

[研究論文]

Japanese Digital Games in Germany A Case Study of Gameplay Across Cultural Borders

ドイツにおける日本のデジタルゲーム受容 異文化間に発生するゲームプレイの分析と考察

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Abstract: Despite the increasing globalization of the digital games market, differences in the way games are selected, experienced and evaluated exist across cultural borders, appearing most salient between East Asian and Western countries. This paper reports the results of a case study, aimed at examining how localized Japanese games are received by German players. Using think-aloud protocol, we gathered and analyzed more than 25 hours of commented gameplay footage, by two German participants across four games. We identify and discuss game elements, that affected the participants' player experience.

デジタルゲーム市場の国際化が拡大しつつある一方、ゲームのセレクションやゲーム体験、評価には文化圏によって差異があり、特に東アジア - 欧米間で見られる違いは顕著である。本研究の目的は、ローカライズされた日本のデジタルゲームがドイツのユーザに受け入れられるその受容プロセスを探索する点にある。思考発話法を研究手法とし、ドイツの実験協力者 2 名に対し 4 種類のデジタルゲーム体験を実施した。収集・分析対象としたのは 25 時間以上のプレイデータである。本論では協力者のユーザ体験に干渉するゲームの要素を特定・考察する。

Keywords: digital games, gameplay, cultural borders, think-aloud protocol
デジタルゲーム、ゲームプレイ、文化圏、思考発話法

1 Introduction

Digital games have grown to become the most prominent entertainment media in terms of market revenue. In 2019, an estimated 2.9 billion people worldwide frequently use digital games (Statista, 2019), generating approximately 137.9 billion USD in revenues (Newzoo, 2018). The spread of games and related phenomena, such as e-sports or live streaming, is aided by, and simultaneously reinforces, trends towards the globalization of the digital games industry, market and player communities (Consalvo, 2009). Despite such tendencies, differences in the way games are selected, experienced, interpreted and evaluated by their players are evident across cultural borders (Zagal and Tomuro, 2013). These differences arguably appear most salient between “the East” (i.e. East Asia) and “the West” (i.e. North America and Europe; cf. Consalvo, 2016), posing substantial challenges for game developers and publishers (Byford, 2014).

While the influence of cultural factors on user experience and user centric design receives growing attention in the area of human-computer-interaction and user experience research (e.g. Santoso et al., 2017), the complexity of games and their fundamental differences when compared to utility software or websites make it difficult to directly adapt these results (Wiemeyer et al., 2016). Although game scholars increasingly examine the globalized production and circulation of games (Consalvo, 2009), their cross-cultural reception (Consalvo, 2016 ; Zagal and Tomuro, 2013) and their adaptation and localization for foreign markets (Mangiron, 2018 ; O’Hagan, 2015), current research on digital games in global contexts is still limited by a lack of systematic, empirical cross-cultural analyses of game cultures and player-game interaction (cf. Elmezeny and Wimmer, 2018, p. 81). This makes it difficult to examine how games, created in specific cultural contexts, are received, experienced and evaluated by players across cultural borders.

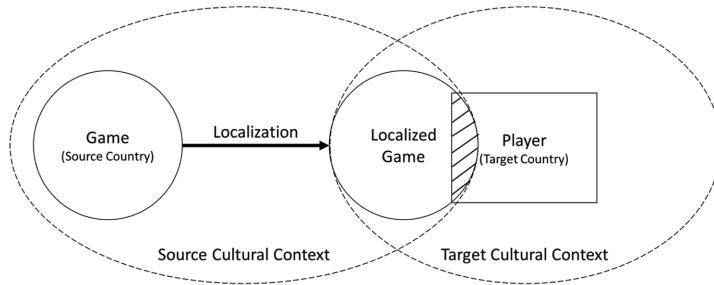


Figure 1 *Relationship between game, player and their respective cultural contexts*

