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**More Than Just Video Games:
Analyzing Japanese Game Design 1985 - 1995**

By
Gerald DeMattia

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Asian Studies

Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

Seton Hall University

August 2020

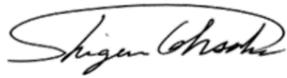
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**More Than Just Video Games:
Analyzing Japanese Game Design 1985 – 1995**

By
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Acknowledgements

In late May of 1998, my grandmother took me to Electronics Boutique to purchase a Japanese role-playing game for the original PlayStation console: *LUNAR: The Silver Star Story Complete*. *LUNAR* would go on to become my favorite game of all time, but my initial impressions were shaped by the premium packaging – which included a behind-the-scenes video CD-ROM. That was the moment I realized some video games were made in Japan by people with a different experience and culture from my own. I would like to begin these acknowledgements with a heartfelt thank you to video game developers. Their limitless creativity and countless hours of work have delivered boundless fun to people like me around the world.

Next, I would like to thank the people that shaped my academic career, most notably Dr. Shigeru Osuka whose tutelage always supported my off-beat academic interests. Without his guidance and patience, this paper would not have been completed. Additionally, the assistance from Dr. Jeffery Rice and Dr. Anne Giblin-Gedacht cannot be overstated. As my two examiners, they provided me with invaluable notes shaped major portions of this paper.

Finally, these acknowledgements come full circle to my family and friends. This thesis was made possible by the encouragement and love from those closest to me – from concept to completion. My brother, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents have always supported my intense interests in gaming and academia. My close friends – John, Lenny, Tom, and Travis – were consistently engaging, discussing academic theories about games so that I may better sharpen my knowledge, research, and arguments. Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my parents whose patience, generosity, and love carried me through life.

Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of how the Japanese experience in the second half of the 20th century shaped video game design in Japan from 1985-1995 – particularly the formation of the Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) genre. To understand the connection between the Japanese experience and JRPGs, research for this thesis was conducted around specific game developers and their creations, namely: Yuji Horii and *Dragon Quest*; Shigesato Itoi and *Mother 1 & 2*; and Tajiri Satoshi and the *Pokémon* games. The crux of this paper centers on primary source interviews with developers where social commentary was cited as the primary influence behind design decisions. Developer commentary on the Japanese experience related to topics such as work life balance, gender roles, and urbanization. To determine that the social commentary was indicative of the wider-Japanese experience, each chapter places the cited material in context with the Japanese historical narrative and data related to each topic. Additionally, *Dragon Quest*, *Mother 1 & 2* and *Pokémon* are analyzed to understand how the Japanese experience informed design decision related to each game. Ultimately, this paper concludes that the Japanese experience as it relates to work life balance, gender roles, and urbanization affected the gameplay systems, narrative, character development, and presentation in Japanese role-playing games.

Keywords: Japan, Japanese, Video Games, Game Design, Japanese Role-playing, JRPG

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Chapter I: Introduction

In the 1980s, the success of Nintendo's Family Computer, and its American counterpart, the Nintendo Entertainment System, expanded the Japanese video game industry. By 1991, Nintendo had supplanted Toyota as Japan's most profitable company based on earnings per employee – approximately \$1.5 million per year per staff member.¹ Rapid growth attracted an assortment of new companies and investors, some from industries unrelated to gaming. For instance, Eidansha Boshu Service Center, a real-estate trading and brokerage firm, was reorganized into Enix, the publisher of the *Dragon Quest* video game series.² These new companies were staffed by the earliest wave of Japanese video game developers, a cohort raised in a formative era in Japan's history – an experience that would shape their approach to interactive game design. Essentially, this thesis is a synthesis of cultural and media studies that asks a simple question: how did the Japanese experience in the second half of the 20th century shape game design in Japan, particularly from 1985 to 1995? To answer this question, this paper will analyze Yuji Horii and *Dragon Quest*; Shigesato Itoi and the *Mother* series (*1* & *2*); and Satoshi Tajiri and *Pokémon*. This research intends to reveal how entertainment is consciously crafted for society and will help us better understand the link between Japanese culture and video game design.

The theoretical link between culture and games has been thoroughly explored in Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McLuhan describes games as

¹ Simon Parkin, "Postscript: The Man Behind Nintendo," *The New Yorker*, Advance Publications, Published September 20, 2013 <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/postscript-the-man-behind-nintendo>

² Chris Kohler, *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life* (New York, Dover Publications, 2016) 80.

incorporating, “both the action and reaction of whole populations in a single dynamic image” making the medium a “faithful model of culture”.³ To put McLuhan’s theory simply, culture directly informs game design. Yet, it is important to note, that McLuhan is discussing traditional games – tabletop, toys, playground activities, etc. His work predates the advent of electronic interactive entertainment, i.e. video games. This paper will expand the application of McLuhan’s theoretical work and use it as grounds to explore the connection between Japanese culture and video game design.

This method is inspired by academic precedence; culture and its relation to traditional games has previously been applied to Japanese studies. John W. Dower’s *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* argued that the American occupation of the Japan radically altered Japanese culture. A notable piece of evidence presented by Dower was the influence the American presence had on Japanese child’s play. The reoccurring images of black markets, American men with Japanese prostitutes, and politically charged protests inspired a new wave of games among boys and girls. Dower describes the most popular as, “*yamiichigokko*, *panpan asobi*, and *demo asobi* – that is, holding a mock black market, playing prostitute and customer, and recreating left-wing political demonstrations.”⁴ It is clear, child’s play during the occupation period was a modelled reaction to sub-cultures that were pervasive throughout Japan at that time. Although Dower’s wider research is seemingly unrelated to McLuhan’s work, or this paper’s topic, his analysis of child’s play during the American occupation of Japan validated the link between Japanese culture and traditional game design.

³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (United States: MIT Press, 1964, 1994)

⁴ John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999)

This thesis builds upon the precedence set by Dower in two distinct ways. Most obviously, this is a paper about video games in the 1980s and 90s. It is not concerned with Japan in the occupation period or traditional child's play. Regarding child's play, it is an act born from the imagination of the young and what Dower describes amounts to simplistic imitation. Comparatively, the subsequent chapters of this work are look at how socially conscious video game designers in a multi-billion-dollar global entertainment industry developed products for the mass market. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that this thesis takes inspiration from Dower's brief analysis of child's play rather than other works on video games in an effort contribute to the discourse in way that differs from what has already been said about interactive electronic entertainment.

Despite the mediums relatively young age, there quite a few notable books that discuss video games – although not entirely within an academic context. Perhaps the first, and most well-know, is David Sheff's *Game Over: How Nintendo Conquered the World*. Released in 1994, Sheff's work is a detailed examination of the Japanese approach to marketing, quality control, and regulation, all which allowed the Kyoto based Nintendo to dominate the video game industry in the 1980s.⁵ *Game Over* is predominantly about Japanese business, and a product of a time when professionals across numerous fields were racing to explain Japan's emergence as an economic leader. At various points, Sheff indulges in wild theories that have Nintendo displacing likes of IBM and Microsoft as the world's chief supplier of computer hardware and software. In many ways, *Game Over* is to video games as Japan as Number One is to academia – an overly

⁵ David Sheff, *Game Over: How Nintendo Conquered the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) VIII.

optimistic pre-emptive look at the role Nintendo and the Japanese software developers would play as leaders in a takeover of the wider computer market.

A precedent for exploring Japanese culture and video game development was set by Chris Koehler's, *Power-Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World a Second Life*. Koehler's research marks a pivot away from the corporate focus set by Sheff's *Game Over* and argues that the Japanese contributions to video games are an extension of the Japan's, "unusually rich history of visual storytelling".⁶ Koehler's claim is a direct reference to visually striking nature of Japanese art forms such as kabuki, bunraku, manga, anime, etc. Koehler's supports his argument with an extensive use of primary source game developer interviews taken from Japanese video game magazines such as *Famitsu*. Within these dialogs, originally intended as pre-release press, or development post-mortems, developers cited the Japanese experience as influential in game design. The connection Koehler's *Power-Up* establishes between the Japanese experience and video games via these primary source interviews had a direct impact on the direction of this thesis.

Koehler's research is an influential catalogue of Japan's contributions to games; however, as an analysis of Japanese culture and game design, *Power-Up* does not go far enough. Throughout Koehler's work, many of the developer interviews that cite the Japanese experience as influential in game design are often critical of society, referencing issues such as workstyle and family. Nevertheless, Koehler fails to place the social commentary, or the games it is related to, in context with the historical narrative that molded this cohort of early game developers. Moreover, Koehler never analyzes how these social critiques directly informed game design. Taking inspiration from Koehler, this paper will make extensive use of primary source developer

⁶ Chris Kohler, *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*, 1

interviews. The goal is to build upon the developer and software focused precedent set in *Power-up* by placing developer commentaries in context with Japan's greater historical narrative and then analyze how the Japanese experience shaped game design.

Two major characteristics took precedence when I determined which games should be analyzed in this thesis – timeframe and popularity. It was preferred that the game's development and release take place during the period in which the Japanese video game industry dominated the market. This timeframe has not been clearly specified by academics; therefore, I will define it as such: starting with the crash of the American video game industry in 1983 and ending with the launch of Microsoft's Xbox in 2001. This period is important for two reasons. 1.) It is the formative years of Japanese game design, and when possible, it is nice to start at the beginning. 2.) Japan dominated the market. With no competition, Japanese developers did not have to adhere to foreign sensibilities when designing games. In fact, this pure Japanese voice in game development is a quality that came under attack with the re-emergence of western-developed games. During the doldrums of the great recession, Japanese developers began to craft games with the western market in mind.⁷ In conclusion, Japanese games released between 1985 and 1995 represented a distinctive period in the cultural history of Japanese gaming.

As for popularity, it was a characteristic chosen based on two key factors – readers and available primary source interviews. Video games are nowhere near as ubiquitous among consumers as TV or music; therefore, it was important to pick titles the average reader may be familiar with. Simple touchstones can make this thesis easier to digest for those who have never played a game before. Moreover, popular games have more primary source information

⁷ Chris Kohler, "In Japan, Gamemakers Struggle to Instill Taste for Western Shooters," *Wired*, Advance Publications, Published September 16, 2010 <https://www.wired.com/2010/09/western-games-japan/>

available, including interviews. It stands to reason that the more successful a game is, the more the media and public would like to know about its creators and development. This turned out to be the case, as the highest profile interview cited in this thesis is a TIME magazine article that featured Tajiri Satoshi, the creator of the *Pokémon* franchise.⁸ Considering these reasons, popularity was an important quality when choosing which games to analyze.

The video games that best fit the criteria outlined above were Yuji Horii's *Dragon Quest*, Shigesato Itoi's *Mother 1 & 2*, and Tajiri Satoshi's *Pokémon*.

Dragon Quest – Created by Yuji Horii

Released in 1986, *Dragon Quest* is best known for establishing the Japanese role-playing game (Japanese RPG or JRPG for short) sub-genre. Since the year of its first release, *Dragon Quest* has spawned more than 30 sequels and spin-offs. As of 2010, the long-running franchise had amassed a total sales number 57 million.⁹ Its longevity and sales numbers are a testament to its popularity.

Mother 1 & 2 – Created by Shigesato Itoi

Released in 1989 & 1994 respectively, *Mother 1 & 2* are another Japanese role-playing games that built upon *Dragon Quest*'s foundation. *Mother 1 & 2*'s narrative was created by the famous Japanese essayist, Shigesato Itoi. No sales numbers exist for *Mother*, making it difficult to quantitate the franchise's popularity. Admittedly, the *Mother* series is not the most popular series, but its prolific creator has addressed the game in numerous interviews. The plethora of primary source material that consistently address the Japanese experience as Itoi's inspiration

⁸ Tim Larimer, "The Ultimate Game Freak," *Time* Originally Posted Monday, Nov. 22, 1999 <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040095,00.html>

⁹ Chris Kohler, "*Dragon Quest IX* Smashes Series Sales Record With 5.3M," *Wired*, Advance Publications, Published March 17, 2011 <https://www.wired.com/2011/03/dragon-quest-ix-sales/>

made *Mother* a prime choice over more popular titles such as *Super Mario Bros.* or *The Legend of Zelda*.

Pokémon – Created by Tajiri Satoshi

Of the titles chosen, *Pokémon* is perhaps the most prolific. Originally released in 1995 as Japanese role-playing game for Nintendo's *Game Boy*, *Pokémon* has since expanded into the world's bestselling multimedia franchise, superseding Hello Kitty and Mickey Mouse.¹⁰

Of course, the information above is merely a brief introduction to these titles, the contents will be reiterated and expanded upon with more detail in the subsequent chapters.

