

What Makes Gêmu Different? A Look at the Distinctive Design Traits of Japanese Video Games and Their Place in the Japanese Media Mix

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Abstract

The popularity and influence enjoyed by Japanese video games is irrefutable. There is little doubt, for many scholars, that the Japanese video game industry has helped establish the standard procedures of production, distribution and localization for the global sector. However, beyond titles of overwhelming international repercussion— from Space Invaders (Taito, 1978) to Silent Hills (2015), without forgetting Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, 1985)—very little has been published on the production of Japanese video games destined for the domestic market, where genres unpopular in the West, such as visual novels or dating sims, are the staples. This leads us to consider the effectiveness and necessity of the term gêmu (Picard, 2013) as a sepa-

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rate category for the critique of Japanese video games. In this paper, we start with Picard's contribution, which defined the socio-economic variables of gêmus, and set out to explore their design and aesthetic features in the broad context of Japanese entertainment products. To do so, we try to delimit the role that gêmu have played in the expansion of Cool Japan and the synergies between them, manga and anime within the Japanese media mix. This allows us to describe a list of particular aesthetic and creative features of gêmu; a set of characteristics which, although not universal, can be usefully applied in game criticism to provide a better understanding of the particular features of gêmu.

Introduction

The history of video games is undoubtedly a global one. The medium has its origin in contact and transfer between agents of different nations at both a creative and an industry level. Consalvo (2006) wrote that “video games’ contents are now better understood as complex flux as opposed to natural or even cultural manifestations”. The case has been made for a picture of the video game industry and its history as a product of globalization, determined by “the incursion of Japanese corporations in North America and Europe” (Consalvo, 2009; Kline, Dyer-Witherford, & de Peuter, 2003). After the expansion of the first arcade video games in the seventies and early eighties, several companies began making game systems and video games—including the development of two of the greatest hits of all time: *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978) and *Pac-Man* (1980)—and soon achieved local and global success. They included Taito, Namco, Sega and Nintendo. They created products that were soon seen as icons of the medium. They were highly successful both in Japan and in the West and achieved cultural relevance to the point of developing a strong merchandising market. Later, since the constitution of profitable markets based on the personal computer and the home console—with Nintendo’s Famicom as its flagship—the Japanese video game industry has been in the vanguard of the development of a globalized, multinational industry.

Martin Picard (2013) acknowledged the reputation of Japanese video games and criticized that the studies on the Japanese game industry are often tied to “the development of a global and hybrid industry” without considering “the specific development of the industry on Japanese territory”. Along the same lines, Pelletier-Gagnon (2011) echoed the neglected status apparently suffered by Japanese video games in academic studies: “Considering that both the history and commercial success of the media is largely attributable to titles made in Japan, it is disappointing to see how those productions still escape most academic works” (p. 15). To avoid this, the conditions of each agent and each market must be taken into account to understand how they contributed to the formation of the medium. Picard defended the separation of what he calls gêmu—that is, “the particular media ecology” which forms the Japanese video game industry—from Western video games, as “the complex geopolitical and socioeconomic negotiations” specific to Japan, forming “tangible distinctions between the Japanese and the North American (or European) market as each tries to divert and capture

these flows.” The Japanese video game industry, he stated, “is both a global and local phenomenon.” Although the main attention is attracted by the big internationally-driven titles and developers, the kaleidoscopic *subkarucha* (subculture) niche markets are equally important as a part (and counterpart) of that industry.

