"Neutral" and "universal" Video Games? Reintroduction and influence of cultural and social identities in the virtual world

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Abstract

As of today, The Video Game Industry has become one of the most profitable and influential leisure business in the world. Alongside this trend, Video Games have become one the most important elements that contribute to the integration of online media and connectedness, mainly because of the offers of interaction and entertainment that provides to online users all around the world. Because of this, as long as the medium continues to increase, the way it affects on social processes and consumption habits will only be more prevalent.

People from all over the world find themselves in virtual spaces, programmed and codified to resemble all kind of scenarios, to communicate and compete, as well as to find new areas to develop new personas and try to constitute new forms of identity, regardless of their cultural contexts. However, while this process is still forming itself, there's been a new trait that may change the way people approach to online gaming. The establishment of localized, regional virtual spaces are starting to differentiate players and, at the same time, nurturing some discourses of individual and even national identity that may change the way people understand games, and how they relate to their own physical spaces.

Throughout this presentation, I will examine the recent rise of new games that have been specially localized and directed specifically to certain audiences that can only be found in certain markets and regions, and how that may change the way developers, consumers and people envision these virtual spaces.

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Introduction

Ever since their conception and introduction in the late sixties, video games have become an increasingly popular and influential media that covers a wide range of activities. Besides, it has become an important factor to understand the subsequent growth and acceptance of personal computers in the early eighties, which eventually helped to provide the conditions for the existence of the Internet and social media as we understand it today. And finally, video games have been especially significant since, as Mia Consalvo put it (2006), they have become a pivotal sector in Japanese cultural industry which hasn't been surpassed yet by other industries.

It is not surprising, then, that video games have become a topic of discussion amongst both academics and journalists. Much of this discussion has been related to the effect that these objects produce on their users, specially in relation to their psychological development (Malone, 1982; Kinder, 1991). Other aspects that have been analyzed revolve around their economic viability and, more precisely, the ever-faster growth that the industry as a whole has experienced in such a short amount of time. However, other studies have centered on the medium as an epistemic artifact, and how it differentiates itself from other forms of traditional media, such a TV or film. This field of studies is tightly related to other already established disciplines, such as cultural studies, media studies and history, and have helped considerably in establishing their importance in the development of modern societal habits and cultural processes. As such, it has become necessary to study video games as objects attached to cultural studies, and especially Area Studies.

Although many works have been done over the years around certain video games, or social phenomena associated to them (such as behavior in online games), there's still a lot of ground to be covered. One of the elements that will be discussed here deals with the theory that video games are an important channel through which cultural flows proceed and are received by the audiences. More specifically, this work will try to define the role of Japan as a country that has contributed the most to the development of these products, and such, where consumers have developed one of their most distinct communities around these products. Also, we will study the influence of these groups in the shaping of some of the most pervasive cultural discourses that are actually spread about the representation of Japan and the concept of Japaneseness in popular culture. Not only that, due to the fact that video games possess several qualities that distinguish them from other forms of media, such as their interactive nature, many of the principles related to audience behavior that have been studied in the last ten years are shown here. The history of this medium is, in fact, related to the development the most recent theories about reception and participation of audiences in the text. That is why, by studying video games, I believe that the postulates established by many important media theorists (Hall 1980; Fiske 1987, 1989; Jenkins 2009) will become richer and help a great deal in exposing many of the practices by which the media is consumed today.

Therefore, we will approach this topic from the perspective of the development of social identities by the act of playing these artifacts, and how, throughout this process of interaction, some of the most important images and representations are formed. By doing this, we hope to introduce video games to the discussion of cultural representation and Japaneseness, and in so doing, contribute in some way to some of the most important debates that have been taken place in Area Studies.