It is also important to address *Dragon Quest*, *Mother* and *Pokémon*'s shared genre: the Japanese role-playing game. This happenstance was not intended, although not surprising considering popularity was a consideration when selecting which games to analyze. After all, the Japanese RPG subgenre was established and popularized in Japan. Nevertheless, this shared characteristic allowed this thesis to cover two additional points. 1.) Loosely cover the evolution of Japanese role-playing games. Since the releases span 9 years, and include *Dragon Quest*, the first JRPG, exploring the evolution of the subgenre is an inherent feature of this paper. 2.) Understand what is “Japanese” about Japanese role-playing games. Interestingly, Japanese role-playing is the only genre in video gaming to be prefaced by a nationality. The only other analogues are Western Role-playing and European Platformers. Since this thesis explores how the Japanese Experience influenced game design in Japan, there is an opportunity to understand this naming convention beyond simple explanations such as the genre was perfected and popularized in Japan.

¹⁰ TitleMax, The 25 Highest-Grossing Media Franchises of All Time, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.titlemax.com/discovery-center/money-finance/the-25-highest-grossing-media-franchises-of-all-time/>.

The advent of electronic gaming as popular entertainment medium gave rise to the field of ludology – simply defined as the study of gaming, particularly video games. Due to the interactive nature of video games, some academics have argued the methodology applied to movies and literature is not applicable. In a published work titled: *A Clash between Game and Narrative*, Jasper Jull referred to video games as decidedly “not literature”, and decried the narratological approach.¹¹ Instead, Jull argued for study of gaming within new theoretical frameworks that better considered the interactive and visual nature of the medium. Jull’s call to action inspired an effort to establish proper methodology for the study of video games.

Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton’s established methods for game study in a work titled: *Game Analysis: Developing a Methodical Toolkit for the Qualitative Study of Games*. Consalvo and Dutton’s toolkit consisted of four theoretical frame works – Objective Inventory, Interface Study, Interaction Map, and Gameplay Log.¹² Each has a specific use to help researchers better understand the relationship between players and their games. For instance, Objective Inventory is applicable to players and the items they interact with in the game world. The methodology is based on asking such questions as, “what is the purpose of an item?” and “what value does it have for the player?”¹³ In practice, it looks like this: In *Super Mario Bros.* obtaining the red mushroom enlarges Mario and allows the player to get hit by an enemy an additional time before dying and having to return to the beginning of a stage. The mushroom creates a larger margin of error. With the reduction in skill required to complete a level, the player is empowered and

¹¹ Jasper Juul, *A Clash Between Game and Narrative*, (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2001)

¹² Consalvo, Mia; Dutton, Nathan “Game Analysis: Developing a Methodological Took Kit for the Qualitative Study of Games,” *The International Journal of Computer Game Research* Vol.1 Issue 6 (2006)

¹³ Ibid.

enticed to keep playing. Although applicable to this paper, these methods are extremely specific and too narrowly defined for this paper and the target demographics.

To meet the needs of this thesis, I will outline a list that contains general and more applicable areas of analysis for game design. The areas include: Systems, Gameplay, Narrative, and Graphics.

Systems: the prescribed guides of conduct and action for the game. Designers create these rules to define how the player will interact with the game, what they will be able to do, and how they will be able to do it.

Gameplay: How the player interacts with the game based on system design. This can include features such as difficulty, movement, combat, etc.

Narrative: the game's story, including, but not limited to, plot, in-game dialogue, and descriptive text used for items and in-universe explanations of gameplay mechanics such as saving progress.

Graphics: every aspect of the visual presentation.

Not everyone these areas of analysis is applied to each of the games researched in this thesis, nor is there a hierarchy of importance among them. Their application was solely based on their need, and how well they explained how the Japanese experience shaped game design.

The overarching structure of this thesis was designed around a linear progression that followed the releases schedules of *Dragon Quest*, *Mother* and *Pokémon*. This approach was helpful for organization and reader accessibility. *Dragon Quest* is the first Japanese roleplaying game; therefore, it is discussed in Chapter II. Luckily, the Japanese experience Yuji Horii cited affected the system design of *Dragon Quest* and in turn shaped the entire genre. This happenstance allowed the fundamental mechanics of the JRPG genre to be established early in

the paper. Furthermore, an analysis of *Dragon Quest* in Chapter II doubled as an introduction to Japanese roleplaying games that could inform non-gamers and those who have never applied critical thought to the genre. It also established mechanics that are continuously referenced in the ensuing chapters. Considering the release order, it made sense to explore *Mother 1 & 2* and *Pokémon* in the subsequent sections – chapters III and IV respectfully, followed by a conclusion.

The body of each individual chapter is also following an organized pattern, each of the subsequent chapters are loosely organized into three sections. First, each chapter will begin by citing the developer's view on the Japanese experience. Next, the developer's assessment will be placed in context with the greater historical narrative of Japan. Finally, the game will be analyzed to better understand how the developer's Japanese experience manifested itself in the game's design. As each of the deals with a different designer, set of issues, game and analysis, each chapter also includes its own conclusion.

Before getting to the body, it is important to get out in front of three major shortcomings. Firstly, while this paper touches on the social and cultural issues that influenced Japanese game developers, it is meant to be an exploration of how they are reflected in game design. With that said, this paper is first and foremost a work about Japanese video games. Therefore, information regarding Japanese culture was an afterthought meant for non-academic readers unfamiliar with Japan. It merely exists to give context to the cultural and social issues referenced by Japanese game developers. For this reason, this information is not as comprehensive as it could be. Secondly, the analysis leans heavily on developer intent, how the creators want their games to be perceived by the players. The reaction by players, whether they understood, accepted, or acknowledged the commentary put forth by these games is not addressed. Simply put, that is research far beyond the scope of a master's thesis. Thirdly, video games are an inherently visual

medium. Yet, this paper makes no use of imagery. This omission is due to copyright issues.

Despite these shortcomings, the research contained in this paper will show that elements of the Japanese experience, particularly poor work-life balance, gender roles, and urbanization, influenced game design in Japan from 1985-1995.

Chapter II: The First Dragon Quest

On a February morning in 1988, thousands of people gathered in the streets of Tokyo to buy the latest game release for the incredibly popular Nintendo *Famicom*, the much-anticipated *Dragon Quest III: The Seeds of Salvation*. The crowds, although massive, organized themselves into neat regimented lines.¹⁴ However, closer inspection of this unabashed display of Japanese consumerism revealed that the release of *Dragon Quest III* was anything but orderly. The event was unabated chaos. *Dragon Quest III* was released on Wednesday, February 10th - the middle of the Japanese work week. Yet, the crowds were not a sea of doting housewives; rather, it included numerous people that should have been at work or school: salarymen, teenagers and young children. February 10th, 1988 did not just mark the release of *Dragon Quest III*, it was also the day workaholic Japan took an impromptu vacation.

Japan's sudden tryst with truancy did not go unnoticed by the wider Japanese public and law-enforcement officials. Between three and four hundred minors were taken into protective custody by the police after they attempted to buy *Dragon Quest III* during school hours.¹⁵ The disruption prompted a change to the release dates of future installments. It would be more than twenty-four years before Enix would launch another entry in the mainline *Dragon Quest* series on a weekday. This trend fostered an urban legend propagated among American game magazines, websites, and fans that claimed Japanese officials had passed a "*Dragon Quest Law*" barring Enix from releasing games on weekdays.¹⁶ The rumor, albeit humorous, is false,

¹⁴ "Dragon Quest 3 Release News TV Show," YouTube, Published April 9.2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xS2T6H8dzfE>

¹⁵ Gregg Keizer, *Compute! Magazine*, 97th ed., vol. 10 (Compute! Publications, Inc., 1988), 7.

¹⁶ Chris Kohler, *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life* (New York, Dover Publications, 2016) 80.

although, not entirely baseless. Public embarrassment over disrupting national productivity prompted Enix to negotiate special weekend releases with Nintendo who only shipped games to retailers on weekdays.¹⁷

The fervor around *Dragon Quest* releases can be best understood by exploring how series creator Yuji Horii designed the franchise with the Japanese experience in mind. *Dragon Quest* games are known to be accessible and easy to finish. When discussing these qualities, Horii has stated, ““there are so many difficulties people are facing. Sometimes there are no rewards... at least in the game we want to make sure they will be rewarded for working hard.”¹⁸ To create a game sympathetic to the difficulties of everyday life in Japan, Horii developed *Dragon Quest*'s systems what he called a “Japanese style” which he described as. “you have to try, try, try, try – and then at the end you can finally get a reward”.¹⁹ Horii's sensitivity to the Japanese experience and the resulting design philosophy has created one of the most popular video games series and subgenres in Japan, but how have these points manifested themselves within *Dragon Quest* and JRPG gameplay systems? To completely answer this question, this chapter will cover three major areas. 1.) Address *Dragon Quest*'s ubiquity in Japan and efforts to explain the franchise's popularity. 2.) Theorize and give context to Horii's statement about Japan's everyday difficulties. 3.) Analyze the first *Dragon Quest* game to understand how the Japanese experience influenced its gameplay systems.

¹⁷ Joe Skrebels, “How *Dragon Quest* Spawned an Urban Legend,” IGN, J2 Global, Published March 28, 2018 <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/03/28/how-dragon-quest-spawned-an-urban-myth>

¹⁸ Yuji Horii, interview by Christian Nutt, *Gamasutra*, May 27, 2011 http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134758/25_years_of_dragon_quest_an_.php

¹⁹ Ibid.

A. Efforts to Explain *Dragon Quest*'s Popularity

There are many happenstances that point to *Dragon Quest* as a bona fide Japanese phenomenon. In its thirty years of existence the franchise has bolstered impressive, nearly unwavering sales figures. To date, publisher Enix has sold over fifty-million games in the *Dragon Quest* line. While other video game series have achieved comparable sales numbers, there exist no analogue for the space *Dragon Quest* occupies within Japanese culture. Japanese video game news publication, *Famitsu*, declared *Dragon Quest* as Japan's "national game".²⁰ The series was so popular in the late 1980s that the Japanese portmanteau of the words dragon and quest, *dorakue*, became a universal shorthand for playing video games.²¹ While the physical inactivity of playing games may make gaming culture seem incompatible with sports, *Dragon Quest* breaks the rules with its music making routine appearances at sporting events.

When explaining *Dragon Quest*'s early success in Japan, journalist in the video game industry point to its close association with artist Akira Toriyama and composer Koichi Sugiyama. Christian Nutt, an editor from Gamasutra, states, "One key point of the series popularity no doubt rests in the fact that *Dragon Ball* creator Akira Toriyama has provided the games' art from the get-go".²² Nutt's other point is Sugiyama's role as the series composer. Tim Rogers, an editor at Kotaku that frequently contributes *Dragon Quest* related content, put it more bluntly, "*Dragon Quest* succeeded in Japan because the series was born at a time when Akira

²⁰ 電撃オンライン, "【CEDEC 2009】『ドラクエ』は藤子さんになれたらいい——堀井氏が基調講演," 電撃オンライン, accessed August 8, 2018

<https://dengekionline.com/elem/000/000/191/191872>

²¹ Chris Kohler, *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*, 81.

²² Christian Nutt, "Analysis: Why Is *Dragon Quest* So Popular?", Gamasutra, Informa PLC, Published July 29, 2009 https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/115327%0b/Analysis_Why_Is_Dragon_Quest_IX_So_Popular.php

Toriyama's *Dragon Ball* was hotter than hot. That's it. That's the reason".²³ The consensus is that, *Dragon Quest*'s association with star power helped drive initial sales. To give better context to these conclusions, the next two paragraphs will discuss Toriyama and Sugiyama's contributions in greater detail.

Akira Toriyama's involvement in *Dragon Quest* ran parallel to the artist's establishment as a household name in Japan. By 1984, Toriyama had penned and illustrated the final chapter of his long-running, highly acclaimed series, *Dr. Slump* and had just begun the successful *Dragon Ball*. Attaching Toriyama's art style to a new intellectual property such as *Dragon Quest* added familiarity to the product, turning the title visuals into a marketing tool. Enix hired Toriyama to provide art for their new game. Rough designs were handled by Yuji Horii and then reimagined in Toriyama's style. Horii recalled drawing generic slime-looking characters and bringing the rough sketches to Toriyama.²⁴ The process resulted in the creation of the iconic *Dragon Quest* slime, a character that has appeared in every *Dragon Quest* game to date and serves as the series mascot. With Toriyama's hand on the pen, the art of *Dragon Quest* had clear, recognizable and distinguished direction.

