Isekai: Tracing Interactive Control in Non-interactive Media

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I. Isekai, How, When, Why?

In Kon Hoshizaki's manga comic *Tenohira Kaitaku Mura de Isekai Kenko-kuki* (*Founding a Pioneering Village in Another World with a Single Hand*), the protagonist, Kai, is a reincarnation of a Japanese high schooler.[1] Frail and bedridden, Kai spent most of his life languishing in a hospital bed playing unnamed farming simulators. After he dies, Kai is reborn in another world, upon which he is presented with another opportunity for life by an unknown actor. Living in this fantasy world, Kai realizes he has another power: he can jump into another dimension of his own, whereupon he controls a plot of land similar to farming simulator games in his previous life. The catch, however, is that while this world carries all of the mechanical trappings of those games, this world is, ostensibly, real. The implication in the story undergoes a dramatic twist: the world he can shape is not just a game, but as real as any world he's experienced. More strikingly, the interfacial systems Kai uses to shape this new world are treated as real and as seriously as any other element in the diegesis of the story. Interfaces, inventory systems, and data have no longer become metaphorical representations of ongoing processes approximating real relations but are real in themselves.

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1   Hoshizaki, Kon: *Tenohira Kaitaku Mura de Isekai Kenkoku-ki*, Tokyo, Japan: Kadokawa, 2019.

Tenohira draws from a lineage of kenkoku-ki (nation-building), where the core story revolves around protagonists constructing nations. However, what separates *Tenohira* is that kenkoku-ki have, originally, not engaged with a systems-based look at the world. *Tenohira* represents, in many ways, a transition towards not only an interface-based representation of fiction and the settings in which fiction occurs but also, more dramatically, the direct implementation of interfaces to these fictions. More specifically, *Tenohira* represents a specific kind of systems-based integration with fiction: that of digital games.

Tenohira represents a growing trend in Japanese amateur-published portal fantasies, more broadly known as isekai. Translated as 'other world' stories, isekai usually refers to a collection of amateur-helmed publications with an incredibly strong (though not necessary) emphasis on game-like fantasy worlds. Though isekai are not the only stories that incorporate game-like elements in their worldbuilding, isekai are by far the largest and play important roles in popularizing a kind of fantasy fiction that is increasingly comfortable with game elements as a truthful, straightforward essence of worldbuilding.

This paper focuses on how isekai are at the heart of ongoing developments in Japanese amateur storytelling and how this storytelling folds back into gamic representations. We will concentrate on two things: one, on the history of contemporary isekai, their transition towards gamified non-interactive storytelling, and two, on how isekai, through the media mix, have begun to craft their own games. The case of isekai is not only one in which paratexts shape games but also one where these paratexts themselves reflect a particular game-like logic. This relation, arguably, reveals how messages of control and programmatic logic persist even in situations of non-interactivity. More pointedly, contemporary isekai often speak about a subject's relation to control.

What are Isekai?

Though broadly defined as 'other world' stories, the term isekai refers to a specific genre of storytelling in which people move from one world to another, usually through some sort of a portal such as a gate or a doorway. While the definition is largely nebulous, isekai, in all practical terms, can be understood differently from ikai ("other world"), which contains a homologic or cultural element, and reikai ("spiritual world"), which contains a

spiritual element. Rather, isekai usually refers to a specific set of qualities: amateur-publishing, fantasy worlds with varying levels of game-like qualities, and a self-reflexive commentary aided by platform publishing. Isekai can be split up more productively into several subcategories based on how characters are transferred to another world. In tensei (reincarnation) stories, characters have often reincarnated from miserable households, unfortunate accidents, or overworking (known as karoshi, or death by overwork). In tenii (transference) isekai, characters often bring goods and material back and forth, frequently leading to a transition of goods, cultural exchanges, and seek to establish interstate flows between the worlds. In shoukan (summoning), characters are 'summoned' by citizens from the other world and are often tasked with a largely insurmountable mission, such as "defeating the demon king." Though shoukan isekai are undoubtedly the ones that adopt video game logics the most readily, all three aforementioned types have numerous texts which do so. Therefore, the commonality is less the nature of the jump over in isekai, but more the recurring game representation that arises from these stories. Though they often differ in terms of their transitions, messages, and plots, their general overall settings are similar: a fantasy world with some level of game-like logic baked into its setting. This is no coincidence.