The Definition of the Video Game and its elements

Many different kinds of approximations have been done over the years to study these objects as cultural products, the most important of them being the narratological studies centered around hypertext and the Internet, such as Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) or Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997). Both authors came from similar traditions (mostly, literary studies and its relation to textuality and narrative), yet developed somewhat opposed traditions. The "ludological" branch of Aarseth, and possibly the most well-known, centered around the way that players experience the artifact and generate different meanings in the context that the rules and content of the game allow. The narratological branch of Murray centered on the way that traditional texts needed to adapt to the rise of the Internet and hyperlinks, which was best represented in video games and signaled the beginning of a new form of narrative. As can be seen, both "schools" had many similarities, but remained separated until several authors (most notably, Gonzalo Frasca and Ian Bogost) started to use terms and concepts from both to develop their own corpus. Because of this original split, there has been a wide array of theories elaborated around video games, some of them contradicting each other, and that has generated some difficulties when studying video games and culture. Moreover, despite several notable exceptions, it is still quite difficult to see topics such as culture and ideologies applied to games.

Another important problem in studying video games is related to their own nature: while they are, by all definitions, texts produced by an specific culture, they share a lot in common to traditional forms of games that haven't been considered as such. This process not only implies that the theories of Huizinga (1953) and Caillois (1954) regarding society and play can be applied to these objects, but also that it is possible to mix them with the terms used by Cultural Studies. In fact, most of the original dispute between ludologists and narratologists was centered around how these different disciplines should be merged and to which degree.

The history of the study of video games shows how these cultural products have helped to shake many traditional conceptions, both in Cultural Studies and Game Theory. At the same time, these studies have been in tune with what other authors have theorized over the years. For example, the theory on participatory culture and active audiences established by Henry Jenkins (1995, 2009) ties in with the working process of video games, because, just like traditional games, they rely on the player's input to generate meaning. Much like the audience that Jenkins studies, these agents take control of the text that is presented on the artifact and inject their own meaning, many times disregarding the authority of the work. This process emphasizes the role of the spectators and makes them participants of their content, and in so doing, are allowed to influence much more in the product. Unlike other cultural texts, such as those of film and literature, one does not merely receive the narrative and decodes it, as Stuart Hall would put it (1980), but needs to experience it in the form of a game session. By doing that, it creates a unique form of reception, since it implies that all lectures of the text will be different and dependent of many factors external to them. Nevertheless, one of the most important characteristics of video games is related to the fact that they are one of the best representatives of the concept of active audience. In an era where every form of media seems to be developing some way of interaction with its audience, video games have always had this characteristic since they were introduced.

Furthermore, it is important to considerate the fact that, as video games become more ubiquitous in society, their range of applications is going to increase. Ever since their original introductions as viable commercial products in the early seventies, there has been an ever increase usage of the term

serious games to define those products that, instead of serving as entertainment, can be used as learning tools, pieces of advertising or even propaganda (Bogost 2007). While these applications and their terminology are just beginning to materialize, they have been received positively and are considered seriously by several institutions (Cunningham 2011).

What kind of messages may be decoded from a video game? This question may be answered differently, whether we follow a behaviorist approximation or a constructivist one. As Bogost explains (2007), behaviorists based on the works of B. F. Skinner (1968) establish that games teaches through imitation of what is displayed on the screen and reproduced by the player. On the other hand, constructivism based on Piaget (2009) suggest that games teaches by tangential learning, meaning that, while the game may offer an specific setting and content, what players learn is located on the way the game is played, and as such, it can be translated to other areas that may be more useful to the individuals. For example, the tools and abilities required to play a game such as *Balance of Power* may be used to understand resource management. As Gee puts it (2005), both these approximations are not adequate to explain how these games are perceived by their audiences. He uses the term "situational learning" to explain that, while a game may indeed help to acquire abilities for other disciplines, the player will ultimately learn only how to actually *play* the game. In this sense, this means that games are encoded in the same way that films and literature are. However, they are decoded in an entirely different manner.