Dragon Quest's association with Sugiyama was important as the game's development began at a time when music became an integral part of the medium. *Super Mario Bros.* was released in 1985 and composer Koji Kondo's compositions quickly became the de facto sounds of gaming.²⁵ Perhaps, the development resulted in a need for higher production values. Enix

²³Tim Rogers, "Dragon Quest XI: The Kotaku Reviewer," Kotaku, G/O Media Inc., Published September 7, 2018 <https://kotaku.com/dragon-quest-xi-the-kotaku-review-1828646512>

²⁴ Jason Cipriano, "'Dragon Quest' Creator Sheds Light On The Inspiration For The Slime," MTV News, accessed March 6, 2018 <http://www.mtv.com/news/2461463/dragon-quest-creator-sheds-light-on-the-creation-of-the-slime/>

²⁵ Andrew Schartmann, *Koji Kondo's Super Mario Bros. Soundtrack* (New York: Bloomberg Academic. 2015) 30.

offered famed composer Koichi Sugiyama a job composing music for several upcoming titles, including *Dragon Quest*.²⁶ Sugiyama is a classically trained composer famous for composing television such as *Ultraman*, *Science Team Gatchaman*, and *Cyborg 009*. Creating the sound of *Dragon Quest* was a brief process, according to Sugiyama, “it took about five minutes between getting struck with the idea and coming up with the melody [for the overture],”²⁷ The result was a symphonic legacy that has transcended the games themselves. The overture was most recently featured in the Japanese Baseball World Cup.²⁸ The entire *Dragon Quest* repertoire is routinely performed in concert throughout Japan.

Although *Dragon Quest* was linked to undoubtedly familiar names in Japanese pop-culture, association with Toriyama and Sugiyama did not translate into initial sales. In fact, as Kohler explains, “When *Dragon Quest* released in May of 1986, sales were so low that Enix stood to lose a lot of money on the project.”²⁹ Sales only began to rise after Yuji Horii submitted articles to *Shonen Jump Weekly* detailing *Dragon Quest*’s gameplay. Even Akira Toriyama, whose manga, *Dragon Ball*, was making weekly appearances in the publication, got in on the article driven marketing campaign. Toriyama proclaimed, “*Dragon Quest* is dangerous! It got to the point where I couldn’t get any more work done, so my wife finally took it away”.³⁰ Of course, Toriyama and Sugiyama contributions afforded *Dragon Quest* visuals and music that fans could celebrate throughout the subsequent decades; however, the title’s initial failure at

²⁶ Chris Kohler, *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*, 80

²⁷ Eric Caoili, “Koichi Sugiyama Came Up with *Dragon Quest* Overture In 5 Minutes,” *Game Set Watch*, Originally Posted Feb. 25, 2010

²⁸ “*Dragon Quest* Main Theme Played For Japan At Baseball World Cup,” *Go Nintendo*, Originally Posted Aug. 6, 2016 <https://www.gonintendo.com/stories/287019-dragon-quest-main-theme-played-for-japan-at-the-baseball-world-cu>

²⁹ Chris Kohler, *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*, 80

³⁰ Akira Toriyama, *Weekly Shonen Jump*, 24th ed., (Shueisha Publishing Co., Ltd. 1986)

retail means that it is more practical to suggest gameplay as the reason for the game's popularity and the establishment of a subgenre that includes major titles such as *Final Fantasy* and *Pokémon*.

The discussion surrounding *Dragon Quest's* gameplay and how it related to the game's success is a more nuanced conversation. Although Nutt and Rogers point to Toriyama and Sugiyama to explain the first game's popularity, both agree that gameplay has afforded the series its longevity. Nutt even goes as far as to call the discussion surrounding Toriyama and Sugiyama's involvement in *Dragon Quest* a "red-herring" that detracts from the "cultural" aspects of the game's design.³¹ It's on these points that this thesis both departs from and aligns with the consensus. With low initial sales, and word-of-mouth resurgence, it is safe to point to gameplay as the definitive reason for *Dragon Quest's* success in Japan. To strengthen this argument, this thesis seeks to expand on Nutt's notion of culture and gameplay by examining how the Japanese experience directly influenced *Dragon Quest's* design.

B. Japan's Universal Difficulty: Work-Life Balance

Unfortunately, Yuji Horii's statement about the Japanese experience and "difficulties" is a vague assessment to base an analysis on; therefore, a hypothesis was needed to create a more substantial lens through which *Dragon Quest* can be examined. To avoid an assumptive leap in logic that puts too many words in the mouth of Yuji Horii, it was important to base this educated guesswork on facts related to *Dragon Quest* and its effect on the Japanese public. For this reason, *Dragon Quest III's* contention with national productivity was considered. By the time of the

³¹ Christian Nutt, "Analysis: Why Is *Dragon Quest* So Popular?", Gamasutra, Informa PLC, Published July 29, 2009 https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/115327%0b/Analysis_Why_Is_Dragon_Quest_IX_So_Popular.php

third release, the franchise's ease of accessibility pulled the public away from their social duties, a responsibility that can be summed up as work. *Dragon Quest* was a well-designed escape from what this paper calls Japan's universal difficulty – a pronounced lack of work-life balance that came to prominence in the post-war era.

During the latter half of the 20th century, Japan exhibited what could be called a nearly single-minded focus on economic growth that effected Japanese society from the top-down. On a macro level, the Japanese government levied subsidies to bolster valuable sectors of the economy, the most famous of which included semi-conductors. Economists commonly refer to the unified front between government and private sector corporations as Japan INC.³² The economic policies that made-up Japan INC. facilitated growth that became the trademark characteristic of Japan's high growth period and bubble economy. During this era, Japan maintained an average unemployment rate of under 3%.³³ According to the World Bank, Japan's GDP per capita rose from \$478.99 in 1960 to \$28,925.04 in 1991.³⁴ These statistics point to a Japanese society that was well employed with significant monetary gains for the individual worker.

The economic growth facilitated by policies forged at the top were passed on to the corporations and the public to be carried out at the cost of work-life balance. In 1960, Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato introduced his, "income-doubling plan".³⁵ Although the economic

³² Alex Gibney, "*The Pacific Century: Reinventing Japan*", Documentary, (October 15, 1992; Arlington County: Public Broadcasting Service, May 26, 2016.)

³³ Trading Economics, "Japan Unemployment Rate 1953-2020" Accessed April 10, 2020 <https://tradingeconomics.com/japan/unemployment-rate>

³⁴ WorldBank, "GDP Per Capita *Current US\$) – Japan" Accessed April 10, 2020 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=JP>

³⁵ Alex Gibney, "*The Pacific Century: JAPAN INC.*", Documentary, (October 15, 1992; Arlington County: Public Broadcasting Service, May 26, 2016.)

strategy was built around the development of a consumer economy, the plan included a propaganda-like challenge aimed at the general public – double your income by the end of the decade. Government led encouragement coupled with a Japanese work ethic that judges “hard work” on the total number of hours present and not overall productivity resulted in excessive overtime becoming the norm in Japan. As recent as 2018, nearly one quarter of Japanese companies expected employees to work 80 hours of underpaid overtime a month³⁶ Despite the overtime, data by the OECD highlights Japan as the least productive G7 nation.³⁷ Running parallel to productivity issues is *karoshi*: a term developed to describe people who died from excessive overtime, literal translation – “death by overwork”. The Japanese government has addressed work-life balance issues with newly adopted national holidays (mountain day) and work-style reform bills.³⁸

Considering the pervasive nature of Japan’s poor work-life balance, it makes sense to apply the issue to Yuji Horii’s comments about the Japanese Experience and, “the difficulties people are facing”. Since Horii’s idea about “difficulties” is related to *Dragon Quest*’s accessibility and ease, this paper’s analysis will examine the game’s systems to understand how Japan’s poor work-life balance was considered in the design. The analysis will include the following two points. 1.) Discussing Yuji Horii’s early career, origins of the roleplaying games, and how it differed from other genres. 2.) Examining the first *Dragon Quest*’s systems to

³⁶ Uptin Saiidi, “Japan Has Some of The Longest Working Hours in The World. It’s Trying to Change,” CNBC, Published June 1st, 2018 <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/01/japan-has-some-of-the-longest-working-hours-in-the-world-its-trying-to-change.html>

³⁷ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Productivity Statistics, Labour Productivity Growth” Updated April 28, 2019 <http://www.oecd.org/sdd/productivity-stats/>

³⁸ Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, “Act on the Arrangement of Related Acts to Promote Work Style Reform” Accessed April 20, 2020 <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/policy/employ-labour/labour-standards/dl/201904kizyun.pdf>

understand how the game's design was considerate of Japan's poor work-life balance, lack of leisure time, et cetera.

C. Origins of Dragon Quest & JRPGs

At the start of his career, Yuji Horii collaborated with programmer Koichi Nakamura to create new gameplay experiences that differed from the action and puzzle games typically found in Japanese arcades during the early 80s. Together the duo made a computer game called, *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*, a narrative driven title that used a combination of text, graphics, and puzzles to tell a story. Unlike the arcade games that focused on the adrenaline rush and sense of accomplishment that came with chasing high scores, playing Horii and Nakamura's title was a leisurely experience commonly described as the, "game without a game over".³⁹ This was due to there being no way to technically lose. Moreover, the abundant text and limited player interaction meant *Portopia* was more akin to reading a book than playing a game. Hence its designation as Japan's first entry in visual novel video game genre.

It can be assumed that *Portopia* sold well as the game received a sequel and was adapted for play on the Famicom to capitalize on the growing home console market. It was when the pair was left pondering their next move that Nakamura suggested, "why don't we create a roleplaying game?" a proposition based on the fact they "were into RPGs around that time".⁴⁰ Nakamura was statement referred to the duo's affinity for *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* and

³⁹ John Szczepaniak, "Before They Were Famous," *Retro Gamer* (Bournemouth, England: Imagine Publishing Ltd. 2007) 76.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Parish, "The History of RPGs: How *Dragon Quest* Redefined Genre," *USgamer*, Published June 7, 2016, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/the-history-of-rpgs-how-dragon-quest-redefined-a-genre>

Ultima: The First Age of Darkness. These two obscure titles from America adapted the rules of the tabletop roleplaying, *Dungeons & Dragons*, for play on home computers.

The mash-up between *Dungeon & Dragon's* and computer gaming was revolutionary, but to appreciate the innovation, it is important understand the established formula for game design in the seventies and early eighties. In the plainest of words, video games were an aptitude test for pattern recognition, reaction time, and hand-eye coordination. For example, *Pong* was an adaption of ping-pong. Although it did not require physicality of the sport, participation in a volley demanded a level of hand-eye acuity. However, the earliest video games were predominantly symmetrical experiences that had players competing against each other. The advent of asymmetrical gameplay where players contended with the game itself arrived shortly thereafter with several innovations in game design. *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* expected players to progress through a series of segmented mazes or courses that increased in difficulty at regular intervals. These stages incorporated a wide variety of hazards – inconveniently placed pitfalls and enemies that moved in abstract patterns – meant to limit a player's progress towards a high score or end goal. Despite evolutions in game design, the skill set required to excel at gaming never changed. The focus was always on creating challenges that rewarded skill with a sense of accomplish, there was little glory in playing games for the undexterous or easily frustrated.

The roleplaying genre was the antithesis to the established formula. The basic design of RPGs allowed *Wizardry* and *Ultima* to focus on a storytelling and exploration. Yet, the genre was decidedly unlike Horii's early attempts at creating a narrative driven video game. The innovation was in how *Wizardry* and *Ultima* included daunting enemy encounters to deliver what the novella-like *Portopia* could not, enough challenge to instill the player with a sense of accomplishment when they prevailed and avoided a game over. Despite the inclusion of combat,

RPGs remained unique in the sense that success was not contingent on the dexterity of the player. Interaction with *Wizardry* and *Ultima* were menu driven affairs with the player's proficiency being governed by numeric statistics that were tied to attributes such as strength, dexterity, and vitality. In a game like *Super Mario Bros*, a player dispatched a foe by landing an accurate, well-timed jump atop an enemy's head; the dexterity-based aptitude test. In *Wizardry* and *Ultima*, an action, such as "attack", is selected from a menu and then a corresponding statistic, in this case "strength", determines how effective the player is in performing the act. Moreover, combat was turn-based with the player and computer-controlled enemies taking actions in turns, not unlike chess or shogi. RPGs emphasized strategy and decision making to a test the intellect of a player.