Kline et al. (2003) stated that the development of “digital play” was a process that combined three fronts: technology, culture and marketing. Picard (2013) added that “the Japanese video game industry has its own process through these circuits, including, of course, its global and transnational aspect, although this constitutes only a part of the overall picture.” For Aoyama and Izushi (2006) there are several factors affecting the development of these industries, such as “the social legitimacy and strength of pre-existing industries, the socioeconomic status of entrepreneurs or pioneer firms in an emerging industry, and the sociocultural cohesiveness between the pre-existing and emerging industries” (p. 1843). They stated that “each country draws on a different set of creative resources, which results in a unique trajectory,” and Japan is no different. Its industry, they wrote, “emerged out of corporate sponsorships in arcades, toys and consumer electronics industries and drew skill from the comic book and animated-film sectors” (p. 1843). These dynamics can be easily traced to the “Japanese media convergence” (Steinberg, 2012, p. viii) or *media mix*. The popularity of the *seisaku iinkai*, or production committees, is the living proof of it. These “joint ventures of several companies, for risk sharing as well as promotional purposes” (Gan, 2009, p. 36), have become a common practice for Japanese printing firms, anime studios, and game developers. Their aim is to grow a whole network of resources seeking to build synergies in the expansion to franchises of successful hits whose origins (which may initially be a manga, an anime, or a video game) are increasingly irrelevant (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 45). It can therefore be argued that Japanese idiosyncrasies influenced the development of *gêmu* and that manga and anime (as seen in Steinberg’s *media mix*) brought a different set of creative skills and a new production mindset to the table.

Thus, the development of a Japanese video game industry was a product of the intersection of this *media mix*, the marketing strategies, and the consumption culture of the country and involved several successful pre-existing industries: electronics, computers, amusement, and content. The scene was ripe for a video game boom, with the *rejâ bûmu* (leisure boom; Lihnart, 2009) and the aggressive government campaigns for the consumption of “Made in Japan” products (Yoshimi, 1999). The business practices of Japanese corporations, prone to “import/export business and joint ventures with American companies” (Picard, 2013) helped the *gêmu* move from local to global. This approach does not reduce all Japanese production to a stereotype but it does allow an understanding of its origins and makes it possible to frame it in the transnational context, controlled by three main markets (Japan, USA, Europe), between which there is constant transfer. These dialogues between creators (and their works) become more obvious if local and global factors are taken into account as part of a transnational setting.

In this paper, we face the need for a particular critical model applied to *gêmu* that can be

placed on the same level as the conceptualization of separate disciplines within animation and comic studies. We are speaking of the anime and manga studies, which are currently becoming established with roots in the distinguishing traits of Japanese comics and animation compared to their counterparts from other countries (*bande dessinée*, *comic strip*, American comics, Western animation). In a similar way, we review the main features of Japanese video games in order to confirm whether the notion of *gêmu* can stand on its own taxonomically so that it can, ultimately, become a useful term for both professional and scholarly fields.

Cool Japan: Manga, Anime, and Gêmu as Cultural Global Goods

The *Cool Japan* tag summarizes the influence that all kinds of manifestations of Japanese popular culture—from manga, anime, and video games to gastronomy, fashion, architecture, and *J-Pop*—have amassed since their spread to the West. This has turned Japan into a leading nation in what has been referred as *soft power*: “the ability to shape the preferences of other[s] [...] [by] getting others to want the outcomes that you want co-opts people rather than coerces them” (Nye, 2004, p. 5–6). After the golden decades of the international spread of anime and video games, already “part of the global circulation of commodities” (Bryce & Davis, 2006, p. 7), the new millennium brought greater concern among Japanese authorities about the management of their own culture, which became a state issue. The high profile enjoyed by anime around Hollywood in the 2000s—with *Spirited Away* (Suzuki & Miyazaki, 2001) winning the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature; Production I.G’s contribution to *Kill Bill Volume 1* (Bender & Tarantino, 2003) and the collaboration of outstanding Japanese animators and directors in the expansion of Wachowski’s profitable universe in *The Animatrix* (Arias et al., 2003)—accompanied by international successful video game franchises such as *Metal Gear Solid*, *Final Fantasy*, *Mario* or *Resident Evil (1)* seemed to promise the imminent take-off of Japan as a world cultural power.