One of the most important definitions that has been established about video games is the one that Gonzalo Frasca elaborated in 2003. A video game, he explains, is "any form of entertainment based on software, which uses both text and images in a hardware platform, be it a personal computer or a dedicated system (consoles), and where one or more players are involved in the same environment, whether it is on the same psychical space or throughout the net." This hollistic definition highlights the most important elements that need to be observed when studying video games, which are: the electronic component, the rules through which the interaction between the player and the interface takes form, and the space where players are situated during the game session. Later works of Frasca further developed a classification of all these elements that he considered characterize video games, which are: the *playworld,* the virtual space, or "fictional world" (Juul 2005) where the players are able to move and introduce themselves in the narrative that is being presented through the graphical representation; the *mechanics*, which are the rules and limitations imposed by the software and hardware on the player that conditions its experience; and the *playformance*, which is the way that the player decides to experience and "play" the actual game. In this last sense, the most important aspect to take in consideration is the context by which the game is received and played throughout, something that will vary heavily among individuals and the place where the game session will take place.

While Gonzalo Frasca offers a useful set of terms to explain many of the elements that comprise a video game, it is important to clarify that many of his terms can be used to activities that don't necessarily have an electronic component, such as sports, board games or other forms of play. As Espen defined, video games may be viewed as "factories of signs," literary texts that can be read in a non-linear form to convey different ideas and meanings (1997).[1] This definition does not seem to take into account the fact that audiences, by being able to decode any text by themselves (Hall 1980) already interact with the product of any medium and reproduce its meaning differently. Therefore, this trait should not be considered exclusive to video games, and could even be traced to

1 He called this type of reading as "ergodic" reading, explaining that, while in a traditional text linearity is quintaessencial to convey the narrative, in "ergodic" texts this elemen is not needed, since most of the narrative is expected to be injected by the reader, and because of this, it will not experience it in a linear way.

older forms of narratives, such as role plays or "Choose your Own Adventure" books. However, as Ian Bogost noted (2007), video games are unique in that they are not merely textual representations, but also reproduce a form of "procedural rhetoric." Essentially, this definition is based on the fact that games follow an already established chain of event that conditions the way players are going to access to its content. In this sense, players do not merely "play," but also reproduce a discourse that is implicit in the mechanics of the game. This definition goes beyond the proposal of Aarseth, since while it still requires participation on the player's side in order to be decoded and transmitted properly, it limits heavily its freedom of movement to convey their own meanings.

According to Bogost, the model of transmission that video games employ assumes that participants will follow certain pre-established procedures that are better defined throughout the mechanics of the game. While it is important to consider that graphical representation and other "classic" forms of reception are used extensively in video games to convey different ideologies, the "procedural rhetoric" must be considered as the most important of them, since it is based on the foundation that these products are made for. Basically, the basis of all video games lies in the fact that, as software programs, they are systems encoded and built based on the technology available to game designers at the moment. This process forces them to build their works with some limitations as to what can be transmitted merely through graphical representation. This has also explained why video games have fostered technological innovation, since the more powerful the hardware, better representations can be made. By contrast, mechanics can be used almost without restriction, since they can be used as metaphors for designers (the authors of the text) to transmit their message.

The importance of mechanics to understand representation in video games can be seen in the way that video games are treated in the press. Since their early beginnings in the late seventies, video game journalism has usually created a fluid taxonomy to differentiate early video games. These categories, which use most of the terminology that is present in other areas such as film criticism, divide games according to the abilities that are required for the participant. For instance, a FPS (short for First Person Shooter) is a type of game that is based on some visual representation (the player experience the *playworld* throughout the point of view of the main character) and mostly on mechanics (the game requires the participant to advance through different stages that are usually full of enemies that need to be destroyed or dodged). The eponymous example of this kind of games is *Doom* from 1994. This form of game offers a completely different experience than, for instance, a Platform Game like *Super Mario Brothers*, in which the player is always able to see the character while it makes him or her go from a certain point A to a point B, usually employing some abilities to defeat her enemies along the way. While both games seem to be similar just by reading the terms I've used to describe them, they both offer completely different kinds of experiences because of the fact that they are not based on the same mechanics. As such, they are not perceived in the same way and are considered two distinct literary pieces.