The roleplaying genre also presented a malleable level of challenge. Video game journalist Jeremy Parish stated that *Wizardry* presented, "a linear curve of difficulty based on the player's location relative to the starting point".⁴¹ However, this curve was constantly renegotiated through the act of grinding. If a player could not match wits or numbers with an enemy, they could resort to doing continuous combat with weaker foes to level up their characters. Level ups awarded the character's additional stat points to increase their effectiveness in attacking and defending. The basic design of roleplaying games – slow paced, intellect-based gameplay that awarded patience and persistence – was a good fit for a mass market. Comparatively, the inability to adapt to the challenge of a dexterity-based aptitude test could stress, frustrate, and alienate consumers. However, *Wizardry* and *Ultima* were anything but basic.

⁴¹ Jeremy Parish, "The History of RPGs: How *Dragon Quest* Redefined Genre", *USgamer*, Originally Posted, June 7, 2016, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/the-history-of-rpgs-how-dragon-quest-redefined-a-genre>

Ultima and *Wizardry* gameplay was steeped in the mechanics of *Dungeons & Dragons* - a major issue for mass market accessibility. Released in 1977, *Dungeons & Dragons* was a niche hobby confined to American basements and garages. Playing the game required the use of three booklets that contained one hundred and thirty-two pages of rules and explanations. *Ultima* and *Wizardry* borrowed concepts directly from these manuals. Thus, players were expected to be well versed in a lexicon of lingo that related to complex notions, such as moral alignment and optimal stat point allocation for bewildering attributes. During gameplay, there were multiple characters to command. A task that required the player to find synergy among the skills and spells of the various classes – warrior, cleric, mage – that populated the party. An additional stint in cram school would be required if the average Japanese were to grasp the systems of a game derivative of *Ultima* or *Wizardry*.

The difficulty was even more problematic, *Ultima* and *Wizardry* lived up to their foreboding subtitles to a startling degree. The numeric stats were completely stacked against the player; David versus Goliath as told by numbers. To make matters worse, the gains from grinding were minimal, and under certain conditions a player's effort could be rendered pointless with hard-earned stat points or progress being completely lost. For instance, if a character died, they were gone forever, along with all the time a player put into raising their stats. If the player's entire party of characters were defeated, they would be forced to start the entire game over. The latter was a major issue when considering both *Wizardry* and *Ultima* took about twenty hours of play time to complete. Bruised egos aside, there was little time in the busy lives of the Japanese for the exercise in masochism that *Wizardry* and *Ultima* offered. Nakamura stated, "*Wizardry* and *Ultima* are difficult games, but what we did with those games was to take them and make a

more easy-to-understand version of them, which was *Dragon Quest*.⁴² The RPG formula needed to be simplified to create a leisurely experience that fit into the busy lives of the Japanese public.

D. Analyzing *Dragon Quest*

Yuji Horii's fundamental design philosophy for *Dragon Quest* was seemingly twofold: make the player feel like a hero and streamline the user experience. To start, the story of *Dragon Quest* revolved around universally recognized acts of heroism. Players assumed the role of a solitary main character descendant from a long forgotten legendary hero. Objectives were simple: prove your lineage, rescue the princess of Lofudor, and bring peace to the land of Alefgard by defeating the Dragon Lord of Chardock Castle. Despite the simplicity of the narrative, there was psychological nuance in the way *Dragon Quest* fostered a connection between the player, the hero, and the objectives. Upon starting the game, players were asked to name the hero with a simple question, "nae wo iretekudasai" or "please input a name". This was not the first-time Japanese players were asked to contribute something personal to a game. It was common for arcade goers to input their initials to lay claim to a score; However, the question *Dragon Quest* posed was not a declaration of digital ownership. The hero of *Dragon Quest* was utterly incomplete without input from the player. An empty shell that began the game at level one, lacking in strength, personality, and significance. The blank slate hero coupled with the RPG formula – grinding, leveling up – allowed the player to *become* the main character: the journey, the growth, and the heroics, were completely their own.

⁴² Jeremy Parish, "The History of RPGs: How *Dragon Quest* Redefined Genre", *USgamer*, Originally Posted, June 7, 2016, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/the-history-of-rpgs-how-dragon-quest-redefined-a-genre>

Placing the focus on a solitary character was a major step taken towards creating a simplified roleplaying experience for Japanese audiences. The player's avatar in *Dragon Quest* was an all in one package that could utilize skills and spells that were normally dispersed across multiple classes. Moreover, players were no longer required to allocate statistic points; they were automatically distributed after a level up. The automated distribution of stat points meant players did not need to know the meaning or purpose of the two attributes that were included in the game: strength and dexterity. Merely, the higher the number the better. All other concepts, such as moral alignment, were trimmed. In retrospect, *Dragon Quest* has been described as a comically barebones take on RPG mechanics.⁴³ However, this introductory lesson was needed to familiarize players with the foreign concepts of the roleplaying genre. Stepping into the role of the hero became a more natural and tangible experience.

Simplicity made *Dragon Quest* approachable, but Horii also wanted to design the difficulty around the cultural idea that all hard work should be rewarded. Horii's contention with challenge in games was directly inspired by the hardship of everyday life in Japan. To reiterate, Horii stated in an interview that, "there are so many difficulties people are facing. Sometimes there are no rewards... at least in the game we want to make sure they will be rewarded for working hard."⁴⁴ This notion was a new take on a traditional Buddhist idea that forged a relationship between time and merit. During the rise of Tendai Buddhism in the 8th century, Saicho proposed that, "if a student's work was incomplete, but he still had spent a full twelve

⁴³ Jeremy Parish, "The History of RPGs: How *Dragon Quest* Redefined Genre", *USgamer*, Originally Posted, June 7, 2016 <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/the-history-of-rpgs-how-dragon-quest-redefined-a-genre>

⁴⁴ Yuji Horii, interview by Christian Nutt, *Gamasutra*, May 27, 2011 http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134758/25_years_of_dragon_quest_an_.php

years on the mountain without leaving, then he should be granted the second highest rank.”⁴⁵ The twelve year time frame was in reference to the duration in which monks spent training on Mt Hiei. Over the centuries, the notion that time equaled merit did not remain exclusive to Buddhist thought. The concept permeated throughout Japanese society to become as Horii described, “traditional”.⁴⁶ In line with these cultural ideas, Horii believed the path to the finale of *Dragon Quest* should be a mountain scalable by persistence that did not necessarily translate into skill, “you must keep climbing, climbing, and climbing, and then you finally get to the top of the mountain, and you see the beautiful view”.⁴⁷ A combination of these two ideas became the basis for the difficulty curve in *Dragon Quest*.

The first alteration to difficulty came when Horii reimagined the pace of the RPG grind around his mountain climbing concept. When applied, the amount of experience points required to strengthen the hero would begin small and increase with each subsequent level up. Unsurprisingly, when the experience needed to reach the max level of thirty was graphed it resembled the incline of a mountain. Thus, the start of the game was to feel like hiking the mountain’s base. An easy-going trail where players swiftly gained levels and surpassed the strength of the enemies found early in the game. It took only seven battles with the blue slimes beyond the walls of Lufador castle before a blissful jingle to announced that the player had leveled up for the first time. Like beginner’s luck in a casino, the quick rewards found at the easily traveled base of the mountain lured players in.

⁴⁵ Shigeru Osuka, *One Vehicle Thought: Life and Educational Thought of Saicho (767-822)*, (Tokyo: Chou University Press, 2001) 57.

⁴⁶ Yuji Horii, interview by Christian Nutt, *Gamasutra*, May 27, 2011
http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134758/25_years_of_dragon_quest_an_.php

⁴⁷ Yuji Horii, interview by Christian Nutt, *Gamasutra*, May 27, 2011
http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134758/25_years_of_dragon_quest_an_.php

To maintain a similar sense of accomplishment to that of traditional game experience, *Dragon Quest* paired the grind with a linear difficulty curve based on how far the player progressed in the story. With every step enemies grew more treacherous. Horii filled the ranks of the Dragon Lord's army with menacing armored knights and golems. Nevertheless, bridges on the world map signaled these difficulties spikes to players so that they might not wander unknowingly to their death. Falling in battle in these areas were a sign that the player was under leveled and tackling such obstacles would require additional grinding. Since the experience points required to strengthen the hero increased between each level, players eventually came face to face with diminishing returns on time investment. The elongated process that added an illusion of difficulty to the game.

This faux difficulty was predicated on the grind being a time consuming, yet easy endeavor. With much of the roleplaying bloat removed, *Dragon Quest* was a fast paced, combat oriented game that did not require too much attention. In fact, it was too simple. The barebones nature meant players could use minimal strategy and repeatedly mash a single button to hurry through command menus in combat. Nonetheless, developers were careful capture the therapeutic qualities of zoning out without boring the player. This was due in no small part to *Dragon Quest* being visually and aurally exciting. Players bobbed their heads along to Sugiyama's bombastic tracks while they dispatched hundreds of vibrant enemies drawn in Toriyama's iconic style. Yet, the promise of the beautiful view atop Horii's mountain was certainly the biggest draw. It effectively disguised tedium as meaningful progress. Horii and his team cemented guaranteed rewards into *Dragon Quest's* design by ensuring a player could not fall from the mountain. *Dragon Quest* included no arbitrary mechanics that caused players to lose levels, nor were attribute points lost at random. All experience gathered

Dragon Quest Experience Point Chart ⁴⁸

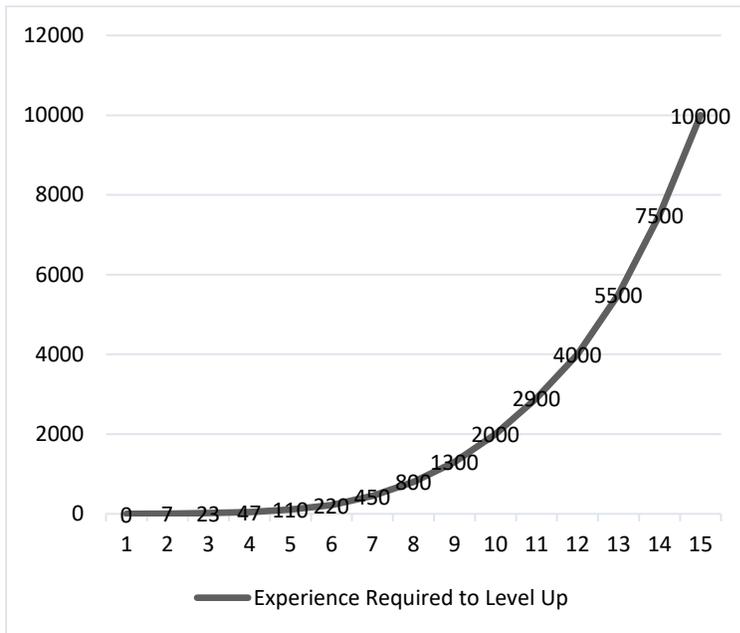


Chart 2.1 The amount of experience required to level up graphed

Ultima and Wizardry Experience Point Chart

Wizardry ⁴⁹		Ultima ⁵⁰	
Level	Experience Points	Level	Experience Points
1	1000	1	0 - 999
2	1724	2	1000 - 1999
3	2972	3	2000 - 2999
4	5124	4	3000 - 3999
5	8834	5	4000 - 4999
6	15231	6	5000 - 5999
7	26260	7	6000 - 6999
8	45275	8	7000 - 7999
9	78060	9	8000 - 8999
10	134586	10	9000 - 9999

Table 2.1 The amount of experience required to level up in Ultima and Wizardry. Ultima used a linear system where the amount to level was always 1000 experience points. Wizardry used a system like Dragon Quest, but with larger gaps in between each level. Comparatively, Dragon Quest was a much faster grind.

