

Book Reviews



Ken Baumann

Earthbound. Los Angeles: Boss Fight Books (2014). 189 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-940535-00-5. Price: \$4.95.

Jon Irwin

Super Mario Bros. 2. Los Angeles: Boss Fight Books (2014). 170 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-940535-05-0. Price: \$4.95.

Michael P. Williams

Chrono Trigger. Los Angeles: Boss Fight Books (2014). 175 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-940535-01-2. Price: \$4.95.

Boss Fight Books, a micropublisher based in Los Angeles, was launched in 2014 after a successful Kickstarter campaign. Each book put out by the publisher details the development, release, and reception of a single video game, but the topics explored along the way include transnational media markets and the highly individualized affective labour of gaming. Several of the titles are of special interest to scholars of international digital mediascapes, as they deal with issues relating to the translation, localization, and marketing strategies that resulted in a number of Japanese games entering the lexicon of global popular culture. In this review I will focus on three such titles: *EarthBound*, *Chrono Trigger*, and *Super Mario Bros. 2*.

The first book in the series, *EarthBound*, is written by Boss Fight Books' editor and co-founder Ken Baumann, who originally published a portion of the text on the video game news and culture website *Kotaku*. *EarthBound* was released in North America for the Super Nintendo in 1995, and Baumann's initial discussion touches on the dedicated fannish community that has sprung up around the game during the past two decades. *EarthBound* is the brainchild of renaissance man Itoi Shigesato, who began his career as a copywriter before becoming a media celebrity in Japan. Baumann describes how Anglophone fans of the game, attracted by Itoi's idiosyncratic yet charming writing and

scenario construction, have celebrated his work while encouraging Nintendo of America to re-release the game for current generation consoles.

Baumann's main concern, however, is how the game has intersected with his own personal history. After presenting the reader with the broader context of the game, Baumann chronicles the experience of a complete playthrough of *EarthBound*, relating its story to his life experiences and an eclectic selection of his readings. For example, the Onett chapter, named after the first city in the game, contains scattered topical references ranging from John Gray (on the myth of teleological progress) to Mircea Eliade (on the appeal of nostalgia) to the website *TV Tropes* (on the figure of the corrupt politician in popular culture). The Summers chapter, named after one of later areas in the game, chronicles the bacchanals the author once engaged in as a professional actor, his introduction to Zen Buddhism, and how his rediscovery of a box of childhood treasures at his parents' house inspired him to reflect on his lost innocence. Baumann's playthrough of *EarthBound* thus becomes a cipher for the process of growing up and establishing one's own identity as a young adult.

The second Boss Fight Books title, *Chrono Trigger*, is written by Michael P. Williams, a former Japanese research specialist who is primarily concerned with how the Japanese cultural context of the game informs its diegetic world. For example, in his fourth chapter, 'Straight? White? Male?', the author provides a fascinating discussion of the role race plays in *Chrono Trigger*, contrasting this portrayal against the cultural theorist Kōichi Iwabuchi's concept of *mukokuseki* (deliberately lacking in cultural odour) and his own personal experiences as an English teacher in Fukushima City. According to Iwabuchi, Japanese producers have taken steps to remove the 'Japaneseness' of media intended for international release, but Williams argues that the fair-skinned monoracialism of the human characters in *Chrono Trigger* belies the narratives regarding race and ethnicity in its country of origin, where he himself was once constantly confronted with his status as a racial outsider. In his sixth chapter, 'The Day of Lavos', Williams touches on how Japan's history of nuclear disaster has played out in popular media representations, including the in-game apocalypse that gives the chapter its name.

Throughout the book, Williams compares the two official English translations of *Chrono Trigger* to the original Japanese text. The sixth chapter, 'Neuga, Ziena, Zieber, Zom', a reference to a magic spell that was completely rewritten in the 1995 English translation to create a rhyming couplet, contains a transcript of an interview between Williams and the author of said translation, Ted Woolsey. Woolsey talks about Nintendo's censorship policies as well the rationale behind some of his most iconic translation decisions, which would become known as 'Woolseyisms'. This conversation is followed by an interview

with Tom Slattery, who created an updated translation for the 2008 release of *Chrono Trigger* for the Nintendo DS console. Slattery acknowledges his respect for Woolsey's work and explains why he felt the need to walk a fine line between updating the translation and respecting the canonical nature of the earlier attempts at localization. Both translators are keenly interested in the voice and tone of the original Japanese as well as and how software specifications limited the range of what they could express through formal stylistic elements.

Jon Irwin's *Super Mario Bros. 2*, the sixth title in the Boss Fight Books series, is more concerned with the development of the video game industry in the United States than it is with Japanese cultural elements. Irwin, a gaming journalist and contributing writer to the independent game criticism magazine *Kill Screen*, is primarily interested in how and why the game that would come to the United States as *Super Mario Bros. 2* made the transition from its original release in Japan as an *Arabian Nights*-themed, Fuji Television promotional campaign tie-in called *Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic* (Dream Factory: Heart-Pounding Panic). The Japanese sequel to *Super Mario Bros.* was meant to appeal to gamers who had already mastered the original and were seeking a deeper and more punishing challenge. Over at Nintendo of America, however, a young employee and game tester named Howard Phillips found the game to be far too masochistic for an American audience, which tended to associate the experience of having fun with fair play. Meanwhile, a marketing director named Gail Tilden was preparing to launch North America's first dedicated gaming magazine, an in-house production called *Nintendo Power*, and a new Mario title was needed to help the venture perform successfully as a strategy meant to help Nintendo maintain market dominance.

Irwin uses various personages involved in the development of *Doki Doki Panic* as focal points for his examination of how the gaming markets in Japan and America differed during the era of 8-bit console gaming. Examples include the game's director, Tanabe Kensuke, who has since come to act as a formal spokesperson and ambassador for the Nintendo philosophy of game design, and Kondo Kōji, the soundtrack composer for many of Nintendo's classic titles throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Irwin also touches on the history of the Nintendo Corporation and its carefully planned expansion of the Super Mario franchise. In closing, he muses on the cultural impact of Mario in the United States, both as orchestrated by Nintendo through outlets such as the Nintendo World Store in Manhattan and in pop culture references such as the fictional rock band Sex Bob-omb in Bryan Lee O'Malley's bestselling Scott Pilgrim graphic novel series and its 2010 cinematic adaptation.

Each of these three books interweaves contextual background and analysis with the author's lived experience of playing his chosen game both as a child

and as an adult. As a result, the writing retains more of the flavour of creative non-fiction than gaming journalism. Subsequent titles in the series, including Ashly Burch and Anthony Burch's *Metal Gear Solid*, take a less biographical approach and focus more on game design, development, and reception. The combination of the personal with the global evinced by each book provides an appealing model for a mode of discussion surrounding games that acknowledges the importance of the individual player even within transnational communities of gamers. All of the books are immediately accessible, even to a reader unfamiliar with the game under discussion.

The titles in the Boss Fight Books series are available as digital editions from the publisher's website (bossfightbooks.com), as well as from the American, British, and Australian Amazon stores. Paperback copies are only available as pre-orders directly from the publisher, but new and second-hand copies can be acquired through various online merchants.

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