Nevertheless, between 2004 and 2009 there was a sudden halt in the rise of *Cool Japan* as a brand. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) noted that the difficulties had to do with the lack of a trustworthy accepted business plan and the mistrust among big corporations and investors in providing support (METI, 2013, p. 4). The absence of initiatives capable of making the leap to international markets resulted in an international setback, strengthening locally-oriented production. The emergence of Microsoft in the home entertainment market, with Xbox in 2001 and especially with Xbox 360 in 2006, brought a paradigmatic change in the industry. Sony and Nintendo were not alone in business anymore, and Western companies had their share of the business for the first time. From that point on, *gêmu* went into an artistic and commercial decline, and strong criticism arose in the West (from developers like Phil Fish [2]) and Japan (from developers like Inafune Keiji [3]). The new, fashionable franchises—*Grand Theft Auto*, *Gears of War*, *Uncharted*, *Halo*—were not Japanese any more. Nintendo and Sony stuck to their styles, but, in many cases, the audiences, were reduced to niche markets.

With the bitter feeling of wasted opportunities, over the last five years the Japanese govern-

ment has decided to invest in *Cool Japan* as the vanguard of their international relations and economic recovery (4). In 2010, METI founded the *Creative Industries Promotion Office* with the intention of bringing together public and private funding in order to promote the *Cool Japan* brand. The fact is that the strategy of the Japanese authorities shows their trust in media projects, which are being relied on to spark a “Japan boom” which can “create a mechanism to invite Japan followers to ‘meccas’ in Japan and promote consumption in Japan” (METI, 2012, p. 5). Thus, Japanese cultural centres, such as the Shibuya and Akihabara districts of Tokyo, have become the settings for an increasing number of productions. This is the case of the video games developed by 5pb. and Nitroplus and their subsequent anime adaptations: *Chaos;Head* (5pb & Nitroplus, 2008; Toshiki & Takaaki, 2008) and *Steins;Gate* (5pb. & Nitroplus, 2009; Iwasa, Hamasaki, & Sako, 2011). Some results of this can also be found in the simulcast premiere tendency (Denison, 2011, p. 462) of *Space Dandy* (Square Enix, Watanabe, & Natsume, 2014) and *Ping Pong* (M. Yuasa, Tatsunoko Production, 2014) in USA and France, respectively. International cooperation can be also traced in interesting Kickstarter campaigns, such as the one started by Production I.G for its short animated film *Kick-Heart* (Leach, Terakawa, & Yuasa, 2013) or the upcoming project *Under The Dog* (Yura & Ando, 2015). Although Kickstarter is a crowdfunding platform mainly aimed at Western audiences, these projects were successfully financed by private donations.

But is Cool Japan really making a point of the Japaneseness of anime and manga? While in the cases of gastronomy or music the promoted products are clearly related to the Japanese culture, can the same be said about the trio of manga/gêmu/anime (for which we propose the term *mangêmunime*)? This line of argument underlies one of the most commented issues of *mangêmunime*: its *mukokuseki* look. *Mukokuseki* is a Japanese term that covers one of the representation strategies that has made it more easily exportable: the motto “no nationality, no state”, alluding to the absence of cultural marks relating to Japanese ethnicity. The issue has been at the centre of the discussion on manga and anime and its link with race representation (Lu 2009, p. 170). Japanese identity (Mouer & Norris, 2009, p. 361), Western reception (McKevitt, 2011, p. 900) and the successful export of electronics and consumer goods (Ibawuchi, 2002), have been widely studied. Among different takes on the matter, Fenell, Liberato, Hayden, & Fujino (2013) argued that “anime’s odorless quality may be due to the nature of the medium rather than cultural whitewashing” (p. 441). This statement visibly tackles the possible limitations of Cool Japan: Is a medium characterized by its *mukokuseki* look the most appropriate for generating soft power for Japan? This *mukokuseki* discussion must also serve as a useful reminder: We must not overdo Cool Japan’s cultural specificity by falling into reductionism arguments from *Nihonjinron* or Japanese orientalism. Scholars, like Condry (2013, p. 18), have advised against assuming that a love for the products of *Cool Japan* that represent Japanese culture can be extended to a love for the country. McKevitt (2011, p. 899) labelled so-called soft power as “anachronistic” in an era when cultural images and ideas flow independent of state power, not in support of it. Instead, by the turn of the 21st century anime served as a medium for transmitting more ambiguous images of Japaneseness to hundreds of millions around the globe.