However, it should be noted that mechanics can be used interchangeably and alongside visual representation to generate different messages. Much like two *noir* films can be watched similarly, yet still be distinguished, two games can be played exactly, yet can be perceived as different. In video game journalism, this has usually meant that new terms have been invented to categorize those games that, while may be similar in the mechanics, are better separated by their visual presentation, by their *playworld*. For example, Third Person Shooters, such as *Tomb Raider*, use similar mechanics to First Person Shooters, but thanks to the improvement of hardware rendering, players are now able to see the main character interacting with the virtual world even though they are moving through it in a similar vein to *Doom*. This feat could only be done mostly thanks to the development of 3D rendering on video games during the late nineties. Furthermore, as

technological innovation continues, some designers have been able to mix mechanics in order to create new experiences, such as combining Third Person Shooters with Role Playing Games (long for RPGs, who relay heavily on player advancement through social interaction with computer generated characters) in *Knights of the Old Republic* or *Mass Effect*.

All these examples serve to illustrate how both the *playworld* and the mechanics have been fundamental to explain video games since its early conception. However, the third element defined by Frasca, the *Playformance*, has not been used extensively in defining video games until less than ten years ago with the advent and popularity of so-called "sport games." This type of products include products such as *Dance Dance Revolution*, *Wii Sports*, *Guitar Hero* or *SingStar*. All of them have in common that they depend more than anything else on the performance of the participant (or participants) which usually implies that *playformance* will be more important than the *Playworld* and mechanics in these cases. While this may be the case, it is undeniable that all these video games also possess traits of the other two elements, going from the aesthetic presentation of *Guitar Hero* or the rules to obtain a high score on *Dance Dance Revolution* (which are obviously based on mechanics). At the same time, all games presented early as examples, while not directly based on the performance of the player, base much of their appeal on the fact that they can be played in many ways, that is, they can be experienced through different performances. For example, many fighting games (like *Street Fighter*) are based entirely on competition between players, and as such, they attract players through the way that they may perform on the game. Since many games posses a mode centered on player competition, we can see that the *playformance* plays a much bigger part on the way that video games are experienced than originally thought.

Throughout all these examples, it has been shown that the terms used by Frasca (*playworld*, mechanics and *playformance*), while not exclusive to video games by any means, are always present in them. By combining them, players are able to make sense of their activity and share a wide range of meanings between them to form communities. Although, as we'll see in the next chapters, these communities have been far from homogeneous, they all have in common their dependence on these cultural artifacts to fully articulate themselves. The space where these agents are able to move is situated between the fictional *playworld* and their own psychical space, and both elements meet constantly. I consider this situation a "virtual world" where the separation between objective reality and fictional representation does not pose a problem to their participants, who are willing to move in-between them without difficulty.

Video games and cultural frameworks

Since the "virtual world" refers to the activity of the player both inside the games and outside them, it can also be used to define the context in which the game is played. By this, we aren't only referring to the physical place, but also the actual cultural context and social *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990) that surround these products. Much like it happens to the rest of cultural products, video games influence heavily on people's habits and consumer activities. And since consumers are also shaped by many other factors, like class, gender or religion, their lifestyle and values are going to be different between regions and cultural frameworks. Video games have been, ever since their origin, influenced heavily by the context in which they were made, as well as the historical pressures that led originally to their acceptance and prosperity in certain countries.

The video game industry is an odd representative of the heterogeneous nature of player's

communities. Today, many companies and video game developers operate in many different countries, since most of the production chain has been heavily globalized (Newman 2006, Donovan 2009). However, video game production is far from being decentralized: in fact, it could be said that the Video Game Industry is one of the more hierarchical structures that operates nowadays in the cultural industry (Dmitri 2002, Consalvo 2006). Due to the fact that many different types of disciplines are required to make a game, enterprises are usually divided in three categories: the first one comprises video game developers and most of the actual creative process; the second covers all the publishers and localization companies that are specialized in promoting video games and investing in massive sponsoring; lastly, the hardware developers are centered on the development and distribution of the main platforms that need to be used for video games in order to be presented to the consumer market. All these three types of companies are tightly related in a vertical structure that goes from top to bottom, since most of the decisions made by the latter two are always the more influential in the short term (Sloan 2006).

