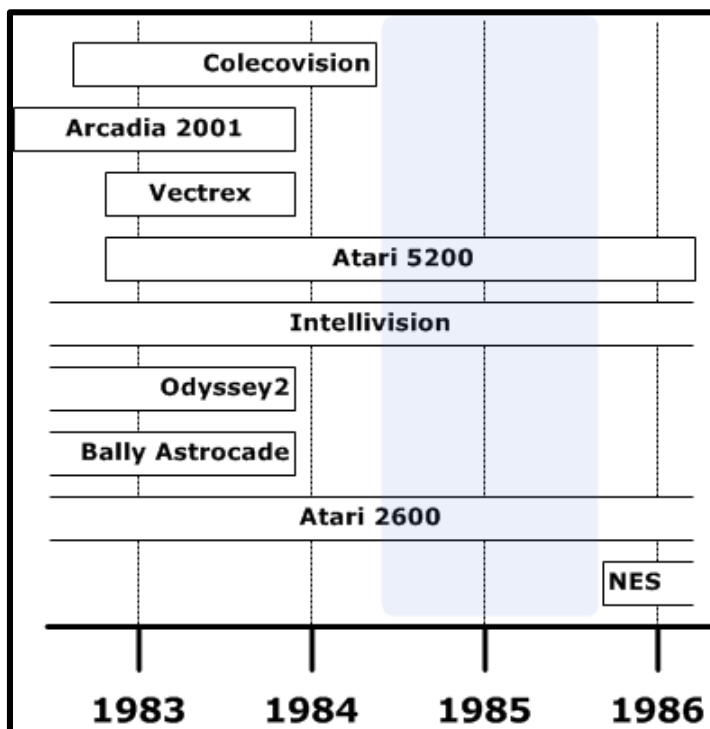
Learning about video games and their design had been my dream ever since I first held a controller at the age of three. Since then, I've indulged heavily into the medium, and have recently become anxious to report and analyze what I have noticed in an industry that has evolved so quickly in a short amount of time, to the point where the video games of old look and play nothing like the ones today. Documentation and research in this field is therefore more critical right now than it ever will be, during a time when this industry is finally beginning to slow down and settle into equilibrium. Specifically, I would like to observe first the qualities in their inherent design that distinguish Western and Japanese games, and then shift to focus on not just what defines a video game, but what defines video games made in Japan.

## Japan's Role in Video Game History

In 1985, a 97% drop in revenue from \$3.2 billion to approximately \$100 million completely destroyed the home video game console business in North America.<sup>1</sup> Before, there had been an explosion of what many considered to be low quality titles circulating in the market. Combined with rising inflation, and competition from superior home computer machines like the Apple I, people began to lose confidence in the prospect of video game consoles, and indeed, many looked at products like the Atari 2600 as little more than a passing fad.<sup>2</sup> However, this crash is commonly overlooked or even forgotten when researching the history of video games, largely due to the emergence of the Nintendo Entertainment System, which was the sole proponent that breathed new life into the industry and completely revolutionized not only how games had quality checking before release, but the capabilities of games themselves. With better technology able to represent more colors and boast better sound design, more artistic liberties were taken by Japanese developers to create characters and franchises you can find in museums today. Japan's approach to game design set a new standard for all developers around the world to follow. Japanese developers such as Nintendo, Konami, and Capcom ruled the market both in revenue and product quality with such titles known in the West as *Super Mario Bros*, *Castlevania*, and *Mega Man*, respectively.