On the other hand, it is also imperative to avoid the assumption that manga and anime are part of a universal culture: They are still Japanese products and the local manners and cultural framework of the country cannot be ignored. There is some debate about where the real appeal of these products lies: Some authors say it is because of their relationship with Japanese culture, while others see a strong influence of Western art in both its aesthetics and narrative devices. A third opinion is that these features can appear to be antithetical but can actually occur simultaneously. One of its advocates is Lu (2008), who explained that the internationalization of anime has been established based on three complementary factors: de-politicized internationalization, Westernized internationalization and orientalized internationalization from the Japanese perspective or “self-Orientalized internationalization” (p. 183). The proven establishment of Japanese franchises with audiences all over the world has not remained unnoticed by the Japanese ministry, which has hastened to place video games in the vanguard of the development of the *Cool Japan* tag. In this sense, it is hardly reckless to think that typically Japanese video games, such as *visual novels*, *danmaku* or *date simulators*, could move into the mainstream, and that franchises and works, such *Tomodachi Life* (Nintendo SPD, 2013) or *Attack of the Friday Monsters* (Millenium Kitchen & Aquaria, 2013), could be distributed in Western markets. Although the predominance of the *mukokuseki* (5) look in the representation strategies of gêmu, anime and manga can be seen as a guarantor of their commercial spread around the world, a large majority of these visual creations are conceived in a specific production context and with Japanese audiences in mind. Therefore, without getting caught up in cultural determinisms linked to *Nihonjinron* non-performing arguments, it is necessary to bear all kinds of structural features in mind in order to provide a critical approach.

Precedents: The Cases of Manga & Anime

In order to illustrate the deficit of attention that gêmu has had among the discipline of video game studies, we proceed to summarize briefly how the aesthetics of the older partners in crime of gêmu, manga and anime, have been depicted in their own studies. This comparison will help us trace their common features and the intimate aesthetic connection between them.

A good number of scholars—for example, Schodt (1983; 2008) and McCloud (1994)—have highlighted manga’s typical features as a result of the Japanese representational tradition. After all, it is still a sequential language incorporating a hallmark of the Japanese culture: the right-to-left reading direction. However, Tezuka Osamu is said to be the artist who gradually introduced a cinematographic language that would end up shaping the subsequent narrative devices in contemporary manga, which began to add a variety of shots, highly narrative continuity, and resources such as parallel editing, fast-paced cuts, and fade to black. Meanwhile, we find highly iconic character design prone to a *mukokuseki* look which not only provides a solid foundation for commercial exploitation of merchandising, but also facilitates recognition and identification, promoting a swift narrative aided by the expressive use of black and white. Finally the demographic segmentation strengthened by Tezuka (Takahashi, 2008, p.

127)—*shōjo*, *shōnen* or *gekiga*—is a trait that not only organises the poetics of each particular genre, but is also linked to the mass production context of the Japanese publishing industry. The target audiences for manga are relative in Japan, as almost the entire population, regardless of age or gender, is used to reading manga. The presence of manga magazines in the crowded commuter trains or the existence of popular *manga kissa* (Macwilliams, 2008, p. 5) are a token of the popularity of the genre. The creative process of commercial *mangakas* (5) serialized in a magazine is frenetic and their studios take the form of truly Fordian production lines, in which several assistants are entrusted with complementary tasks such as completing backgrounds or going over lines. This whole process is designed in order to meet the strict deadlines of the publishing houses, whose manga magazines are mostly weeklies. A long serialization in a periodical magazine generally guarantees print runs of compilations in paperback sized books or *tankōbon*. As we have seen, the voraciousness of manga consumption habits, supported by the fast-paced narrative, makes the lifespan of manga magazines very limited. This fact, apparently lacking in importance, has conditioned some of the features described by the scholars quoted above. The absence of colour, the iconic characters, the episodes of less than twenty pages (or around sixty, in the case of monthly series), and the narrative succinctness are traits related to the production context of manga, one of the strongest businesses for the publishing industry in Japan.