Alongside these companies, video games are also dependent on the platform in which they are distributed. Whether it is dedicated systems (such as video game consoles), personal computers or mobile phones, their chance of success in an already overflowed market lies heavily on these supports. This also means that, if a certain market has a preference for a certain kind of niche, those products released in said niche have a bigger opportunity. For instance, both the Chinese and Korean market have usually preferred PCs and mobile phones, while video game consoles are far more ubiquitous in American and European markets. These elements tend to, quite usually, separate even further those markets that have well-established and differentiated communities.

It has been argued that video games act as channel for cultural flows and, as such, serve as catalysts to establish cultural hybrids in different regions. However, another element that has been historically associated to games is the fact that they strongly relate to views and representations of Japanesness in Western society. Depending on the context that they were originally made and released, these games tend to be associated to those *emics* that define the culture where they operate. Being texts that are presented throughout the already defined mechanism of "procedural rethoric," players engage in these *emics* during game sessions, and thus, "play" with them. Of course, the representation of these *emics* will depend of their *playformance*, and they may even alter them to suit their own needs, as the fans studied by Jenkins do with traditional texts (1995).

Now, with that being said, it is important to consider whether this way of transmission has been acknowledged by video game designers, or even if it has been desired by companies specialized in this sector. While it is true that many games have been strongly associated to specific frameworks, much of the effort done by the industry seems focused on either the exploitation of successful brands or heavy investment on technological innovation. Both strategies have been used to boost sales since the origins of the medium, and it has followed almost step by step the principles of corporate capitalism. It could be argued, as Izushi and Aoyama did, that this kind of strategy has contributed, albeit accidentally, to several forms of cultural innovation (2002). But ever since their beginnings, video games have been presented, first and foremost, as a "neutral" and "aseptic" entertainment, aimed at the biggest demographic possible.[2] However, this intention of "blankness" is more challenged as more video games that are marketed to specific demographics are made, whether they may be directed to a local market or even a certain minority. Besides, thanks to the interactive nature of these cultural artifacts, many different communities have been able to "transform" them even though they weren't initially intended for it.

2 Although such "biggest demographic" tends to be considered mostly American white teenagers.

Knowing this, we must know take into consideration that, although video game communities may be autonomous from one another, the history of this medium has led to many players establish a clear hierarchy between some products. At the same time, these communities have challenged the traditional discourse of "West-Rest" that has been always present in Cultural Studies, since, as we will see, Japanese Video Games have managed to have an impact in the medium that hasn't been matched by their American counterparts. Even so, the inversion of this traditional dichotomy has implied that many of these communities (especially, but not exclusively, Western communities) do instill a sense of Japaneseness and Japanese representation in many of these products. This perception, which is integrated heavily with other representations of Japan present in popular culture, is one of the most important elements from which this country has been envisioned as a "cultural superpower" to most consumers today, and as such, it must be studied seriously.

Video Games and Japaneseness: Intertextuality and Representation

Japanese Video Games are considered one of the most important products of the whole medium (Consalvo 2006, Kohler 2004, Goldberg 2011). Much of its influence is related to the fact that Japanese hardware and software companies have managed to maintain a steady leadership thanks to their maintaining of a constant curve of innovation. However, while other innovative Japanese products, such as mobile phones, may suffer what is known as the "Galapagos Effect" (Dujarric and Hagiu 2009), video games constitute, in fact, an exception. The cause of this situation must be traced historically. Video games were initially popular in North America and Japan thanks to the efforts of companies from both countries, as well as some European and Australian firms (Donovan 2010). However, in 1983, the majority of the American firms retired from the sector after a particularly agitating period of economic turbulence and industrial crisis. While there has been several explanations to this phenomenon, and why it didn't ultimately happen in Japan (Donovan 2010), Mirko Ernkvist suggests that rapid technological innovation, associated with small differentiations between the products, made many leading American companies quickly obsolete (2008). One interesting fact is that Japanese Video Games, while also suffering from some of the same problems, managed to maintain its stability thanks to a strong control in quality and a particularly receptive local market. By contrast, North American firms had flooded their own with sub-par games that damaged their reputation and forced them to low their prices too much.