This paper reports the results of a cross-cultural case study, aimed at examining how German players experience and evaluate localized Japanese digital games (see fig. 1). Japanese digital games are consumed globally. However, their production process is often primarily centered domestically, with predominantly Japanese development teams. The resulting product of such a development environment is argued to showcase uniquely Japanese elements in respect to a game’s aesthetics, narrative and ludic aspects (Schules, 2015). This supposed “Japaneseness” is receiving increased attention by scholars and fans (Consalvo, 2016) and warrants the question of how Western users experience and interpret Japanese games, i.e. games produced by a developer based in Japan, with a mostly Japanese staff, as indicated in the games’ credits. As we endeavor to understand, how Japanese games are received in the West, we focus on Germany, the largest games market in Europe and the second largest market among Western countries after the US (Newzoo, 2019), because of its market size and maturity. We decided against focusing on the US in this survey, because of the strong influence local companies have over it. Germany, on the other hand, is a prime example of a mature games market, open to a variety of contents from a wide range of countries (game - Verband der deutschen Games-Branche, 2019).

We recorded more than 25 hours of play sessions with two German users, playing four different Japanese games chosen based on a set of theoretical assumptions (see chapter 2). We utilized think-aloud protocol (TAP), i.e. players were

asked to constantly voice their thoughts during play, to create a set of analyzable text documents, depicting the participants experiences during play. We also conducted follow-up interviews after the play sessions.

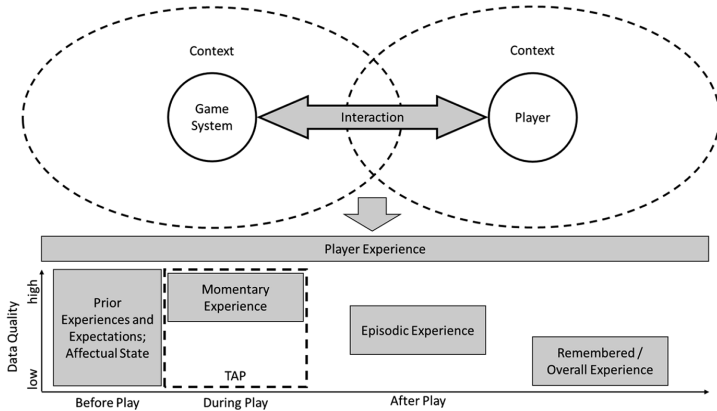


Figure 2 *Relationship between game system, player, the surrounding (cultural) contexts and player experience over time. Capturing player's momentary experience provides the highest quality of data through the absence of time lag and filtering processes*

We employ TAP as a method to holistically analyze users' momentary player experience¹⁾, i.e. the experience during the actual period in which a product is used (Vermeeren et al., 2010, p. 527, cf. Marti and Iacono, 2016) while interacting with digital games created in a different cultural context (see fig. 2). "Holistic" here refers to a comprehensive analysis of users' experiences in concern to both, a game's narrative and audio-visual elements, its "shell", as well as its underlying "core" (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 8) of systems, rules and mechanics, often colloquially referred to as "gameplay". Although narrative and mechanic elements are strongly interrelated (Ang, 2006), prior studies show a tendency to focus only on specific aspects of player-game interaction, such as narrative (Qin et al., 2009), immersion (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2007 ; Nacke and Lindley, 2008) or playability (Sánchez et al., 2009) and are mainly conducted from a design viewpoint and within a single cultural context.

The contribution of this paper is thus two-fold. First, we provide empirical

results on how games are adopted and interacted with across cultures through an in-depth examination of the reception of Japanese games by German players. Second, we carry out a holistic analysis of the player-game interaction, considering core and shell elements. We find that several narrative and gameplay elements common in Japanese games pose potential barriers for the immersion of German players into the games. Furthermore, Japanese games tend to be evaluated by players based on different criteria than Western games.

In the following section 2, we discuss our methodological framework for this case study and provide a detailed overview of our dataset and the selection criteria for participants and games in this study. In section 3 we report the results of the recorded play sessions and our survey of game reviews. We discuss, compare and contextualize the results in section 4 and provide our conclusions in section 5.