Now, almost thirty years later, developers across the world are creating video games. Because of this global boom in the industry in more recent years, Japan is no longer the main distributor of video games as even big companies in Japan like Nintendo now struggle to stimulate a declining audience of gamers who are buying fewer consoles, and switching instead to smartphones and other small-scale mobile games<sup>3</sup> whilst also trying to compete with some of the staggering budgets of games like *Grand Theft Auto IV*, which boasted the highest development cost – over 100 million dollars – of any game ever created when it hit shelves in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

There is much debate over whether or not Japan's games industry has suffered due to a lack of originality and experimentation in the games themselves – developer UTV Ignition's general manager, Kaz Takeshita, cites that perhaps business and profit has become more important than creativity in order to create products that are guaranteed to sell, and therefore keep developers afloat during Japan's economic recession. "The video games industry was born in Japan and then exported overseas", Kaz states. "When the business side of things rather than creativity is prioritised, when efficiency and profitability is prioritised, creativity and originality is undermined." More outspoken designers like Keiji Inafune of *Mega Man* fame have outright denounced the Japanese games industry, likening it to sushi, that "I don't think that Japanese games can't ever be popular overseas again. But they won't be popular any more in their pure state. It's like sushi. Everyone loves sushi in the West, but you can't just serve sushi over there like it is in Japan." <sup>5</sup> As sentiments like these are vocalized more and more, Japan seems to be at a turning point in the grand scope of the very industry it resurrected.



The Intellivision didn't have a single game developed in 1984, and few were being made for either Atari console.

((<http://www.intellivisiongames.com/history.php>), picture courtesy of <http://www.huguesjohnson.com/features/timeline/worst-year.html>, Creative Commons)

## Defining Video Games

Because the definition is so flexible during a time when the medium is constantly evolving, I will establish three iron rules to which a piece of media must adhere in order to qualify as a video game.

### **1. A game must be set to an electronic, rasterized visual accompaniment.**

As both parts of the term ‘video game’ would suggest, all of them must exist through a *rasterized*, electronic display. Raster graphics in this case refer to the existence of *pixels*, the smallest unit of visual representation on a computer screen. For example, pinball machines, slot machines and others relying solely upon external devices as the means of play are not video games. However, a slot machine depicted in raster graphics on a screen would satisfy this condition. Today’s game market demands uniformity and consistency through visual representation and a minimalist approach to external peripherals required to play – this could be one reason why arcade machines, pinball machines, and other novelty titles often found adjacent to bowling alleys and in game centers are slowly being phased out of existence. Many games today do utilize touch technology and motion capture peripherals as part of the experience, but the action always takes place on the screen, and these kind of peripherals are usually niche, such as the use of a pen stylus on the Nintendo DS touch screen – some games require it, and yet many games make no use of touch screen mechanics at all and still thrive in sales.

### **2. A game must have a set of rules, objectives or goals to give the player a purpose.**

In a video game, a created world is acted upon by the player, and the world reacts. This is paramount, and visible even in the earliest games like *Pong* – the ‘world’ (the enemy paddle) serves a ball, and you, the player, act upon that world by returning the serve with your own paddle. Albeit limited and originally represented in black and white with crude geometric shapes, the game had a clear goal – score more points than the computer controlled paddle. Not every game has to have a clear ending. In fact, several games are programmed not to end at all. They do, however, need to have rules and conventions that nurture a purpose for the player to pursue. Failing this, one would have to create their own purpose in what would be a virtual sandbox and not a video game. Online community *Second Life* may take place in a virtual 3D world in which you control a digital version of yourself, but there is no purpose or rule – everyone creates their own content and customizes their avatar as means to a purely social end.

### **3. The player must have some control over the pace of the game.**

One of the most satisfying concepts in playing and creating games is the knowledge that everyone will have a different experience, because the player has power. Games nurture this idea through creative means. To cite one example, the *visual novel* genre consist of pictures and scenes paired with a purely text-based story experienced through the eyes of one or more characters. Some titles force players to make decisions throughout the story that affect the character’s destiny, and other games may include puzzle solving segments. However little power the player has, visual novels often utilize the least interaction and most will still qualify as video games.

Interactivity gives player the power to impose his or her will upon the world inside of the video game based on their actions, and rules give the player a purpose to use such power. Visual representation of the player's actions and the digital world therein create a frame upon which the entirety of the game is captured. The intended result is a pleasurable experience in which the player had a hand in making.