Not long after the "Atari Shock," as the 1983 crash would be known in Japan,[3] the electronic and toys company Nintendo hailed an aggressive campaign that not only revived the market in USA entirely, but also contributed to the economic growth of the medium. To avoid what were seen as the main cause of the original crisis (namely, the excess of mediocre products and the war on prices), Nintendo established a strict control of production that forced all game developers to adjust the quality of their works to certain standards. At the same time, Nintendo was granted the last word in terms of distribution, so that consumers couldn't be overwhelmed. This system practically forced all companies to submit themselves to Nintendo's demands, since at the time, it was the only company that had a significant presence in the market (approximately 90% of it, according to Sheff 1993). While this control indeed helped to establish some firms in the industry, many developers resented what they saw as an authoritarian and paternalistic treatment in Nitendo's business practices (O'Donnell 2010). As such, many of these developers eventually started to favor other hardware designers who established less restrictions, such as Sega, Sony and other publishers.

3 An allusion to the sudden collapse of the leading company at the time, Atari.

Others sector that were sought out as alternatives included several niches that hadn't been fully explored, such as PCs and cell phones. During more than two decades, Japanese Video Games and Japanese companies maintained an almost complete predominance of the sector, which was only starting to shatter after the success of the Microsoft console, the Xbox, in the early 2000's. Nowadays, the emergence of several national industries, such as South Korea and China, as well as the massive diversification brought up by digital distributors, have undermined the previous dominance of the Japanese industry (and of video game consoles). Nevertheless, the current structure of the Video Game Industry has been articulated following the model that Nintendo established thirty years ago.

The historic process of this medium shows why the distinction of "Japan and the West" that Consalvo establishes (2006) has been a predominant trend even until today, despite the difficulties that Japanese companies are facing. Furthermore, this situation has been used to reinforce the notion of "Cool Japan" that was used by several institutions to elevate the condition of Japan as a cultural superpower (Condry 2009). One aspect that hasn't been treated extensively is the fact that this integration could be done primarily because of the early intertextuality that was established between Japanese Video Games and pop culture. By this, we're referring to the process by which several media relate to each other thanks to the fact that they share a cultural framework or take part in the worldview of an specific group. If one should travel to a neighborhood dedicated to youth entertainment in Japan, she will note how anime, manga and even fashion is marketed alongside electronic entertainment without distinction. Likewise, many developers show these traits of intertextuality by employing similar artistic styles, or even the same artists that work in other media, if not directly adapting popular products. This relationship was established in Japan several years before other cultural industries started to do the same (Kohler 2004).

In order to understand how this relation functions, John Fiske argued that all texts that can be found in society are related to one another thanks to the phenomenon of "intertextuality." Although this term was coined originally by Julia Kristeva, both Fiske and Fairclough (1989; 1992) tried to limit this otherwise nuanced expression by establishing distinctions between "manifest intertextuality" and "constitutive intertextuality," as well as "horizontal" and "vertical" modes of it. While the manifest intertextuality signifies to direct allusions and references to a certain work in others, constitutive refers to the relations established between the texts that follow a similar structure, such as genre or format. Constitutive intertextuality is also related to interdiscusivity, since texts that follow the same patterns are also bound to develop the same signs and enouncements and, therefore, fall into a same discourse formation. However, texts also establish unequal relations between them, since, as Fiske pointed in his work, references and similarities found in a medium that refer to another will inevitably establish a hierarchical relationship, while works that fall in the same format (books, movies of songs) tend to be more equal because they follow the same discursive formations.