⁴⁸ Akira Speirs, "Dragon Quest: Names/Stats/Levels FAQ," GameFAQS, Published July 20, 2002 <https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/nes/563408-dragon-warrior/faqs/18342>

⁴⁹ Kelly Flewin, "Wizardry 1 – Proving Grounds of The Mad Overlord Walkthrough," The-Spoiler, Published 2001 <https://the-spoiler.com/RPG/Sir-Tech/wizardry.1.2.html>

⁵⁰ Richard Garriott, *Ultima 1: The First Age of Darkness*, (Austin: Origin Systems 1981)

Dragon Quest Attribute Point Chart ⁵¹

Level	Exp	Str 1	Str 2	Agi 1	Agi 2	HP 1	HP 2	MP 1	MP 2
1	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	7	1	1	0	0	7	6	-	-
3	23	3	3	2	2	9	8	-	-
4	47	3	3	4	4	16	14	11	10
5	110	8	7	6	6	20	18	15	14
6	220	12	11	6	6	23	21	19	17
7	450	14	13	13	12	25	23	21	19
8	800	18	16	16	15	31	28	24	22
9	1300	26	24	18	16	35	32	31	28
10	2000	31	28	27	24	39	35	35	32
11	2900	36	33	31	28	47	42	45	41
12	4000	44	40	36	33	48	43	53	48
13	5500	48	43	44	40	55	50	59	53
14	7500	56	51	51	46	63	57	65	59
15	10000	64	58	60	54	71	64	67	60
16	13000	68	61	66	60	77	69	90	81
17	17000	68	61	74	67	85	77	95	86
18	21000	81	73	80	72	100	90	103	93
19	25000	83	75	82	74	115	104	110	99
20	29000	88	79	84	76	123	111	123	111
21	33000	91	82	86	78	134	121	130	117
22	37000	93	84	96	78	143	129	141	127
23	41000	95	86	90	81	150	135	148	133
24	45000	99	89	94	85	155	140	156	140
25	49000	109	98	96	87	159	143	156	140
26	53000	113	102	101	91	165	149	163	148
27	57000	121	109	103	93	174	157	170	153
28	61000	126	114	111	100	180	162	175	158
29	65000	131	118	116	105	185	167	185	167
30	65535	136	123	126	114	195	176	195	176

Table 2.2 Dragon Quest's attribute growth. With each level up the hero would grow in strength and agility. A chart such as this is impossible to create for Ultima and Wizardry. Those games require the player to allocate points across five attributes. Moreover, growth was based on convoluted systems that added an element of randomness to the amount of attribute points that were obtained. Dragon Quest simplified the system, and insured players always grew in some manner or another.

⁵¹ Akira Speirs, "Dragon Quest: Names/Stats/Levels FAQ," GameFAQS, Published July 20, 2002
<https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/nes/563408-dragon-warrior/faqs/18342>

was permanent. Even upon death the players maintained all their progress. Thus, with enough time invested, the player could grind away any inkling of difficulty *Dragon Quest* offered. For the first time, it was not a matter of whether a player could beat a game but when. The simplified gameplay coupled with faux difficulty that offered a guaranteed sense of accomplishment made it a worthwhile for Japanese players to zone out and play *Dragon Quest*.

This formula became the basis for a new subgenre of roleplaying games appropriately labeled the Japanese RPG. Despite common use, what constitutes as a Japanese roleplaying game is sometimes debated. Jason Schreier points to recurring mechanics such as turn based combat.⁵² However, these gameplay systems were adopted from western games and merely altered by Japanese developers. Geography is also cited; the genre was popularized in Japan. These two definitions are just shy of the mark, neither emphasis on how Japanese culture influenced game design. And that is exactly what made *Dragon Quest*'s brand of roleplaying quintessentially Japanese. “*Dragon Quest* embodied the Japanese ideal of handwork equals success,” said Alex Fraioli in an interview with video game historian Jeremy Parish.⁵³ The developers of *Dragon Quest* adapted deeply cultural ideas to foreign concepts to create a game that appealed to new Japanese sensibilities shaped by demanding work and school culture.

The subsequent success that followed *Dragon Quest* inspired countless long running franchises – *Final Fantasy*, *Mother*, *Pokémon* - each with their own take on the subgenre. But *Dragon Quest* and the Japanese RPG were not without critics. Shigeru Miyamoto, the famed creator of Mario and Zelda, said that he personally had, “a fundamental dislike of the RPG

⁵² Jason Schreier, “Why Do People Care About JRPGs?,” *Kotaku*, published June 28, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/5921080/why-do-people-care-about-jrpgs>

⁵³ Jeremy Parish, “The History of RPGs: How *Dragon Quest* Redefined Genre”, *USgamer*, Originally Posted, June 7, 2016, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/the-history-of-rpgs-how-dragon-quest-redefined-a-genre>

system”.⁵⁴ Explaining his position, Miyamoto stated, “I think that in RPGs, you are completely bound hand and foot and can’t move. Only gradually as your character gains powers, do you become able to move your hands, your feet... you come untied slowly. And in the end, you feel powerful. So, what you get out of an RPG is a feeling of happiness, but I don’t think that is a game that is fundamentally fun to play”.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Miyamoto showed sensible understanding what set *Dragon Quest* apart from the action oriented titles when he admitted that, “with a Mario games, if you’re not good at them you may never be good. Anyone can become good at an RPG.”⁵⁶ However, Miyamoto’s deliberation breezed over two key concepts that solidified *Dragon Quest* as Japan’s national game: happiness and a chance to feel powerful.

E. Findings

In a balanced economic system, there is a distinct divide between work and private life, but the demands of rapid economic growth birthed a distorted system where work and school intruded on the private. Vigorously enforced by social pressures, the national ethos entrenched a sense of powerlessness in the Japanese psyche. *Dragon Quest* was the counterpoint. The daily grind whittled self-worth, the RPG grind sculpted heroes. Moreover, the malleable level of difficulty rewarded persistence, reintroducing control into everyday life. In a way, *Dragon Quest* was supplement for a pathological malaise that had consumed Japan. The game offered power and happiness.

Dragon Quest has maintained its role in Japanese society, evolving slowly over its thirty-two-year history. The overture Sugiyama composed in 1986 has accompanied every title screen

⁵⁴ Chris Kohler, *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*, 82

⁵⁵ Chris Kohler, *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*, 82

⁵⁶ Chris Kohler, *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*, 81

in the series right up until the release of *Dragon Quest XI* in 2017. Despite major advancements in audio, sound effects are always sampled from the original game. Battles continued to be turned based, even though modern sensibilities have deemed the system unfashionable. And of course, the grind has remained a core experience of the game. “When we design the game, it’s like driving a car” said Horii, “you know how to drive it without thinking about it – that’s what we are trying to do. So, we keep maintaining the same kind of gameplay system.”⁵⁷ Enix did attempt to modernize the series. When *Dragon Quest IX* was revealed to the public, the game sported an action-oriented combat system. Fans derided the changes, forcing Enix to reintegrate older systems into the game before launch. *Dragon Quest XI* went on to be the 4th best-selling game in the franchise. This desire to keep series familiar runs parallel to Japanese a national ethos that has remained consistently oppressive. If there is excessive overtime in Japan, there will be a need for *Dragon Quest*.

Yet, it is important to understand, that although *Dragon Quest* countered the negative effects of work culture born from Japan’s economic boom, the game was merely a band aid on a major issue. An innocuous steam valve discharging the building pressure of long hours at the office and in the classroom. Even when the release *Dragon Quest III* disrupted national productivity, social pressure quickly dealt with the issue by confining release dates to Sundays and holidays. Moreover, *Dragon Quest* didn’t offer overt commentary on the national ethos. Nor did it inspire people to think critically about how society had changed over the course of the high growth period. The observations Horii had made about work culture in Japan were for the sake of the game’s design and mass appeal, not a social statement. With that said, the contribution

⁵⁷ Yuji Horii, interview by Christian Nutt, *Gamasutra*, May 27, 2011
http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134758/25_years_of_dragon_quest_an_.php

Dragon Quest made to storytelling in games cannot be discredited. Like a book, or movie, it was a piece of entertainment that anyone could see through to the end. By the end of the 80s, the narrative potential of the Japanese RPG formula would inspire games with rich social commentaries.

Chapter III: Mother 1 & 2

In 1988, Shigesato Itoi strode into the Nintendo headquarters in Kyoto to pitch a new Japanese roleplaying series to Shigeru Miyamoto – the creator of *Donkey Kong*, *Super Mario Bros.*, and *The Legend of Zelda*. At this point Itoi’s confidence was well founded, he was a household name in Japan. As a copy writer, Itoi penned some of the most recognizable corporate catch phrases in the country. Itoi’s words, *oishii seikatsu*, or tasteful life, tied together a Seibu ad campaign that stirred customers. In 1981, together with renowned writer, Haruki Murakami, Itoi co-authored *Yume De Aimashou*, a collection of surrealist short stories. Itoi later reflected on his dynamic career in a memoir titled, “*When Itoi Was All the Rage*”. The book explored how the ease of employment that came with being a superstar. Despite his pedigree as a writer, Itoi has maintained that Miyamoto’s reaction to the design document was less than enthusiastic.⁵⁸ The video game industry was booming at the time; thus, Miyamoto showed apprehension towards celebrities as he believed they only had a commercial interest in game development.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Nintendo green lit the JRPG project which released under the title: *Mother*.

The *Mother* series built upon the Japanese roleplaying foundations established in *Dragon Quest* by coupling gameplay with character driven narrative common in film. Itoi stated he felt compelled to create a JRPG after playing *Dragon Quest*. Itoi’s approach to game design began with simple question, “what would Spielberg make?”⁶⁰ By 1987, the Spielberg’s production credits included the likes of *E.T the Extra Terrestrial*, *Gremlins*, and *The Goonies*. None of these

⁵⁸ Shigesato Itoi, Interview, Trans. Shmuplations <http://shmuplations.com/mother/>

⁵⁹ Simon Parkin, “Earthbound Retrospective: Mother Ode,” *Eurogamer*, Originally Posted, July 28, 2013 <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-07-28-earthbound-retrospective>

⁶⁰ Shigesato Itoi, interview by Keiichi Tanaka, *Den Fami Nico Gamer*, January 9, 2018, <http://news.denfaminicogamer.jp/english/180109>

films are cited as direct inspirations; nevertheless, their influence was clear in *Mother*'s cast, setting and themes. For example, *Mother*'s plot revolved around an ensemble of preadolescent youths, the setting discarded the medieval trappings of *Dragon Quest* in favor of contemporary America, and the theme stressed the power of interpersonal connections – not unlike friendship displayed in *E.T* or comradeship exhibited in *The Goonies*. This latter point is best exemplified in *Mother 2*'s climax when the heroes summon the power of human emotion to overcome an intergalactic alien menace known Giygas.

Although the *Mother* series displayed themes such as interpersonal connection and friendship, the game and its creator were overtly critical of Japan's family system. For instance, the main characters of *Mother 1 & 2*, Ninten and Ness respectfully, only speak to their fathers over the phone. When asked about the absentee fathers in an interview, Itoi stated, ““I never have my characters come from a stable home”.”⁶¹ Separate from these remarks, Itoi explained the scenario was a reference to his frustration with work-centric Japan. Itoi's commentary inspires key questions, how is the Japanese broken home related to work centric Japan and how are these concepts explored within the *Mother* series? To answer these questions, this chapter do the following: 1.) Explore the Japanese gender roles and their relation to parenthood and work. 2.) Analyze how the Japanese experience informed *Mother 1 & 2*'s depiction of parenthood and how it is critical of Japanese gender roles and their relation to work.

⁶¹ Shigesato Itoi, interview by Weekly Famitsu, Trans. Lindsay, *Yomuka*, Originally Posted, April 30, 2009 <https://yomuka.wordpress.com/2009/04/30/famitsu-06191992/>

A. The Good Wife, Wise Mother and The Salaryman

Since this chapter will analyze how *Mother 1 & 2* presents a critical depictions of Japan's gender roles and their relation to family and work, it is important to establish what these norms are for Japanese men and women. Of course, the criticism Itoi exhibited via *Mother 1 & 2*'s was focused on fatherhood; nevertheless, it is also important to explore the role of motherhood as they are two stations that are intrinsically linked. In fact, the importance of the mother is suggested within the game's title which functions as triple entendre that references the game's alien menace (mothership), the idea of an interconnected planet (mother earth), and the emotional importance of the maternal-child relationship. To effectively compare *Mother*'s depictions of fatherhood and motherhood in Japan the next two paragraphs will outline the maxim ascribed to each gender within Japanese society: the good wife, wise mother, and the salaryman.