Anime stands as the main ambassador of Japanese popular culture, although mostly this is the result of an adaptation of a previously successful manga story, a process that stands as one of the early examples of the media mix routine. As Thomas Lamarre (2009) explained, “An anime series or film might thus be thought of as the nodal point in a *transmedial network* that entails proliferating series of narrative and non-narrative forms across media interfaces and platforms, such as the computer, television, movie theater, and cell phone” (p. xiv). As Bryce and Davis (2006) explained:

Manga and *anime* are for mass consumption, and are always profoundly bound by commercialism. They are published in various commodity forms such as magazines, comics, books, videos, DVDs, as well as evolving into a wide range of media mix consumer products (e.g., games and merchandise) that fully penetrate everyday life in Japanese society. (p. 5)

As with manga, anime owes good part of its current form to Tezuka, also a pioneer in Japanese mixed media, who channelled his breakout manga into their corresponding animated adaptations in the form of a television serial. In order to achieve this, the Mushi Pro studio faced the pioneering task of producing an episode of *Astro Boy* (also known as *Tetsuwan Atomu*) every week from 1963 to 1966. In order to drastically reduce costs to meet a limited budget, the studio reformulated its working system to embrace a style that has become the staple feature of anime: limited animation or “selective animation” (Gan, 2009, p. 36). Far from Disney’s animation ratio, established around twelve to eighteen drawings per second (Lamarre, 2009, p. 64), Mushi Pro set theirs to an average ratio of two, occasionally reaching six. The resulting animation clearly suffers from stiffness of movement. However, the cod-

ing of facial language —highly valuable for its expressive effectiveness (i.e. large, sparkling eyes or sweat droplets); the importance of the narrator’s voice, later crucial to the configuration of the *seiyū* and idol stardom, and the adoption of a stable structure of twenty or twenty five-minute episodes (6)—were then progressively reproduced by recently created studios. During the eighties and nineties, these saturated the markets with limited animation until it became a defining quality of the poetics of anime.

These poetics were also decisively influenced by the treatment of themes in animation moving away from the Western conventionalisms. Once again, in accordance with the precedents set by manga, anime’s range of subjects and topics is one of the richest in any modern entertainment industry. Far from restricting their audiences to childish productions, studios like Production I.G, Madhouse or Gainax played a leading role in the change of direction to a more adult, more realistically thematic approach which, together with stylized animation as opposed to the standardization of limited animation, became mainstream. The crystallization of this process can be traced in the works of its most prominent leading figures: Otomo Katsuhiro, Oshii Mamoru, Anno Hideaki, and Kon Satoshi.

As we have seen, simply tracking this evolution from a multidisciplinary perspective applied to the reality of anime may provide us with a much more detailed insight into the reason for the poetics of anime. We can thus appreciate the influence of production values in the importance of the camera sliding through the still background images, the fast-paced editing, the maximized depth of field, and so on. In this way, faced with an initial handicap related to economic factors, the limited animation style has established a good part of the narrative and expressive features for which anime is known (7). Those defined features invite a consideration of approaches mixing anthropological, sociological, and economic standpoints: a cross-curricular analysis, to be precise.

Features of Japanese video games

Can the term *gêmu* offer an identity as strong as anime and manga? Can it, like them begin “to be recognised as a shared medium in a global society” (Bryce & Davis, 2006, p. 5)? We believe that Western perception of Japanese video games works in three different axes: character design, game design and animation in the cinematic sequences, with the possible addition of gender issues, identities and sexism.

The iconic nature of the Japanese characters, such as Mario, Donkey Kong, Alex Kidd and Sonic, gave way to a culture of “mascots” in video games, something very common in Japan, where almost every company has a cute character to represent it. These mascots served both as “brand nationalism” in marketing Japan (Iwabuchi, 2010) and as “transcultural currency” (Sonic the Hedgehog, after all, was created in part to appeal to the American market) for the global “commodification of play” (Allison, 2006).