2 Method

2.1 Overview

To understand, how German players interact with and experience Japanese games, we recorded over 25 hours of commented gameplay footage by two German players of four games. We transcribed the footage and carried out a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis of the resulting documents. The games were chosen based on an examination of German and Japanese game reviews, and theoretical criteria, in concern to their contents and gameplay elements. User reviews from the German and Japanese Amazon stores (<https://www.amazon.de/>; <https://www.amazon.co.jp/>), and official reviews from German gaming media websites (<https://www.gamestar.de/>, <https://www.4players.de/>, <https://www.maniac.de/>) have been used to assess the selected games in concern to overall quality and supposedly Japanese elements. Participants had no prior experience of playing these specific games but had played some prior entries in the respective franchises. Below, we describe our specific adaptation of think-aloud protocol, elaborate on our method of analysis and detail the criteria for our selection of games and participants.

2.2 Think-Aloud Protocol, Experimental Set-Up and Analysis

Originating from work on cognitive psychology (Ericsson and Simon, 1980) TAP is employed in a wide range of disciplines, such as translation studies (Jääskeläinen, 2010), second language education (Bowles, 2010) or usability testing (van den Haak et al., 2003), to enable the analysis of participants' thought processes. In digital game studies and game user research, TAP has been frequently referenced as a means of gathering qualitative data on player-game interaction (Drachen et al., 2018), but has thus far mostly been used for usability and playability testing (e.g. Olsen et al., 2011), predominantly by large-scale game developers (Brown, 2010, p. 82).

The advantages and disadvantages of using TAP have been broadly discussed (e.g. Jääskeläinen, 2010). It is a valid instrument to gather qualitative data on momentary game user experience. It is also the only viable method to gather data on user's cognitive processes *during* play (i.e. momentary experience), in contrast to methods used to measure affective and behavioral dimensions of the play experience, such as quantitative measurements of physiological data (Tan et al., 2014). TAP is therefore ideally suited to explore the thought processes and experiences of German players interacting with Japanese games in our study. There are, however, several potential drawbacks associated with conventional applications of TAP. The most prominent problem is the burden it puts on the player. The constant vocalization of their thoughts potentially interferes with their immersion into the game world, inhibiting them from reaching the "flow" (see Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), i.e. the complete absorption into what they do. This can negatively affect the quality of the gathered data (Ribbens and Poels, 2009).

One way of alleviating such difficulties is the use of retrospective think-aloud protocol (RTA). In RTA, players are recorded during play and only later asked to describe their impressions while being shown the footage of their session (Ribbens and Poels, 2009, p. 5). While this possibly allows for increased immersion by the user during play, it also temporally removes the point of data gathering from the actual period of use. Another caveat of using TAP lies in the laboratory setting, influencing

player experience, as players are asked to play a game they might otherwise not play, in an environment foreign to them.

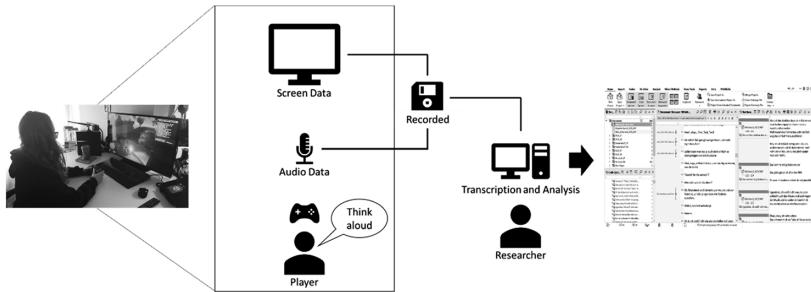


Figure 3 *Picture of play session and schematic overview of the experimental set-up*

We designed a modified version of TAP for this study (see fig. 3), to provide a maximum of high-quality data on momentary player experience, while minimizing the burden it places on the player. This is based on the results of a pre-survey, from July 2018, with two German participants in a laboratory setting in Germany. The main findings in concern to the realization of TAP in this pre-survey were (1) difficulties for players to voice their thoughts during periods of stress, such as during combat, and (2) the negative effect of the lab-setting on the immersion of players. Consequently, in this study, participants were encouraged to constantly voice their thoughts, but also instructed to prioritize their play experience, and remain silent if necessary. Additional post-play interviews were carried out, to fill in the gaps and provide participants with a chance to present their overall thoughts on the games. This effectively combines the benefits of concurrent and retrospective think-aloud protocol approaches. The combination of TAP and post-play interviews also enables players to reflect on their play experience and provide new insights or clarifications.