## The Ingredients of a Game: Aural, Ocular, Rule, and Play

Before diving right into Japanese game design, we must establish an understanding of not only the main rules for what makes something a video game, but the content found therein. After these components are known, we can begin to effectively observe how the sights, sounds, and the control of the player is manipulated differently by developers in both Japan and the West. Unlike the rules that define a game, the components that make up the actual content of any given title is very flexible and may not always be equally distributed. For example, a game where players must match their button presses with a timed rhythm (*Guitar Hero*, *Dance Dance Revolution*) place more focus and importance on aural than visual content. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will attempt to simplify these components into four categories: aural, ocular, rule, and play.



### Ocular – what we see

Visuals in a game might either serve to create an aid to help players understand the rules (in the largely white, sterile dystopian world depicted in *Mirror's Edge*, the color red is eye popping, and always indicates something meaningful to the player), build a virtual world teeming with detail, or both. With the emergence of three-dimensional graphics in video games, there has been a growing need for more graphical capabilities that continue to push

the limits of hardware, prompting the release of newer video game consoles and computer peripherals such as video cards, and the accompanying memory and processors in order to support them. However, some games still utilize two dimensional graphics, either due to production costs or simply preference.

### **Aural – what we hear**

A less prominent but still important aesthetic element in video games is what I call the aural – what we hear and perceive with our ears. The use of audio (or even a lack thereof) is often associated with creating a sense of place or mood in a video game, and is even used sometimes to send cues or signals to players in some games. Critically acclaimed horror game *Silent Hill* is famous for the use of a static-emitting radio item to detect horrific monsters who lurk nearby. As the player gets closer to the monster – sometimes in pitch black darkness – the static may intensify, becoming louder or more chaotic. The following silence upon escape serves psychologically as both unnerving relief and an audio cue to inform the player that he or she is safe for the moment.

### **Rule – what we play**

What constitutes a game's "rules" consist of concrete guidelines or laws that the player must follow. Any components with which the player can interact but not directly control can fall into this category. The rules of the game world as determined by the game's designers should ideally resonate with the player's actions by providing an appropriate reaction. For example, in a game such as *The Legend of Zelda*, being pitted against an enemy where the player's sword is ineffective generally indicates that, because there is no other obvious way to proceed, another solution has to exist to the player in order for the game to continue. Some design trends establish the status quo within a certain genre of games. Anyone who has played a single *Super Mario* title for more than five minutes will know that jumping on the head of an enemy is a surefire method to dispatch them, or that grabbing one-hundred coins will give the player an extra life. Good games are designed conscious not only of the entertainment value inherent in the game's rules, but how the game might challenge and engage the player to create a satisfying experience.

### **Play – how we play**

Arguably the most important part of all games are the capabilities of the player, and this falls under the 'play' category. Any aspect that can be controlled by the player, whether they are directing a character, ordering troops around, or stimulating the in-game world will fall into this category. Designing this aspect of a game can often be the most challenging, since the entertainment value from actually playing the game falls upon how the player interacts with the video game, and therefore the game designers must craft an experience that can be understood and enjoyed with a reasonable level of engagement. Interestingly enough, however, popular video games have not always been necessarily fun to play – games like *Deadly Premonition* and *Nier* (both are Japanese games released in 2010) were decried by critics for poor gameplay and outdated visuals. However, both gained a substantial cult following due to other factors such as the story and music, both of which have no bearing on the game actually being fun in the contextual sense as defined above by both 'rule' and 'play'.

## Next steps

Now that I have established the purpose of the research, defined the necessary characteristics in order to be considered a video game, and briefly elaborated on the nature of their content, I will be able to further expound upon the factors that have allowed Japanese games to establish their own distinguished identities via design philosophies, business practices, or aesthetic norms inherited from other forms of Japanese popular culture while occasionally contrasting with the very same factors oft-invoked in Western games. I will do so by analyzing in depth both the deliberate and unintended nuances found in various titles and franchises which have given Japan its own unique identity in this industry.

## References

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