Nintendo was the dominant force in the industry until the mid-nineties when, with the

arrival of Sony's PlayStation, another Japanese firm became the staple of the medium. The transnational character of these brands seems to imply that they have a common marketing strategy worldwide, refuting the distinctiveness of *gêmu*, but, as Inoguchi (2009) states, several Japanese companies filter what they export by choosing well-recognized products that conform to a non-Japanese view of Japanese culture. Games like *Boku no natsuyasumi* (Millenium Kitchen, 2000) or visual novels like *Clannad* (Key, 2004) are exclusive to Japan and virtually unknown in the West. The trend seems to be changing, with the popularization of works like *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2001) or *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) in the West or the recent release of *Tomodachi Life* (Nintendo, 2013) in the American and European markets. Moreover, when some of these games were adapted and suffered several cuts in their localization processes—in an attempt, perhaps, to make them more “transnational”—players and critics generally thought this was a mistake: The Japaneseness of these games, as with anime and manga, was a selling point, not a cultural obstacle. This is the case with the localization of *Ryūga Gotoku 3* (Sega, 2009; released in North America as *Yakuza 3*; Sega, 2010), which lost some mini-games involving hostess clubs, mah-jong, and dating sims in its Western version. As a result of these complaints, the Western version of *Ryūga Gotoku 4* (*Yakuza 4* [Sega, 2011]) had no significant cuts made from its original release. Other games had some changes made to them: the Western edition of *Tomodachi Life* traded sumo for a variant of American football and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo & Monolith Soft, 2013) had some of its more effeminate male characters turned into females. But, in general, their quirky humour, design patterns, and aesthetics are retained. As the case of *Yakuza 4* proves, their most Japanese traits are not only preserved but also highlighted. Their “Japaneseness” seems to be a main selling point, something that is consistent with the concept of *Cool Japan*.

In addition to the Japaneseness of these games (often perceived as representatives of Japanese games), *gêmu* have their distinctive traits from a game design perspective. Since video games combine influences both from visual and audiovisual media (cinema, TV, comics, and so on) and traditional games, it is reasonable to argue that traditional analogue Japanese games have added their own elements and personality to *gêmu*. Thus board games, like *shogi*; card games, like *hanafuda*; or games of chance, like *pachinko*, can be considered. Several nonagram or *picross* games, for example, have been released for Nintendo portable systems, such as *Mario's Picross* (Jupiter & Nintendo, 1995) or *Picross 3D* (HAL Laboratory, 2009). Moreover, some Japanese games, like *sudoku*, have even achieved global success and had digital versions, like *Sudoku Gridmaster* (Hudson Soft, 2006).

A clear example of the distinct development of *gêmu* as a highly Japanese cultural object is the Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG). It is a universal assumption in the gaming world that JRPG constitutes a distinct genre (or, at least, subgenre) different from the RPG. The JRPG was defined by the seminal work *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft, 1986), produced as a response to American RPGs, such as *Ultima* (Garriott & Origin Systems, 1981) and *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech Software, 1981). *Dragon Quest* producer Horii Yuji wanted to create something different to them, something distinctly Japanese, and he hired illustrator Akira Toriyama

and composer Koichi Sugiyama to help him do so. The ruleset was very different to Western RPGs, with a simpler stats system and a focus on character and resources. For Donovan (2010, p. 161) *Dragon Quest* created a fork in the evolution of the genre that still exists today. Therefore, JRPG can be used as a point to support the idea of gêmu as a separate type of video game. But do these differences exist in other genres?

The specific desire to create something profoundly Japanese that led to the creation of JRPG might be an exception, but its separation from its Western counterpart is not. Other genres, such as shoot 'em up, have Japanese variants (or sub-genres) like *danmaku* (“bullet hell”), a type of shoot 'em up with frantic action and a high level of difficulty. The high difficulty seems to be a general trait of gêmu, as in the case of the *Fire Emblem* series, which are usually toned down for their Western release. Even in genres that have both Japanese and Western productions and are not separated in practice, the differences in design styles suggest that a distinction like the one used in the case of RPG would be useful. For example, hack and slash action games, like the *God of War* and *Bayonetta* series, represent two ways of understanding the genre with the design of their mechanics, enemies, battles, and even levels. The former focuses on spectacle, giant bosses, genre hybridisation, set pieces, and story, while the latter places greater emphasis on skills, combos, pacing, and reward systems.