We recorded the participants in their home environment, providing them with the game software, a game capture card to record their screen data and a headset to record their voice. Using cloud storage, we set up a system which allowed players the comfort of playing in their homes, while enabling us to keep close track of their

progress and generated data remotely. Participants were instructed to play at least two hours per game in total and play for at least 30 minutes per session. They were asked to record a minimum of 10 hours of data but were free to play longer.

The audio-visual data (game footage overlaid with the participants' voices) and post-play interviews were transcribed, to enable a computer assisted qualitative data analysis of the documents, via MAXQDA. Participants' utterances during play were coded and categorized inductively, to facilitate a holistic analysis, without preconceptions. The coding process is based on Grounded Theory approaches (Strübing, 2014). Resulting codes, often in the form of in-vivo codes, are categorized by a method of constant comparison, to discover structures evident in the think-aloud protocols.

In detail, the study is comprised of the following steps: 1) semi-structured interviews with participants to clarify their attributes, e.g. gaming history, related hobbies, etc.; 2) instruction for TAP and first supervised session, to assure the quality of the recording; 3) actual recording of screen and voice data; 4) post interviews, i.e. RTA; 5) transcription of the data; 6) analysis, employing a coding process based on Grounded Theory, also taking into account the emotional state of players by simultaneously examining the video footage during the coding process. To clarify the influence of cultural aspects on participants' player experience, we considered utterances in which participants themselves mentioned the cultural background of a game (i.e. describing it as Japanese) or framed game elements as culturally specific (e.g. an "anime-like user-interface). We also discuss utterances, that can be interpreted as being related to specifically Japanese elements of game design discussed in previous research (Schules, 2015).

2.3 Game and Participant Selection Criteria

The four games chosen for this study are the PlayStation®4 versions of: Ni no Kuni™ II (Level-5 2018, below NK2), Kingdom Hearts™ III (Square Enix Business Division 3 2019, KH3), Tales of Berseria™ (Bandai Namco Studios, 2017, TB) and Dragon's Dogma™: Dark Arisen (Capcom, 2013, DD). These games are commonly

classified as Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), arguably the most iconic genre of Japanese games in the global market (Schules, 2015). They feature similarities in their basic gameplay elements, such as a real-time battle-system, although the concrete implementation differs.

NK2's artwork is inspired, and partially created, by Studio Ghibli (see <https://de.bandainamcoent.eu/ni-no-kuni/ni-no-kuni-ii-schicksal-eines-königreichs>), which is frequently mentioned in German reviews of the game (e.g. Bischoff, 2018). The game's Japanese origin is strongly emphasized in German review articles. On the other hand, KH3 is part of the Kingdom Hearts series of games, combining characters and worlds from various Disney franchises with JRPG elements (see <https://www.kingdomhearts.com/3/de/home/>). In contrast to these two games, TB and DD have no close ties to existing trans-media franchises. TB is the newest entry into the long running "Tales of" series of digital games, beginning with the 1995 release of Tales of Phantasia. It is a representative of traditional JRPGs and received and marketed as such in Germany (see <https://www.bandainamcoent.com/games/tales-of-berseria>). DD incorporates various elements popular in Western games, such as an open-world design and a more photorealistic graphic style (see <http://www.dragonsdogma.com/>).

All games are critically acclaimed and well-received by German and Japanese users, as evident in user reviews on the German and Japanese amazon stores. They belong to the same genre but show differences in concern to their content and mechanics. NK2 and TB employ a visual design typical of manga and anime. KH3 merges Japanese and Western (Disney) visual design, while DD adapts the photorealistic graphics common in Western games. The latter is also implemented in an open-world design, clearly showing the influence of Western game design practices.

In figure 4, we compare German and Japanese Amazon user reviews, transformed into percentages for easier comparison. German reviewers tend towards higher review scores than Japanese. Japanese reviewers might generally be more critical in their evaluation or exhibit a tendency to avoid giving a full score (cf. Zagal and Tomuro, 2013), while German reviewers are less hesitant. Potentially, the

selected games are evaluated by a broader, and more diverse, player base in Japan, while they are mainly bought and reviewed by existing fans of JRPGs in Germany. One interesting feature lies in the size of the gap between the German and Japanese score of each game. The difference is smallest (10%) for DD, the game reminiscent of Western games, and biggest (20%) for TB, a typical JRPG, that is not part of a major globally recognized transmedia franchise. TB however also garnered the most positive reaction by German users.