Throughout the 20th century, the most common gender role ascribed to Japanese women was the good wife, wise mother - an East Asian analogue to the western housewife. "We consider home to be the woman's sphere." said the one time ministry of education in Japan, Kikuchi Dairoku, "man works outside and woman helps at home is our maxim."⁶² In this system, women were to play, as sociologist Mary C. Briton put it, "a secondary role in the economy", their job was to invest in, "human capital".⁶³ As the good wife, wise mother, they would raise industrious children and support hardworking husbands. Data suggests, the good wife, wise mother ideal was a widely practiced norm. As the economy strengthened in the second half of

⁶² Margaret E. Burton, *The Education of Women in Japan*, (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1914) 105.

⁶³ Mary C. Brinton, *Women and The Miracle Economy: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 27

the 20th century and more men were employed, the workforce participation rates of women dropped below 50%.⁶⁴ Furthermore, lower workforce participation rates among women could be tied to increased marriage rates. Sociologist Mary C. Brinton explains that by the 1960s, “90% of all females between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine were married”.⁶⁵ A key piece of information tying this together is the mutually exclusive relationship between marriage and child rearing exhibited by Japan in this period - 50% of Japanese babies were born to women between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine.⁶⁶ Considering the low workforce participation rates, and synonymous relationship between marriage and childrearing, it is safe to assume that the good wife, wise mother was how a majority of Japan experienced motherhood.

The male counterpart to Japan’s good wife, wise mother was the Japanese salaryman, a gender trope that emerged in the post-war. During miracle economy and high growth periods, economic advancement most directly benefited Japanese men. Government commissioned white paper reports the on well-being of Japanese society enthusiastically acknowledged the increase in life-time employment among males and the widespread establishment of the single income salaryman household.⁶⁷ According to data from the world bank, workforce participation rates among Japanese males ages 15+ maintained averages higher than 77% from 1960 to 1996.⁶⁸ On this point, it is important to consider how disparities in workforce participation rates between men and women are indicative of a male-majority labor pool. Furthermore, this male-majority

⁶⁴ Mary C. Brinton, *Women and The Miracle Economy: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan*, 39

⁶⁵ Mary C. Brinton, *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 19.

⁶⁶ Mary C. Brinton, *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*, 16.

⁶⁷ WM. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, Arthur E. Tiedemann, *Sources of Japanese Tradition: 1600 to 2000* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 400.

⁶⁸ WorldBank, “GDP Per Capita *Current US\$) – Japan” Accessed May 5, 2020

https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.MA.NE.ZS?contextual=default&locations=JP&most_recent_value_desc=false

work force-maintained unemployment-rate lower than 3%.⁶⁹ Tying the salaryman to absentee fatherhood is the fact that Japan's excessive overtime culture was mostly experienced by salarymen in the male-majority workforce. High employment rates among men coupled with long work hours means there was a large amount of distance between fatherhood and the household.

B. Analyzing Mother 1 & 2

Depictions of the good wife, wise mother, and salaryman are evident in *Mother 1 & 2* due in part to a contemporary backdrop and narrative flourishes that framed JRPG gameplay systems within the setting. Both *Mother 1 & 2* borrowed JRPG conventions established in *Dragon Quest* such as turn-based combat, status effects, and linear experience point progression. For example, in *Dragon Quest* the player did battle against dragons or other enemies inspired by the *Dungeons & Dragons* pantheon of enemies. To better match the contemporary setting, the player instead fought rabid dogs or the occasional cranky lady. These surface level changes were key to *Mother 1 & 2*'s contemporary setting. On the other hand, more advanced concepts like status effects and experience points were narratively tied to the mother and father figures. The combination of narrative and gameplay systems frame these characters as the good wife, wise mother, and salaryman archetypes.

The depiction of the good wife, wise mother was related to how *Mother 2* paired narrative and gameplay systems with a JRPG concept known as status effects. In *Dragon Quest*, it was possible for the player's character to succumb to status effects such as poison, which

⁶⁹ Trading Economics, "Japan Unemployment Rate 1953-2020" Accessed April 10, 2020 <https://tradingeconomics.com/japan/unemployment-rate>

slowly reduced the player's health points over time. Poison can be healed with items, namely antidotal herbs. *Mother* replaced poison with the common cold, which is remedied with medicine from the drug store. Exclusive to *Mother 2* was the introduction of homesickness. On occasion, the main character, Ness, would ignore commands input by the player because he "lost all motivation in battle" and "misses home" – as described by the in-game text. Homesickness was applied to Ness at random, with the probability based on his current level. As Figure 2.1 shows, the likelihood of Ness becoming homesick increased at higher levels. Since levels are typically an indicator of how far a player has progressed in a JRPG and the journey to *Mother 2*'s conclusion was for the most part in the direction away from Ness' house – the game's starting point – it can be concluded that the game tried to mathematically simulate homesickness.

Mother 2 emphasized a connection to the good wife, wise mother gender norm through homesickness and the method the player must use to absolve the status effect. Unlike poison in *Dragon Quest* or the common cold in *Mother*, the player could not use an item to remove the status effect. If the player visited the in-game doctor, he would reply with the following:

"What a sad look in your eyes... you, the boy in a red cap. You must be homesick. That's nothing you need to be ashamed of. Anybody who is on a long trip will miss home. In this case, the best thing to do is to call home and hear your mom's voice."

The player could eliminate the homesickness status effect from the apathy laden Ness by calling his mother on a payphone. Alternatively, all the various locations within *Mother 2*'s world were interconnected. This means the player can travel back to the start of the game and visit the Mother in Ness' home. Through narrative and gameplay systems, *Mother 2*'s depiction of motherhood was grounded in the good wife, wise mother maxim that suggests women and the home are synonymous.

Table 3.1 Mother 2 Homesick Probabilities by Level ⁷⁰

Level	Probability	Percentage
1-5	0/256	(0%)
16-30	3/256	(1.17%)
31-75	2/256	(0.78%)
76-99	0/256	(0%)

Table 3.2 Mother 2 Phone Dialogue (Father) ⁷¹

<p>“Hello, it's your dad. "Work to exhaustion when you're young..." Have you ever heard of a weird saying like this? Just remember, I'm always behind you 100% Don't be afraid. I know that you're brave. You can do it! Don't forget to call me periodically during your adventure. I can make a record of your progress when you call me. Oh yeah, I deposited \$30 into your bank account. Do you have your ATM card? Withdraw your money from any cash machine and buy whatever you need. Good Luck, m'boy! I feel like such a hero! What? Well, the father of a hero, at least Waha!”</p>
<p>“Hello, it’s your dad. You’ve been out there for a long time now... It may be none of my business, but don’t you think it would be a good idea if you took a break?</p> <p><i>(Player inputs “No”)</i></p> <p>Ah, I see... Well, it doesn’t make me happy, but I understand your point about the fate of the world being at stake.”</p>
<p>Ness? It’s your dad. Well, exp to get to the next level, Ness... 14. Anyway, what do you need from me?</p> <p><i>(Player inputs “Record” to save progress)</i></p> <p>All done. Your dear old dad was also thinking about hitting the hay for the night. I have created a record of your adventure to this point. Good night, sleep tight.</p> <p><i>(Player inputs “Continue” to keep playing the game)</i></p> <p>Ness, you like to work hard just like your mother. But, I don’t think it’s good to work too hard.</p>
<p>“Next week will be your birthday, Ness. I’m trying hard to be home for that big day! I’ll be sure to get you a good present! I’ve been following your adventures closely, but I want to hear about them from you, in person. You sound a lot more.... Mature over the phone. ...Well, I’ll see you at home, then.”</p>

⁷⁰ Fandom, Earthbound: Homesickness, Accessed August 18, 2020

<https://earthbound.fandom.com/wiki/Homesick>

⁷¹ Shigesato Itoi, *Mother 2*, (Kyoto: Nintendo) 1994 – Supplementary Text Dump:

<https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/snes/588301-earthbound/faqs/54196>

Similarly, the depiction of the Japanese salaryman was also related to narrative and gameplay systems; however, the characterization was instead tied to currency, saving, experience point tracking. In role playing games like *Dragon Quest*, when a player defeated an enemy, they were awarded gold to buy items such as swords, armor, or antidotal herbs. The idea of in-game currency was translated to the *Mother* series in a way that emulated the role salarymen played as financial support for the family. In *Mother 1 & 2*, the player could use a phone to call the main character's father who will deposit money into their bank account – another example of narrative reframing a gameplay system to better fit the contemporary setting. Additionally, players could call the main character's father to save their progress and continue later. During this process, the main character would discuss experience points obtained and progress towards the next level. These dialogue exchanges parodied the landline relationship Japanese fathers often had with their children with common topics such as grades or height for experience points. Like the in-game depiction of motherhood, a combination of narrative and gameplay systems grounded fatherhood in the salaryman trope which positioned men as a distant financial support system for the family

Itoi's reference to salarymen and absentee fatherhood in work-centric Japan was a critique that was suggested through graphics and dialogue. In *Mother 1*, phone calls to the main character's father are accompanied by an 8-bit pixel art cutscene. The scene depicted a man cast in shadow standing with his back to the screen while talking on a payphone. A noteworthy detail in this scene was the briefcase that the father was holding in his right hand. Its inclusion suggested the father absence from the home is due to work. On the other hand, the father does not appear in *Mother 2* at all, he can only be communicated with through phone calls. Nevertheless, the same insinuation regarding the salaryman's distance from the home due to

work was presented, albeit through dialogue. Firstly, it is important to note that phone exchanges between the main character and father emphasized a caring relationship. With each phone call, the father offered encouragement. An abridged conversation from early in the game reads as follows:

“Hello, it's your dad. "Work to exhaustion when you're young..." Have you ever heard of a weird saying like this? Just remember, I'm always behind you 100% Don't be afraid. I know that you're brave... Good Luck, m'boy! I feel like such a hero! What? Well, the father of a hero, at least Waha!”

Not unlike the briefcase in *Mother 1*, the writing in *Mother 2*'s phone exchanges suggested the father's absence was not a choice. This suggestion was taken further in the moments that lead up to *Mother 2*'s finale. Ness' dad will cease saving the player's progress over the phone as he desperately tries to make it home in time for his son's thirteenth birthday. When the game ended, a procession of *Mother 2*'s cast of characters scrolled across the screen. At the end, Ness' family emerged. The father appeared as a telephone. Itoi seemingly utilized imagery and dialogue to suggest that the salaryman's distance from the home was not an individual choice, but an issue resulted from Japan's work centric culture.

C. Findings

The Japanese Experience had a clear effect on the way Itoi developed characters through narrative and gameplay systems in *Mother 1 & 2* – namely the main character's mother and father. Itoi utilized narrative to reframe common JRPG gameplay systems to fit a contemporary setting that included characters that fit the modern theme. Analyzing gameplay systems in *Mother 1 & 2* that were tied to the parent figures reveals two characters well-grounded in the good wife, wise mother and salaryman gender norms that were prevalent throughout the Japanese experience in the latter half of the 20th century. Interestingly, through the mother and

father's interactions with the main character, Itoi was seemingly able to highlight the disparities in childrearing experienced by Japanese men. The *Mother* series demonstrates how the Japanese experience influenced game design, but more importantly, it is an example of how a game could also be critical commentary on the experience that informed its development.

Chapter IV: Pokémon Red and Green

In 1989, Nintendo released a portable device called the *Game Boy* – a gaming platform creator Gunpei Yokoi designed with Japan’s urban commuter in mind. Interestingly, the *Game Boy*’s bestselling title, *Pokémon*, was also developed with Japan’s urbanization in mind – particularly how the expansion of urban centers was changing the Japanese landscape and destroying rural tradition. The creator of *Pokémon*, Tajiri Satoshi, said in a *TIME* magazine interview that inspiration for series was derived from bug catching, a childhood hobby he witnessed disappear from Japan during the country’s rapid urbanization in the second half of the 20th century.⁷² To understand how urbanizations effects on bug catching and the Japanese experience influenced the development of the first pair of *Pocket Monster* games, *Red* and *Green*, better known as *Pokémon*, this chapter will explore 3 key areas. 1.) Examine Tajiri Satoishi’s Japanese experience in rural-Tokyo and how urbanization changed his hometown. 2.) Explore bug catching as a common past time within Japanese culture. 3.) Analyze *Pokémon Red* and *Green* to understand how nostalgia for bug catching, which was adversely affected by urbanization, influenced the game’s design

A. Post-war Urbanization in Japan

Japan’s post-war economic boom was accompanied by urbanization that transformed the country’s landscape in a way that displaced cultural tradition. Salarymen commuted to high-rise buildings that sprung up all around the country and the nuclear family moved into housing

⁷² Tim Larimer, “The Ultimate Game Freak,” *Time* Originally Posted Monday, Nov. 22, 1999 <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040095,00.html>

developments that increased in size with every project. When the inner cities could not contain the economic miracle, it was redirected. In 1962 the Japanese government enacted the spatial development plan.⁷³ The goal was to extend the economic opportunities of Japan's urban centers to less developed regions via roadway expansion projects. These new highways turned rural areas into a sprawling suburbia. From 1950 until 1960, Tokyo's suburban population rose from 10 to nearly 23 million.⁷⁴ A concrete tidal wave that cashed down on nature. Urbanization's disregard for the preservation of the environment had a profound impact on a century's old tradition of nature appreciation.