But gêmu are not only variants of existing genres: Visual novel games (an illustrated novel with branching paths and limited interaction) have been very successful in Japan and have had no direct Western variants. These visual novels have reached the West in only a few cases, such as *Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward* (2012). Other genres, like *dôjin sofuto* (amateur video games) and dating sims (romantic simulation games where the main goal is to find a partner), have rarely been released outside Japan, unless they are mixed with other genres, as in the *Persona* series and *Catherine* (Atlus, 2011). A sub-genre of dating sims is *eroge*, a portmanteau of “erotic” and “game.” These genres (visual novel, dating sim, *eroge*) derive from manga and can even be considered “audiovisual manga” in which reading is the main pillar of the work and the player’s decisions determine the progress of the story. These genres have gathered some following outside of Japan, thanks to imports, but only in small, dedicated niches.

Another trait of gêmus, either deliberate or unconscious, is the use of cultural references, such as the aforementioned hostess clubs, sumo fights, or pachinko dynamics. The use of these references can be deliberately avoided to strengthen the “mukokuseki” aspect of games, leading to what Pelletier-Gagnon (2011) called “mukokuseki game design”: “Major companies such as Capcom and Konami promote a video game design strategy characterized by the absence of elements marked as Japanese at both the fictional and gameplay levels” (p. 99–100). This reminds us that looking for clear traits of Japaneseness in gêmu can be misleading. “Japaneseness in video games is a concept that is always in motion” that can be “rearticulated in multiple ways by different game designers” and is “not confined to Japan” (p. 99–100). But, as we have seen, this does not mean that Japanese games are transnational per se, lacking distinctive qualities that separate them from Western video games, or that

some Japanese games are less *gêmu* than others. In the same way that some manga and anime creators, such as Otomo Katsuhiro or Miyazaki Hayao, have Western influences on their work, so can *gêmu* designers. The notion of *gêmu* should not be a closed, unchangeable list of mandatory traits, but a practical idea that helps critics, designers and scholars obtain a better understanding of Japanese games both as part of their markets of origin and an international, transnational conversation at industrial and creative levels where transfers and influences are constantly occurring. Otherwise, as Pelletier-Gagnon states, we rely on a “binary perspective of the video game culture of circulation” that “entails certain risks concerning direct negotiation with the product”.

In addition to the mascot culture, the cultural references, the Japaneseness at a conceptual level and the differences in game design (with different views on challenge, control sets and even goals, and the consequent genres and sub-genres variations), it can be argued that *gêmu* are different from Western games in their animation techniques, interests and principles. Animation in video games, as Chow (2012) explained, “is not just for embellishment, but rather for creating an illusion of dynamic environments that immerses and engages players” (p. 185). Chow (2012) stated that “animation is always responsible for directing players’ attention” and writes about different compositions according to the balance of “primary” and “secondary liveliness” (p. 185). In his view, action games like *Halo* or *Doom* “present progressive and conspicuous actions of the characters, with minimal transformations of the environment or other objects” (p. 185), whereas animation in Japanese hits like *Cooking Mama* “distracts one’s attention by showing persistent and simultaneous happenings” (p. 185). The former type of game, Chow stated, is the dominant form in the Western market, while games that employ “strategies to dilute player’s attention over the game’s scenes” (p. 185), such as simulation games, account for a substantial volume of sales in East Asia. *Gêmu*, therefore, seem to rely more on “secondary liveliness” than Western games.