If we should follow these principles, how we would categorize the relations between Japanese Video Games, Japanesness and other forms of media? As Mia Consalvo explained (2006), the traditional distinction made between the West and the Rest that Orientalist Studies (Saiid 1995) helped to develop, was actually inverted in the Video Game Industry for a long time. Instead, what happened was similar to those brief periods when non-US elements started to dominate certain sectors of the American cultural industry (Morley and Robins 1995), such as the "Japan Panic" of the mid eighties or the success of Korean Music in recent years. Since Japanese Video Games are heavily associated with other forms of popular culture, their connection was considered a major reason through which franchises such as *Pokemon, Digimon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh* became popular in the first place. Other franchises became popular in video games thanks to the impact of the original

animation, which was the case of *Dragon Ball* or *Saint Seiya*. And, lastly, some games prompted the creation of spin-off series that were aimed as an attempt to localize the original products. This was especially fruitful on the part of Nintendo and Sega, which managed to create several TV series and movies out of the popularity of their products. The 1989 movie, *The Wizard*, was considered a major advertising for the next *Super Mario Brothers* game, as well as a portrayal of video game culture at that time (Kinder, 1991). These examples show than, far from having being a monolithic process, the entry of Japanese popular commodities in North America and Europe was handled differently according to the nature of such commodities. However, as these products began to consolidate themselves in Western markets, consumers began to establish an intertextual relationship between them and constituted a community that reflected this relation. Such community was centered on the idealization of Japanese pop culture and the longing for the presence for Japanesness in their way of life (Galbraith 2011), which eventually evolved on a "semiotic solidarity" between Japanese and Western consumers that implied the acquisition of similar terms to describe both communities (Iwabuchi 2002, Jenkins 2009). In this sense, it could be argued that intertextuality was the major force through which Japanesness was integrated in Western consumer habits. This phenomenon can still be experienced if one would visit any of the many conventions that are being celebrated in the West, where participants are able to express their identity and desires without the restrictions that are usually associated with everyday life (Jenkins 1995).

It is, then, quite interesting to note how different Japanese and Western video game communities have grown out to be. While most of video game culture in USA or in my own country is experienced through digital spaces (mostly, on online gaming), conventions and private meetings, Japanese gamers have access to a wide arrange of public spaces where arcade machines, specialized shops and pachinko are mixed without distinction. Such societal habits, while may be present at certain spots of the Western market, never reach the scale of any Japanese amusement park. Even so, these districts, while usually occupied by young people, also host of are situated near adult spaces, where gambling and pornography can be found. Such diversity could hardly be seen in any major city, even less towns, in Spain or any other Western country, where arcades are slowly fading and game shops are small. Nevertheless, the connection and solidarity between consumers is still present, and it has even increased during the years. As digital distribution has become more prevalent, commodities are absorbed at an increasing speed, and audiences are constantly formulating their social identity. While this discursive process is unpredictable, there are certain elements that can be found and relate intimately to the presence of Japanesness in these narratives. One of them, and probably the most significant, is the longing of the Japanese popular spaces, both in terms of services (the desire to visit a Sega amusement park) or psychical situation (the idealization of neighborhoods such as Akihabara as reachable utopies). The other, while less easily perceived, is the association of certain narratives and genres to a supposed cultural factor. The most extreme cases are the relation of First Person Shooters to a Western Audience and the categorization of a whole brand of mechanics as "Japanese Role Playing Games." This "culturalization" is not just reflected in mechanics, but in the *playworld*: those games which employ an esthetic similar to that found in *anime* or Japanese popular culture is inmediately recognized as belonging to the sphere of Japan, while games that offer a presentation more similar to Hollywood are labeled as "Western." Finally, *Playformance* plays also a fundamental part, since the association of Japanese video game consumerism with public spaces and localized areas is heavily contrasted to the private and Internet-related space of Spanish or American players.

Ever since the success of Nintendo and the consolidation of Video Games, Japanese products have become more ubiquitous than ever in European and American markets, and as such, audiences have began the process of relating them to establish their own identity. While these heavily hybridized constructions of reality may be based on an idealization of Japan that practically meets with an

essentialist discourse, they are nevertheless major driving forces in modern society. Video games have been a vital agent in this process, and as such, we need to start studying them in the light that theorist such as Aarseth, Juul, Bogost or Frasca have provided. This way, we will be able to see how their presence plays a major influence in contemporary worldviews and, moreso, in Japanese representation in the international sphere.

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