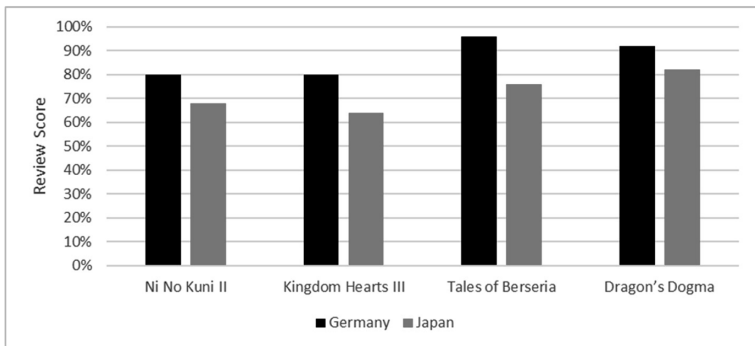


Figure 4 *Comparison of German and Japanese Amazon reviews, transformed into percentages, with 100% as the best score (data from April 21, 2019; taken from <https://www.amazon.de/> and <https://www.amazon.co.jp/>)*

The differences between the selected games, allow us to examine the reaction of German players towards different practices of game and art design in Japanese games. Participants for this study did not play any of these games before. Participant A is male, 26 years old and identifies himself as a “core gamer”. Participant B is female, 25 years old, and regularly plays games for enjoyment but does not self-identify as a core gamer. Both have played JRPGs before but stated no preference for them. A had experience with the Tales of Series and the first two Kingdom Hearts games, while B had seen online playthroughs of the first Ni no Kuni. Both were familiar with Japanese Anime and had watched several Studio Ghibli productions before but did not identify themselves as particularly engaged with or knowledgeable of Japanese pop culture.

3 Results

3.1 Overview

A, who self-identifies as a core gamer chose to spend almost three hours on DD, while B, who can be described as a casual gamer, chose to spend more time on KH3. Both spent the most time with NK2, again more than four hours. A recorded a total of 12.3h (739 minutes; NK2: 243; KH3: 152; TB: 171; DD: 173), while B recorded a total of 13h (781 minutes; NK2: 259; KH3: 251; TB: 141; DD: 130), leading to a total of 25 hours and 20 minutes of commented gameplay footage. Post-play interviews lasted for approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes per participant. A's commented video footage amounts to 88 GB of data and 30,070 transcribed words (NK2: 13,337; KH3: 4,049; TB: 6,888; DD: 5,751). B generated 84 GB of data and 27,057 words (NK2: 12,579; KH3: 6,806; TB: 4,194; DD: 3,478).

Most of the participants' utterances during the play sessions and comments made in the interviews focus on three different aspects of games, (1) their audio-visual style, (2) narrative, and (3) gameplay. We identified various ways by which the participants referred to the cultural background of the selected games, for example by emphasizing their Japanese origin or status as JRPG (49 times), likening them to anime or manga (18 times), or commenting on their J-Pop soundtrack (4 times). We also considered instances in which participants described feelings such as confusion or bewilderment with certain game elements (e.g. a "visually oppressive user interface") which can be attributed towards established principles of Japanese game design (Schules, 2015). We summarize the results of the analysis of think-aloud protocols for each element below and discuss our findings and their relation to the study's cross-cultural approach in section 4.

3.2 Audio-Visual

The participants did not show any aversion towards the anime like visual style, displayed in TB and NK2. NK2's art design was frequently praised, both participants describing it as "cute" and "coherent". B saw it as "the most memorable feature of the game", calling it "beautiful". A described it as "being like an Anime, in a good way".

Similar reactions were observed for TB. In the post-play interview, A professed to have enjoyed the “orderly” and more photorealistic graphic style of DD the most. A and B both disliked how the female main character is displayed in TB. B felt she was “too sexualized” and claimed that this made it hard to identify with the character. In the post-play interview, she argued that this was worsened by the game’s third-person perspective, as she was constantly “forced to watch her”. A felt that the main character’s clothes were “too revealing” and wondered about her age. B made similar remarks about female Disney characters in KH3, arguing that their graphic presentation differed from the movies.