Conclusions

Are *gêmu* as distinctive as manga and anime? As we have seen, *gêmu* have defining foundations, practices and trends in their use of mascots, cultural references, the general notion of Japaneseness, their game design, genre framing, and even their animation concepts. Moreover, most of these defining traits can be linked to their cultural inheritance and media mix: The history of Japanese video games began with specific local factors and a media mix that was undoubtedly Japanese. It could be argued that *gêmu* evolved aesthetically from, or at least inherited traits from, manga and anime. From an industrial and sociological point of view, they form the abstract notion of *Cool Japan*, a pressing issue in the country. Formally, they overlap on several fronts. The most obvious one would be their look, but they also share thematic, tonal, and narrative traits, to the point that we could expand the notion of *manga-nime* to *mangêmunime*. The Japanese media mix is prone to transmediality: A franchise or intellectual property can have its story and characters spread over *gêmu*, manga, anime, and merchandising, whether one of these is dominant and the others spin-offs or whether they share equal importance, as in the cases of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*Shin Seiki Evangelion*), the

.hack franchise or *Pokemon*. When compared to other global and transnational industries, the cross-media architecture of the Japanese media-mix presents an idiosyncratic, differentiated structure, where the central medium is usually anime. But anime is not always the centerpiece, at least not anymore: Japanese animated films and television shows form a market cornered by derivatives of other audiovisual platforms, such as the case of *Professor Layton*, *Bayonetta*, *Blue Dragon*, *Dragon Quest*, *Steins;Gate* or *Final Fantasy*. While the importance of manga and printed media in Japan is beyond argument, the above examples show a parallel trend in placing gêmu at the centre of the adaptation and expansion of narrative. In any case, this interwoven framework is a common practice and manga, anime and gêmu very often coexist within the same franchise.

In all cases, transmedia, which has become an important concept in the West in the past few years, seems to be a common trait of the Japanese media mix, and it has been there since the origin of gêmu. Not only is it necessary to distinguish gêmu from Western games in order to understand them better, they should always be considered as part of a bigger, and deeply interwoven, Japanese media mix.

	JAPANESE MEDIA MIX			
	GÊMU	ANIME	MANGA	MERCHANDISING
TRAITS	Design Trends			
	Animation Techniques			
	Aesthetics			
	Playable Genres And Subgenres			
	Narrative, Fiction Genres			
	Tone			
	Themes			
	Transmedia Strategies and Universes			
	Cultural References			
	Cool Japan			
	Japaneseness			
	Marketing			
	Industries and Audiences			

Table 1: Main Traits of Gêmu and Their Overlap with Other Parts of the Japanese Media Mix.

Endnotes

1. Probably due to their development for transnational commercialization, these franchises can be seen as clear examples of the *mukokuseki* look, also accompanied by storylines developed in Western settings.
2. Game developer Phil Fish explained this in his Twitter account (3-6-2012): “At tonight’s IGTM Q&A, some Japanese guy asked us what we thought of modern Japanese games, and I said I thought they sucked.”
3. Game developer Inafune Keiji told The New York Times (Tabuchi, 2010): “I look around Tokyo Games Show, and everyone’s making awful games; Japan is at least five years behind”. Years later, he stated that the Japanese industry has “probably gotten worse than when I was talking about it before and that’s a shame” (Makuch, 2013).

4. One of the aims established by METI is to “explode Japanese attractive goods and services on a worldwide scale and becoming a driving force for Japan’s economic growth” (METI, 2013, p. 2).
5. An interesting metalinguistic reading of this is *Bakuman*. This manga explores, in an idealized way, the functioning of the magazine in which it is published, the *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, arguably the most popular manga magazine in Japan.
6. This is considered the “gross” duration. However, the “net” duration of new contents in each episode is greatly reduced by the opening and closing sequences and also, if necessary, by transformation sequences. Those pieces are usually reused throughout the productions. The case of opening and closing sequences can serve as an illustrative example of the Japanese media mix, as the songs featured in them are usually the latest singles from the most popular idols of the time. Thus, production and recording companies come together to take advantage of it.
7. Since it was founded, the celebrated Studio Ghibli has aimed for complete animation in order to produce *manga eiga* (Lamarre, 2009, p. 66). This intention has been seen as both a distinctive feature compared to the rest of contemporary anime—an elitist attitude criticized by directors Oshii Mamoru and Hosoda Mamoru—and an example of the difference in strategies when producing animation in Japan, as Studio Ghibli is one of the few that can afford such big investment productions.

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