



Japanese role-playing games: genre, representation, and liminality in the JRPG

edited by Rachael Hutchinson & Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon, Lexington Books, 336 pp., US\$120.00 (hardback), US\$45.00 (eBook)

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BOOK REVIEW

Japanese role-playing games: genre, representation, and liminality in the JRPG, edited by Rachael Hutchinson & Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon, Lexington Books, 336 pp., US\$120.00 (hardback), US\$45.00 (eBook)

Japanese Role-Playing Games: Genre, Representation, and Liminality in the JRPG is the first English-language collection of essays focusing entirely on a genre of Japanese games known for their complex stories and rich worldbuilding. The 14 essays in this collection cover the construction of the JRPG genre, the formation of transcultural gaming communities, and the representation of issues such as nationality, gender, and disability. *Japanese Role-Playing Games* features a diversity of contributions from established and emerging scholars who use important and representative JRPG titles as master keys that unlock doors to many of the major themes and ongoing discussions in the fields of Game Studies and Media Studies.

Rachael Hutchinson and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon's Introduction strives toward a definition of the term 'JRPG' that moves beyond national origin. The editors argue that 'the JRPG structures its knowledge on two axes – the conventions and dynamics of the digital role-playing game on one hand, and the Japanese production context on the other' (3). Koichi Iwabuchi's 2002 study of how Japanese manufacturers erase the 'cultural odor' of their products comes into play in the ironic sense that the specifically 'Japanese' RPG has emerged as an ontological category that provides a rich field for the examination of how culture influences both the production and reception of media. To investigate the workings of culture while moving away from essentialism and stereotypes, Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon pursue 'a text-centered approach [...] in favor of close readings and deeper investigations of ergodic, aesthetic, and thematic aspects' of games originating in Japan (3–4).

The first section of the collection ('Genre'), delves into what distinguishes the JRPG as a distinct category. In the opening essay, Yuhsuke Koyama discusses the early history of JRPGs through a study of how the early games in the *Dragon Quest* series were received in North America. Fanny Barnabé unpacks the JRPG convention of tutorial sections, while Joleen Blom emphasises the importance of player agency in shaping a cohesive story from various narrative fragments offered through gameplay. All the essays in this section challenge the concept of genre, especially as it relates to cultural specificity, in unique and interesting ways that speak to the value of reading games as texts with meanings that extend beyond formulaic structures.

It's fitting that the second section ('Representation') opens with Ben Whaley's essay, which explores the complications of 'representation' as seen from different perspectives, as well as how the process of localisation affects player perceptions of video game characters and narratives. Three of the essays in this section address representations of disability in games, including how such representations are expressed through gameplay as well as story. Andrew Campana's discussion of *Chrono Trigger* and Rachael Hutchinson's study of *Final Fantasy XV* both illustrate how the concept of 'disability' is portrayed not just through narrative text, but also through ludic mechanical structures. Both essays provide close readings of their source texts within their social contexts, and both serve as excellent examples of how to write about media representation in a manner that is nuanced and insightful yet still accessible to readers unfamiliar with the minute details of the source texts.

The third section ('Liminality') is about transnational and transcultural gaming communities, and the essays in this section demonstrate how gaming spaces may be configured as social spaces. Daniel Johnson investigates how Japanese game-developers have incorporated networked features that accommodate Japanese attitudes towards online connectivity in RPGs, and Johnson also explains how these features are presented and interpreted within the diegetic worlds that contain them. Prolific author and cultural critic Daichi Nakagawa offers an industry perspective on microtransaction-based mobile *gacha* games such as *Fate/Grand Order* and *Pokémon GO*, while William Huber challenges the efficacy of the political allegory made possible by the MMORPG format of *Final Fantasy XIV*.

Japan Studies scholars with varying degrees of familiarity with the specific titles used as case studies will find a wealth of information and resources in these essays, which briefly summarise the games while explaining why they are representative, important, and connected to broader currents in Japanese history and society. Meanwhile, Game Studies scholars will find approachable yet intellectually rigorous discussions of culture and national origin, which have thus far been relatively few and far between in the field outside the work of a few specialists. Although readers from different backgrounds may find some of the essays more accessible than others, the editing is consistently excellent, and the curated lists of references are extremely useful resources. *Japanese Role-Playing Games* is a powerful contribution to both Asian Studies and Media Studies that sets a strong and positive precedent for future academic work on video games.

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