From a contemporary point of view, it is difficult to understand how urbanization had adversely affected Japanese culture. Twenty some odd years into the lost generation, millions of tourists travel through Japan to marvel at a country considered to be unique blend of new and old. In Tokyo, Senso-ji, a Buddhist temple constructed in 645 AD, is a mere twenty-minute walk from Sky Tree, an observation tower erected in 2015. Nevertheless, the oldest Buddhist temple in the city does not rest in the shadow the tallest tower in the world. Structures like these are at the heart of a unique urban landscape that has become an integral part of modern Japan's institutionalization of tourism. For the many tourist that did not experience the rapid urbanization of the high growth period, it is impossible to recognize the amount of nature and tradition lost in the creation of Japan's modern skyline.

⁷³ Hirito Arakawa, *Japan's Urbanization and Growth Process*, Power Point Presentation <http://www.habitatsummit.org/pdfs/Presentations/Day%202/Special%20Session%20-%20Making%20Cities%20Work%20for%20Growth/Hiroto%20Arakawa.pdf>

⁷⁴ Wendell Cox, "The Evolving Urban: Tokyo," *New Geography* Originally Posted Jun. 20, 2012 <http://www.newgeography.com/content/002923-the-evolving-urban-form-tokyo>

B. Tajiri Satoshi's Childhood

Many of Japan's most prolific game developers were raised during the high growth period, among them Was Tajiri Satoshi, the creator of *Pokémon*. Tajiri witnessed Japan's urban transformation firsthand. Tajiri was born in 1964, and raised in Machida, Tokyo. Tajiri's hometown was subject to considerable development throughout the high growth period. Game development became an opportunity for developers to react to economic growth and urbanization in Japan – a nostalgia for what was lost became a driving factor in design. Tajiri's experience inspired with urbanization directly influence the creation of *Pokémon*. A game designed to reconstruct a relationship with nature unique to the pre-urban era. Studying Tajiri's childhood is key to understanding how economic growth and urbanization effected Japan and influenced Japanese game design.

Despite being part of the Tokyo metropolitan area, Tajiri's hometown of Machida was relatively rural by modern standards. When describing his hometown, Tajiri stated there were, "rice paddies, rivers, forest. It was full of nature."⁷⁵ In Tajiri's early years, Machida had yet to be swallowed by the ever-expanding concrete of Tokyo. It was in rural Machida that Tajiri would develop his first, and perhaps his most important hobby, bug catching. Tajiri spent his time capturing various bugs such as fireflies and stag beetles. He would trade and care for all kinds of insects. Tajiri wanted to grow up to be an entomologist, a person that studies insect life. This obsession garnered him the nickname, "Dr. Bug".⁷⁶ Although a seemingly unflattering name, Tajiri's fascination with insect life is not bizarre within the context of Japanese culture.

⁷⁵ Tim Larimer, "The Ultimate Game Freak," *Time* Originally Posted Monday, Nov. 22, 1999 <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040095,00.html>

⁷⁶ Tim Larimer, "The Ultimate Game Freak," *Time* Originally Posted Monday, Nov. 22, 1999 <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040095,00.html>

C. A Japanese Hobby: Bug Catching

Japan's love for insects is a fondness older than the *Tale of Genji*, the supposed world's first novel. *The Tale of Genji* was authored in the early 11th century by Murasaki Shikibu, a lady-in-waiting of the imperial court. A quintessential piece of Japanese literature, it is regarded as an accurate account of aristocratic life in Heian period. The novel depicts a strong relationship between human and insect life. An analysis by Fredrick Lieberman, explains how the novel's allusions to nature's orchestra, of which insects were an integral part, intensified the emotional timbre of human scenes.⁷⁷ Lieberman's assessment is legitimized by the profound appreciation for insect life exhibited by major and minor players in the plot. This is most evident in Chapter 38, *The Bell Cricket*. Genji is enamored by the clarity and brightness of the bell cricket swinging into song, even suggesting at one point that the night should be dedicated admiring its beauty.⁷⁸ A similar affection for insect is displayed by a wide variety of characters. Suggesting it was not characteristic exclusive to Genji, but deeply cultural.

This admiration for insects transcended Heian culture to become a modern form of nature appreciation. Moreover, Murasaki Shikibu's artistic use of nature's orchestra to cultivate emotion has expanded beyond literature. In the modern sphere of popular culture, film, anime, video games utilize the hum of cicada to bring a scene to life or communicate Japanese seasons to the audience. Additionally, real-world human interaction with insect life mirrors Murasaki Shikibu's 11th century account is easily observable in media. Articles dedicated to bug catching were often featured children's magazines such as *Kodomo Kagaku (Children's Science)* and *Garuzu Kurabu (Girl's Club)*. The ubiquity of these publications coupled with the difficulty of

⁷⁷ Lieberman, Fredric. "Music in "The Tale of Genji"." *Asian Music* 2, no. 1 (1971): 39-42.

⁷⁸ Murasaki Shikibu, Chapter 38 The Bell Cricket in "*The Tale of Genji*" accessed August 13, 2018, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/murasaki-shikibu/tale-of-genji/chapter38.html>.

maintaining traditional pets in small Japanese homes transformed bug keeping into a popular form of child's play. The past time became so popular department stores in highly urbanized areas, where insects are scarce, began to sell various types of beetles for children to raise. A child can buy a male rhinoceros beetle for about 800 yen, the smaller sized females are about 300 yen.

By the late 1960s, the bug catching in Tajiri's rural Machida was in contention with Japan's rapid urbanization. Nestled between the Chou and Tomei expressways, Machida was webbed with major roads. Additionally, Yokoyama line ran through the city's heart, a vital track in what Japan Rails called the Tokyo Mega Loop. For the millions that flocked to metropolitan area in search of work during the miracle economy, Machida was a commuter paradise. Equity in the real estate steadily grew, which inspired the number of housing projects. In 1971, an urban planning coalition formed by Tokyo Metropolitan Government broke ground on the construction of a new residential development named Tama New Town. Stretching roughly nine miles east to west and two miles north to south, this massive planned suburb straddled Tama, Inagi, Hachioji, and Machida. And with a population of nearly two hundred thousand, Tama Newtown is the largest housing development in Japan. Similar housing complexes sprung up all over the area, swallowing Machida in the concrete of urban Tokyo. Today, The Bureau of Labor officially recognizes Machida's success as a municipality only in relation to its role as a commuter town for the city center.⁷⁹

Thoroughly engaged with bug catching, Tajiri witnessed first-hand the profound impact Machida's urban transformation had on the tradition's interconnected relationship with the environment. "When development started taking place, and as it grew, all the insects were driven

⁷⁹ Bureau of Industrial and Labor affairs, Machida Chamber of Commerce and Industry, <http://tokyoritti.jp/english/special/now/ui72b20000004s5k.html>

away.”, Said Tajiri “every year they would cut down trees and the population of insects would decrease. The change was dramatic. A fishing pond would become an arcade center.”⁸⁰ The new urban landscape made interacting with nature an impossibility. Consequently, child’s play was redirected away from appreciation for nature and onto a love for products. Conscious of the cultural change, Tajiri had stated, “places to catch insects are rare because of urbanization. Kids play inside their homes now, and a lot had forgotten about catching insects. So had I”.⁸¹ Tajiri’s self-referential comment was an allusion to his growing interest in the many arcades that now occupied the fields he once scoured for bugs

D. Changing Hobbies with the Times

By the time Tajiri had become a teenager his interest had shifted from adventuring out into the tall grasses of Machida to catch bugs to frequenting the town’s game centers. Tajiri was a self-proclaimed, “*Space Invader* junkie”.⁸² In 1978 he would spend time emptying his 100-yen coins into Taito’s arcade shooter, a cultural phenomenon that took Japan and Tajiri by storm. The Japanese video game boom of the early 1980s would only serve to further lure children away from old traditions.

Eventually, his love for games manifested itself in the form of a self-published fanzine called *Game Freak*. Satoshi has said one special issue on the *Zabius* game sold an upwards of 10,000 copies at 300 yen each. Today, issues of *Game Freak* are collector’s items. Denizens of Akihabara often gawk at their insanely high asking prices, wishing they could own a piece of

⁸⁰ Tim Larimer, “The Ultimate Game Freak,” *Time* Originally Posted Monday, Nov. 22, 1999 <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040095,00.html>

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

Tajiri Satoshi and *Pokémon*'s history. While producing the magazine, *Game Freak* staff members began studying programming languages. Suddenly, the lackluster life of guerilla journalism could no longer satiate their love for video games, they wanted to make their own.

In 1989 *Game Freak* was reformed into a video game development company. Tajiri and *Game Freak*'s first title, *Quinty*, a *bizarre* puzzle game, was published by Namco and released on the Nintendo Famicom. The game was successful and was eventually distributed in America for the Nintendo Famicom's American counterpart, the Nintendo Entertainment System, under the name *Mendel Palace*. Less than a year after the release of *Quinty*, Tajiri would catch a glimpse latest innovation in video game hardware, the Nintendo *Game Boy*.

Pokémon was born the moment Tajiri saw the *Game Boy*. "The communication aspect of *Game Boy*. It was a profound image to me.", Tajiri explained "It has a communication cable. In Tetris, the handheld's first game, the cable transmitted information about moving blocks. That cable got me interested. I thought of actual living organisms moving back and forth across the cable."⁸³ The living organism Tajiri envisioned were most likely bugs. In the same interview Tajiri said, "everything I did as a kid was rolled into one – that's what *Pokémon* is"⁸⁴

Pokémon was to be a roleplaying game. The game's core concepts revolved around players adventuring out into nature reminiscent of rural Japan to catch and raise abstract creations. The idea was to repackage essence of bug catching into a video game so that the urban generation may experience a tradition that was rapidly fading. Beginning as an idea wrapped in nostalgia, *Pokémon* slowly transformed into a playable game. On February 27th, 1996, *Game Freak* released *Pocket Monsters: Red and Green*. The five-year development cycle paid off.

⁸³ Tim Larimer, "The Ultimate Game Freak," *Time* Originally Posted Monday, Nov. 22, 1999 <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040095,00.html>

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Pokémon mania infected Japan. And as with all things Japan loves, *Pocket Monsters* received its own portmanteau: *Pokémon*. In less than two years, the hysteria spread to America.

E. Analyzing Pokémon

Pocket Monsters may be small in stature, but the success of the *Pokémon* franchise has been monolithic. From a numeric standpoint, the achievements are staggering. The *Pokémon* moniker appears on 77 games that have sold a combined total of more than 300 million units.⁸⁵ The *Pokémon* Trading Card Game has shipped more than 21.5 billion cards to 74 countries in 10 languages.⁸⁶ Just this past year, the animated series exceeded 1000 episodes, and is currently in its 20th season. Furthermore, this broad media mix produced a cultural footprint that is unquantifiable, but not beyond comprehension. One need to only look at the world-wide adoration for series mascot, Pikachu.