The Writing Cycle of Isekai

Isekai have been around for a very long time.[2] However, it's only with the recent explosive popularity of online publishing platforms and an increased effort in media mix investment in these stories that they have they grown so numerous, proliferating on amateur publishing sites such as *Shousetsuka ni Narou*[3] and *Kakuyomu*,[4] though the former carries a much larger database of isekai stories. Translated as "Let's Become a Novelist," *Shousetsuka ni Narou* (syosetu) allows anyone to publish their chapters regularly, with readers providing feedback and ratings. As stories climb in the rankings, they generate larger audiences. Moreover, *Syosetu* organizes its stories into categories, genres, and sections, and thus the rankings of each individual component are

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2   Takachiho, Haruka: *Isekai no Yuushi*, Tokyo, Japan: Tokuma Bunko 1981.

3   syosetu.com

4   kakuyomu.jp

displayed on its website (Figure 1). Most notably are Syosetu's two largest categories: isekai ("other world") and genjitsu sekai ("real world").

Figure 1: Front page of Syosetu

Source: syosetu.com, April 2020

Through this search, ranking, and genre system, Syosetu's charts funnel its viewers into areas where they are encouraged to keep reading. Viewers are further incentivized to keep reading by making and maintaining accounts, with authors given blogs and users given message boards. In this sense, Syosetu acts as not only a repository of amateur publishing but also a de-facto social media platform on its own, focused on keeping user retention as high as possible. Sites like Syosetu and Kakuyomu would go on to foster community-based writing contests, where winners can get potential book deals ("Dai

6-kai ōbārappu web shōsetsu taishō"[5]), be paired with an artist for a manga adaptation ("Shōsetsukaninarō × manga up! Dai 1-kai komikaraizu gensaku-shō"), and win cash prizes ("Dai 2-kai āsu sutānoberu shōsetsu taishō: Āsu sutānoberu"[6]). Authors, therefore, have an incentive to conform to these publisher's requirements. However, while Syosetu's system and ranking might explain how isekai are so popular, the site alone does not explain why isekai stories have game-centric logics, and Syosetu's system does not explain why game-elements have become so ubiquitous in Japanese amateur publishing, even outside of isekai.

Writer and blogger Manyo argues that contemporary isekai have exploded primarily due to the influence of Reki Kawahara's *Sword Art Online (SAO)*, a 2009 light novel series that originally began as an amateur work from 2002 and then was adapted into multiple anime, manga, and video game offerings starting in the year 2012. Revolving around young people who try to escape from a virtual reality MMORPG, *Sword Art Online* is not directly isekai, but rather captures a similar sentiment in many modern day isekai, that of the need for young and disenfranchised people to transition to another place,[7] even if that place is uncertain and potentially hostile. *Sword Art Online's* massive success was a concerted media mix effort, one from its top-ranking position on popular magazine Kono raito noberu ga sugoi ("This novel is outstanding") alongside its quickly following anime adaptation.[8] A secondary cultural argument for *SAO's* popularity exists: the desire for a transition to a different world is propelled, arguably, by an increasing

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5   N.N.: "Dai 6-kai ōbārappu web shōsetsu taishō," *Shousetsuka Ni Narou*; https://over-lap.co.jp/narou/narou-award6/

6   N.N: "Dai 2-kai āsu sutānoberu shōsetsu taishō: Āsu sutānoberu," *Earth Star Novel*; https://www.es-novel.jp/esn-award02/

7   Manyo. "Isekai tensei anime wa naze fueta? Sōdoāto onrain ikō no web shōsetsu būmu," in: *Real-Sound*, February 2, 2017; https://realsound.jp/movie/2017/02/post-4134.html

8   Saito, Satomi: "Beyond the Horizon of the Possible Worlds: A Historical Overview of Japanese Media Franchises," in: *Mechademia,* vol. 10, pp. 143-161, here p. 144.

disenfranchisement from Japanese youths in a post-Koizumi neoliberal Japan.[9] According to Ueno Tsunehiro, the early and mid-2000s in Japan faced a series of increasing aggravation between the rich and poor, leading to young people decrying an increasingly alienating Japanese economic system.[10] The end result is a proliferation of survival-type stories such as *Death Note* (2005) and *Kamen Rider Ryuuki* (2003), where young people are pitted against each other for survival. *SAO* slots into that lineage, and after its explosive popularity following its anime adaptation in 2012, Syosetu (and many other publishing platforms) would see an explosion in amateur publications.