B criticized NK2’s user interface as “too plain” and not reflecting the game’s overall art style. She disliked the change of graphic style during travel on the game’s world map. A found DD’s menu unwieldy and “confusing”. Both remarked negatively on TB’s user interface, especially during combat, calling it visually oppressive, with “too many colors and information displayed”. Both emphasized this during the post-play interviews, B describing it as a “sensory overload” which made it hard for her to continue playing. A argued that each game’s graphic was outdated, when compared to current Western games. He found that TB “looks like a PS3 game” and argued that NK2’s graphics were “not innovative enough”.

3.3 Narrative

A and B expressed difficulties of following NK2’s story during the early stages of the game. After the first cutscene, B lamented that she doesn’t “understand what’s going on”. Although she professed to have at least a passing familiarity with the first Ni no Kuni game, and both games’ stories are not directly related, she wondered whether she would have needed to play the first game, to understand the story. During his post-play interview, A emphasized his difficulties with the story, calling it “hard to follow”. A and B strongly criticized the storyline of one of the early characters in the game, who sacrifices herself so that the player characters can survive. They described this as the “unnecessary waste of an interesting character” and a “premature sacrifice”.

KH2’s story was viewed negatively by A, whose impression solidified early

during his play session. While he described the game's intro as "beautiful", and positively likened it to the Final Fantasy franchise, he was unsure about its purpose. During his session, he started to remember elements from prior Kingdom Hearts games he played and claimed to experience nostalgia but felt negatively about the high frequency of cut-scenes. He started skipping them approximately 20 minutes into his play session and did not make any further comments on the story. B focused on the way Disney characters were integrated into the game. She felt that they did not stay true to their characterization in the Disney movies, and were portrayed as stereotypes. She expressed aggravation at the portrayal of the character Megara from Disney's Hercules, whom she felt to be oversexualized, illogical and weak.

TB's story was evaluated more favorably. A felt "positively surprised" at its depth and the way the main characters interact with each other. B generally enjoyed the interaction among characters and liked the portrayal of the game's main cast, describing them as "interesting" and "deep". She commented favorably on the female main character's personality, which she "liked, despite her oversexualized exterior". In the post-play interview, B expressed trouble at immersing herself in the story because of the main character's looks and evaluated the game's premise, which she interpreted as a revenge story, as too stereotypical for a game largely driven by its narrative. DD's story was not mentioned at all by B, while A only remarked that he enjoyed the "darker tones" of the "somewhat ambivalent" story. In the post-play interviews, A explained that he did not think the story of the game "matters" and was focused on its gameplay.

3.4 Gameplay

A more frequently referenced gameplay mechanics and elaborated on such elements during his play sessions than B. A and B criticized the pacing of NK2 and TB. They expressed their dissatisfaction at the lack of a function to skip cut-scenes and dialogue, especially in NK2, as they did not want to read through them. A mentioned that the high frequency of cut scenes and dialogue made him feel "like a spectator, not a player", and criticized the lack of influence the player has on the

story.

In TB, A recognized two patterns of how the player is led through the game world. He positively evaluated the scenes in which the game's main character spoke to herself, to provide hints on what to do in the game, seeing it as a natural and unobstructive way to provide information and insights into the thoughts of the main character. But he criticized that this was not implemented more consistently, as he experienced phases in which he had to talk to various NPCs to gather information on how to proceed, leading him to label the game as "a stereotypical JRPG", as evident in the use of "as few resources as possible" to heighten profits.

A and B constantly referred to the games' combat systems. A criticized the combat system of KH3 as "remaining in the PS2 era", while B mentioned that she found it enjoyable, but hard to execute. B disliked the limited control over the player character's party members in NK2. Both generally evaluated TB's combat system positively. B emphasized that she found it easier to approach than the combat system in KH3.