Lightheartedly referred to as the Japanese Mickey Mouse, the joke is the only cultural analogue that conveys Pikachu's international popularity and significance. The character's popularity inspired the Japanese government to employ the mascot as a cultural ambassador. Pikachu has since appeared alongside Super Mario, Doraemon, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during the closing ceremony of the 2016 Rio Olympics to promote the 2020 summer games in Tokyo. More recently Pikachu has appeared alongside his *Pokémon* friends – Charizard, Bulbasuar, Squirtle – to promote Japan pitch for the 2025 World Expo. The concept video details

⁸⁵ Tracy Lien, "How Successful Is Pokémon? Take a Look at the Numbers!," *Polygon*, Published August 18, 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/pokemon/2014/8/18/6030089/Pokemon-sales-numbers>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

a massive development project that will take place on Yumeshima Island which is in the heart of the Osaka bay

Unfortunately, the incessant merchandizing, marketing, and branding that has become the foundation for the media empire that is *Pokémon* has inexplicitly blurred Tajiri's artistic intent. The economic machine that demands monetary growth has made the deluge of *Pokémon* branded merchandise and products the focus. Consequently, these distractions have made it difficult to recognize *Pokémon* for what it was initially intended to be, a nostalgia inspired reaction to the economic growth's rapid urbanization of rural Japan in the post-war period. An analysis of the earliest games in the *Pokémon* series reveals how Tajiri manifested anxieties about urbanization into an interactive experience that attempted that to reimagine the environment, tradition, and spirit of bug catching in pre-urban Japan.

The foundation of *Pokémon*'s reimagining of bug catching in pre-urban Japan is cemented in visual callbacks to life as it was in the 1960s. For instance, the player's avatar is prominently featured on the title screen; however, his clothing is not contemporary to time in which the game was developed. The oversized baseball cap, two-toned jacket, and the backpack visible in combat, were typical of young boy's fashion in the late 60s and early 70s. Similar styles are observable in movies from the two decades. The evocation does not end with clothing; the bold fashion statement preludes a setting reminiscent of rural living.

The original pair of *Pokémon* games are set in a fictionalized version of the Kanto region. The world map, accessible via an in-game menu, is a pixel perfect representation of the Kanto plain with easily identifiable landmarks such as the Boso peninsula. However, the cities of Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba, and Kanagawa are inexplicitly missing. These urban centers are replaced with towns – Masaru, Nibi, Tokiwa – that are now, among fans, established locales in the world

of Pokémon. What is important to note about these fictional communities is how their layouts mirror the organization of rural neighborhoods in Japan. Generally, Japanese towns in the countryside are arranged into a tight concentration of homes. These communities are then separated from one another by large swaths of forest, fields, and rice paddies. Masaru, Nibi, and Tokiwa follow a similar pattern, each is separated from one another by routes that run through forests and tallgrasses. In designing the world of *Pokémon*, Tajiri seemingly overlaid the communal arrangement of rural Kanto atop the Tokyo metropolitan area.

The rural setting allowed the act of collecting *Pokémon* to better emulate the experience of catching bugs among nature. Players capture wild *Pokémon* by adventuring out into the tallgrass that grows on the routes between each of the game's many towns. Later on in the series, the creatures that populate these areas are sometimes outlandish abstractions of real world animals. However, the original *Pokémon* titles were thoughtful in their pacing, showing the player the familiar before the abstract. The maiden journey into the tallgrass is full of encounters with *Pokémon* that resemble what Tajiri may have found in a rural park while catching bugs. First meetings included, Caterpie, Rattata, Butterfree and Pikachu. Bizarre names aside, the inspiration for these *Pokémon* were obvious: a caterpillar, rat, butterfly, and field mouse. For all intents and purposes, the exploration of nature inherent in bug catching is recaptured in the design, pacing, and inhabitants of this fictionalized Kanto region.

While the setting was integral in emulating the bug catching experience, it was the roleplaying mechanics that imbued *Pokémon* with emotion. For Tajiri, the excitement of bug catching was in the, "tiny discoveries".⁸⁷ There were 150 Pokémon; therefore, 150 tiny

⁸⁷ Tim Larimer, "The Ultimate Game Freak," *Time* Originally Posted Monday, Nov. 22, 1999 <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040095,00.html>

discoveries to make. Fervor surrounded these findings via a roleplaying mechanic known as random encounters. Previously appearing in *Wizardry*, *Ultima*, and *Dragon Quest*, random encounters were used to add tension to exploration. While exploring, enemies were hidden from sight. At random the player would be drawn into battle against an opponent that was randomly chosen from a collection of enemies. Will it be something weak? Or challenging? That did not matter in *Pokémon*, the wild creatures were not meant to be difficult. Random encounters were no longer about tension, but anticipation. Will the *Pokémon* that appears be something the player had not seen before? This was important, as the marketing suggest, “gotta catch em all!”.

Roleplaying mechanics were also utilized to foster a connection between the player and the *Pokémon* they were catching. A vital element of bug catching as a form of child’s play was the caretaking aspect. Naming and raising insects were a part of this process. For that reason, every *Pokémon* could be given a name chosen by the player. There may be an endless number of randomly generated *Pokémon* wandering among the digital tallgrass, but the naming process declared one as irreplaceable from the rest. This initial bond is furthered through training, the in-universe term for the RPG grind. Players can level up their *Pokémon* and watch them grow stronger. This creates a sense of appreciation for the player’s *Pokémon* as they perform skillfully in combat against others. *Pokémon* uses lines of code on a lifeless cartridge to recreate a relationship between people and a living organism that was impossible to have in an urban environment.

F. Findings

In conclusion, the Japanese experience had direct influence on *Pokémon*’s fundamental concepts, perhaps more so than any other title discussed in this thesis. Throughout his

childhood, Tajiri Satoshi witnessed real world changes to his hometown brought on by rapid urbanization. The construction of densely populated suburban communities transformed rural life in Japan and diminished the relevance and accessibility of Japanese bug catching – a centuries old tradition. Analysis of *Pokémon* shows the many ways Tajiri adapted the JRPG formula to recreate core concepts of bug catching within the game. Both the game and the hobby share fundamental concepts thanks to mechanics central to role-playing games, namely: the discovery assisted by random encounters and creature rearing realized through the grind. Of course, the trading was only possible via advancement in technology unrelated to the JRPG genre; Nevertheless, Tajiri's nostalgia influence *Pokémon's* presentation, from setting to the pocket monster the players could catch and exchange. The Japanese experiences influence on *Pokémon* also runs parallel to another observation related to these findings. Interestingly, *Pokémon's* connection to Japanese bug catching and urbanization situates the title as another entry in humankind's effort to continually adapt to their changing environment. Similarly, the title is also example of a wider Japanese effort to preserve the old alongside the new.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Throughout the 1980s, incredible market growth within Japan's video game industry attracted a cohort of video game developers whose creative vision was shaped by the Japanese experience. By gathering developer thoughts on Japan with primary source interviews, placing their remarks in context with the greater historical narrative, and analyzing gameplay, this thesis has demonstrated how the Japanese experience influenced the design decisions made by Yuji Horii, Shigesato Itoi, and Tajiri Satoshi within *Dragon Quest*, *Mother 1 & 2*, and *Pokémon*, respectfully. Of course, the findings sections contained within each chapter were not comprehensive and failed to answer all the questions this thesis posed. For instance, what is “Japanese” about the JRPG genre. Moreover, throughout the research and writing process, the content has inspired new questions that need to be addressed – an occurrence that was expected considering the relatively untapped potential of video games within academia. An example of this is developer intent versus the actual Japanese perception of these games. Considering the questions that were unanswered and newly formed, this conclusion will address three major points of discussion. 1.) Re-introduce the findings contained in chapters II-IV with additional thoughts related to the overarching thesis 2.) Discuss the “Japanese” nature of the JRPG sub-genre. 3.) Introduce new questions around the concept of developer intent and how further research might address the concept. Additionally, a closing statement will reflect on the contributions of this thesis, and how its methodology can be utilized further.

As highlighted in the opening paragraph, the research conducted for this thesis demonstrated that the Japanese experience influenced game design decisions made by Yuji Horii, Shigesato Itoi, and Tajiri Satoshi within *Dragon Quest*, *Mother 1 & 2*, and *Pokémon*,

respectfully. In the case of the first *Dragon Quest* and the foundation of the Japanese roleplaying game sub-genre, Yuji Horii considered Japan's poor work-life balance. The resulting product was a simplified roleplaying game that was approachable. The accessibility was predicated on JRPG gameplay systems that fostered a faux difficulty that did not bore, but instead rewarded consumers that sought leisure over challenge. Regarding *Mother 1 & 2*, the Japanese experience influenced Itoi's approach to characterization. Itoi combined narrative and JRPG gameplay systems to craft in-game parental figures based on common gender roles in Japan – specifically the good wife, wise mother, and salaryman tropes. With the subgenre's narrative potential, Itoi explored a commentary on Japan's absentee father issue, a problem he equated to the country's work centric culture. To create *Pokémon*, Tajiri Satoshi, inspired by the negative impact urbanization had on Japan's bug catching pastimes, adapted JRPG gameplay systems to reimagine his childhood hobby in a virtual space.

The ways the Japanese experience shaped game design reveals a common denominator shared among Yuji Horii, Shigesato Itoi, and Tajiri Satoshi. These creators harbored anxieties related to economic growth that shaped their approach to game development. These anxieties are best specified as poor work-life balance and urbanization, which could be accredited to efforts to increase personal income. This revelation makes sense, considering Japan's intense focus on economic expansion throughout the second half of the 20th century. However, the pervasive, mundane nature of these issues invites new questions, is the Japanese experience unique to Japan? If not, are the gameplay systems fundamental to the Japanese roleplaying sub-genre distinctly cultural?

In addition to the main question posed by this paper, the research sought to address what made Japanese roleplaying games “Japanese” beyond the subgenre's creation and popularization

in Japan. However, the Japanese experience that informed the gameplay systems fundamental to the JRPG was not exclusive to Japan. In fact, data shows that the United States of America has among the worst work life balance in the world.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the JRPG *you will eventually win* formula established in *Dragon Quest*, a concept series creator Yuji Horii called traditional, has proven to be a popular sentiment across cultures. *Dragon Quest* never found popularity in the U.S., a subject worthy of its own analysis, but other Japanese role-playing games did. Although a late development and one outside this paper's timeframe, *Final Fantasy VII's* North American release in 1997 established the JRPG as a quintessential genre outside Japan.⁸⁹ Subsequently, Pokémania swept through the U.S. in 1998.⁹⁰ Both are great examples of how JRPGs resonated with American consumers. These points suggest that common issues with capitalism equates to shared tastes in video games. Considering this, perhaps the answer is simply time and place. After the American video game crash in 1983, Japan was the only country in the world with a vibrant home console market. Under these market conditions, Japanese developers would be the only creators designing with the wider market in mind.

The analyses included in this thesis also inspired questions for future research based around developer intent. To elaborate, did the developers game systems or narrative approach illicit the intended feeling or response from the player? For example, it should be questioned

⁸⁸ Victor Lipman, "Why America has Become 'The No-Vacation Nation'," Forbes, Forbes Media, LLC, Published May 21, 2018

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/victorlipman/2018/05/21/why-america-has-become-the-no-vacation-nation/#376d711d4c53>

⁸⁹ Gene Park, "Perfecting Final Fantasy 7's Legacy, as Told by its Creators," The Washington Post, Nash Holdings, April 3, 2020 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/04/03/final-fantasy-7-legacy-creators/>

⁹⁰ Rick Lockridge, "Pokémon Mania Sweeps United States," CNN, WarnerMedia, October 14, 1999 http://edition.cnn.com/TECH/computing/9910/14/t_t/pokemon.tt/

whether Japanese players perceived *Dragon Quest* as an accessible, non-frustrating source of leisure. The same notion is especially applicable to *Pokémon*. With the series' transformation into a multimedia juggernaut, it is hard to imagine players understand or ever understood the game's as Japanese bug catching adapted to a virtual space. To answer these questions, it is important to consider the psychology of games or explore primary source reviews and letter to editor segments in video game magazines to understand how these games were received.

In conclusion, by placing developer commentaries in context with Japan's greater historical narrative and then analyzing how the Japanese experience shaped game design, this thesis has built upon previous works such as *Power-Up*. Although this thesis failed to find a new answer to the JRPG naming convention and offered new research to pursue, its methodology is applicable elsewhere in video game studies. *Dragon Quest*, *Mother*, and *Pokémon* are less than a handful of the games in JRPG genre. Moreover, the JRPG genre represents a microcosm within the greater video game market. There is also the timeframe. Over the decades the Japanese experience has changed; therefore, so have Japan's video games – both in imagery, gameplay, setting, and themes. In 2014, Sega released *Ryu Ga Gotoku 0*, known as *Yakuza 0* in the United States. This open world, action RPG included a setting that celebrated the excesses of Japan's bubble economy, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Nonetheless, the obvious shift in tone from the anxieties uncovered in this paper's research could be the result of developers growing weary with Japan's decades-long stagnant economy. On that note, it is not game over for this methodological approach, there is still much to play, research and write.

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