The most salient difference between A and B was observed in DD. B had great trouble with the combat system, finding it too difficult. Participant A's reactions to DD provide a stark contrast to this. Initially, he disliked the early phase of the game, in which he was confined to the starting area to familiarize himself with the game mechanics, interpreting it as too restrictive. However, this gradually started to change, after the first 20 minutes in his play session. During the first battles in the game, he perceived the combat system to be "clunky" and "not fun enough". This shifted into a very positive impression of the combat system and general gameplay. After 30 minutes in the game, he perceived the combat system to be "really good, but somehow ridiculous". After one hour, he exclaimed that "the gameplay is awesome" and "incredibly fun". He also commented positively on the game's open world design, which B contrasted positively to the linear level design of NK2. A and B enjoyed the ability to determine the look of the player character.

4 Discussion

4.1 Linkages between core and shell

The above-mentioned categories are closely interlinked, and it is their dynamic relationship, that ultimately leads to the overall evaluation of a game. How different elements of a game were experienced, influenced the way other elements were evaluated. B's problems with the main character of TB were emphasized by the game's third-person perspective. Participant B's inability to adapt to the combat system of DD led to frustration and her wanting to quit. A initially seemed critical of the game, but gradually started to praise various elements of it, such as the visual design, after he started enjoying its gameplay, especially the combat system.

Based on our observations, overall experience of a game seems to be more strongly influenced by gameplay elements, than by its story. Opinions in the post-play interviews were conclusive with these findings, arguing that "as long as it is fun to play", deficiencies in the narrative could be forgiven. However, this also appears to be dependent on game design choices. In NK2 and TB, waning interest in the story by the participants clashed with the emphasis both games put on (un-skippable) cutscenes and dialogues, leading to a negative experience.

4.2 Japanese games across cultural borders

Throughout the play sessions it was apparent that the selected games were attributed with different levels of "Japaneseness" by the participants. NK2 and TB were interpreted as "being like an anime" or a "typical JRPG" from an early stage, based on the audio-visual style and gameplay. A associated this with "outdated graphics" and "non-innovative gameplay". However, he also professed to sometimes "enjoy playing such games", partially because of their "deep characters". On the other hand, DD was not linked to its Japanese origin in any of the participants' utterances. Reactions to KH3 were more ambivalent. B predominantly commented about its Disney elements, while A focused on the gameplay, which he framed as "very Japanese" and being like a "PS2 game".

In the post-play interviews, it was evident that both participants' preconceptions

about Japanese games let them to employ different standards of evaluation when compared to Western games. For example, both claimed to enjoy the “cute” visual style of NK2, because it “fits the Japanese style of the game”. However, in the interviews, they negatively commented on the “sensory overload” present in both games. Participant A claimed that this was “expected in a Japanese game” and although “it made it hard to see what’s important during combat”, he was used to it from other JRPGs and did not see it as out of place. Participant B however argued, that this made it very hard for her to enjoy the combat system, especially in TB.

Several points of critic voiced in concern to narrative elements and character design are the result of a mismatch between the participants’ personal values and common tropes in Japanese popular culture. The “oversexualization” of characters in TB and KH3, and the way the story of NK2 is portrayed, was attributed by B to a “difference between Eastern and Western values”. Participant A explicitly touched upon this during his play session of TB, saying he “had hoped that things like that should be viewed more critically in Japan by now as well”.

The contrast between the evaluation of “Japanese” and “Western” games was made clear by both participants’ reactions to DD. A and B did not interpret the game as inherently Japanese. Instead, their evaluation of the game, when contrasted with how they evaluated the others, makes it clear how frequently they remarked on such cultural dissonances in the other games. Aside from B’s difficulties with the combat system, and resulting bad overall evaluation, both participants agreed that the game’s open world design, its presentation of story and characters and the graphic design felt “more natural” and “less strenuous” to get into.

4.3 Transmedia franchises and differing media ecologies

Except for DD, all selected games are part of larger transmedia franchises (cf. Koskimaa et al., 2018 ; Steinberg, 2012). NK2 has a predecessor and, although not related by story, is influenced by Studio Ghibli productions. TB is the latest entry in the long running Tales series of JRPGs and, at least in Japan, also part of a transmedia franchise, including manga and anime, while KH3 is part of the global Disney

franchise. This also influenced the participants' reception of and expectations towards each game. B's knowledge of an existing predecessor to NK2, led her to frequently question whether her problems of following the game's story were caused by her not having played the first game. A knew of the existence of other Kingdom Hearts games, and wondered how they were related to KH3, negatively impacting his play experience.

The reception of KH3 is influenced by its incorporation of Disney characters. B was very familiar with Disney, identifying herself as a fan. This led to a dissonance between her interpretation of Disney characters, and the way they were portrayed within the game. She felt that characters like Hercules or Megara were portrayed in a stereotypical and flat way and was bothered by the speed with which the characters were introduced and disappeared again.

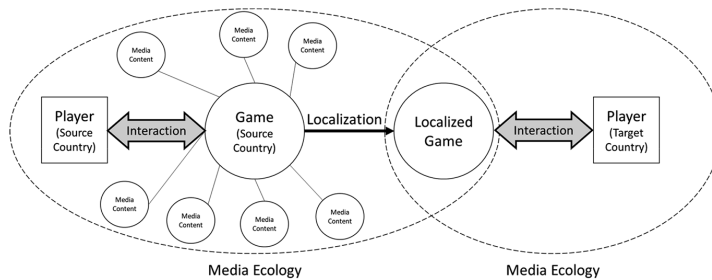


Figure 5 *Relationship between game and related media content in the source country. Players in the source country are part of and aware of the broader context in which a game is embedded, while players of the localized version do not share this frame of reference*

We argue that different media ecologies (cf. Strate, 2004) are one factor, influencing the way Japanese games are received in the West. The selected games are not only part of larger franchises, they are part of the broader Japanese media ecology (see fig. 5), with explicit and implicit links to various other products of Japanese popular culture. Japanese users experience these games from within this specific environment, which potentially differs greatly from that of German players. In our study, A and B had a basic familiarity with Japanese anime but did not identify as

dedicated fans. Their enjoyment of the selected games was hindered by the implicit references to common tropes of Japanese pop culture, embedded in them, hindering immersion. For instance, the “sensory overload” criticized by A and B is common in Japanese media and less likely to pose a problem to Japanese players. The deliberate lack of such elements in DD was perceived by the participants to facilitate easier access to the game.

5 Conclusion

German players have different expectations towards and evaluate Japanese games by different standards than Western games (Zagal and Tomuro, 2013). However, the “Japaneseness” of a game is not a direct outcome of it being developed in Japan. Instead, it is the result of design choices in concern to audio-visual presentation, narrative and gameplay, which the player interprets as “Japanese”. NK2 and TB are classic JRPGs, with core (combat system, linear design, slow pacing) and shell (audiovisual design, narrative) components common to the genre. Both participants were unable to fully immerse themselves in these games, as they frequently experienced dissonances in concern to the concrete implementation of these elements. NK2 and TB were clearly identified as being “Japanese”. As the high evaluation in German Amazon reviews of TB, and the generally positive attitude of both participants towards these games suggests, this can also prove beneficial to a game, providing it with an aura of being exotic, and making it stand out when compared to Western titles.

KH3, with its blend of Eastern core and a shell influenced by Disney, was not outright identified as Japanese by the participants. B’s impressions of the game were mostly focused on the incorporation of Disney elements. When compared to NK2 and TB, the game appears less exotic to German users, leading to a stricter standard of evaluation and lower review scores. A was more critical of this game, than any other, strongly criticizing its (Japanese) core, especially the combat system.

DD was essentially regarded as a “Western” game by the participants, because of its open world design, photorealistic graphics and low-key narrative. Aside from B’s

trouble with the combat system, the game was described as the most accessible of all selected games. A found it the most enjoyable. DD is a successful case of a Japanese game with Western shell and core, that maximized accessibility for Western players. Our findings suggest, that Japanese games can either attempt to minimize their Japaneseness (cf. Iwabuchi, 2002), to make them more accessible to Western players, or to emphasize it, to make them seem exotic and unique in the Western market.

Endnotes

- 1) Player Experience is “an ensemble made up of the player’s sensations, thoughts, feelings, actions, and meaning-making in a gameplay setting” (Ermi and Mäyrä 2007, p.37), for a more detailed discussion see e.g. Caroux et al. (2015), Sánchez et al. (2009)

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