Thus, the proliferation and game-logic of modern-day isekai are influenced by two major developments in Japan's amateur publishing community, one platform and the other sociocultural. Because amateur publishing sites—and Syosetu in particular—placed a heavy emphasis on ranking based upon major categories such as isekai and genjitsu no sekai, amateur authors seeking to find audiences are incentivized to write and publish stories that fit those slots. Compared to self-publishing platforms such as DeviantArt and Author of Our Own, sites like Syosetu and Kakuyomu not only implement immense measures to keep users and authors active on their sites but also interlock their systems with real, tangible benefits, particularly contests with prizes that lead to professional publications and media adaptations. These platform developments, however, can only be possible due to the explosive popularity of game-centric survival-type stories written by young authors. The successful adaptation of Kawahara's *SAO* signaled to amateur authors that such endeavors are not only possible but, for online platforms, potentially preferable. Working in tandem, these two developments give some insight as to how and why isekai exploded in popularity. But why do they maintain their video game logic, and what is that logic suggesting?

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9   Tanaka, Motoko: "Trends of Fiction in 2000s Japanese Pop Culture," in: *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Ejcjs, July 29, 2014; www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcjs/vol 14/iss2/tanaka.html

10   Tsunehiro, Ueno: "Imagination after the Earthquake," in: *Verge: Studies in Global Asia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2015), pp. 114-136.

II. ISEKAI AND SYSTEMS

Isekai and the Game Logic

Isekai is a genre dominated by a relatively young demographic, both in its audience and in its authors.[11] *SAO's* narrative focuses on a group of MMO players being locked within the world's first "Full-Dive" virtual reality MMORPG (that is, an MMO utilizing helmets to create the illusion of direct experience through a neural connection). Throughout the original story, they live within this game world for months and are unable to leave before defeating the original creator of the game. They live and breathe the game-logic for their time within the game, with skills, HP bars, and many more MMORPG mechanics being ever-present both for the characters and in the narrative. The works of the isekai boom that followed from Kawahara's SAO will bring the aspect of game logic into their works consistently. The details and presence of specific mechanics are never set in stone, but the game influence can be traced back in many works, for example, *Re:Monster,*[12] *Otome Game no Hametsu Flag shika nai Akuyaku Reijou ni Tensei shite shimatta.*[13]

Hereon we will talk in more detail about a few examples that illustrate the different ways game systems are represented in isekai stories.

In Maruyama Kugane's *Overlord*, we have a concept fairly close to that of *SAO*; a veteran guild leader reminisces about his time in an MMO in the last minutes before the servers shut down.[14] However, instead of getting logged out, he realizes he is now living in the MMO as his character, an evil overlord. The pretense for the ludic systems remains the origin of the world as an MMO in this case. However, the world and characters around the protagonist have become life-like and transcended their original logic. The world is a hybrid between game and reality; the border between NPCs and real human actors becomes blurred. In *Overlord*, we can see an example of how the line between a game world and the real world is being challenged

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11 N.N.: "Talking to Inori," in: *Pause and Select*, April 19, 2020; https://www.pause andselect.com/articles/talking-to-inori

12 Kogitsune, Kanekiru: *Re:Monster*, n.p.: Shousetsuka Ni Narou 2011.

13 Yamaguchi, Satoru*: Otome Gēmu no Hametsu Furagu Shika Nai Akuyaku Reijō ni Tensei Shiteshimatta...*, n.p.: Shousetsuka Ni Narou 2014.

14 Kugane, Maruyama: *Overlord*, n.p.: Shousetsuka ni Narou 2010.

despite the insistence of mechanical game elements and its origin as an MMO.

Isekai are not only stories where game logics are popular among writers but also popular among readers. Manyo speaks of the disenfranchisement of young people with the world around them as an often-central element of the appeal of isekai.[15] The protagonists of isekai stories are often (though there are certainly exceptions) unhappy and unsuccessful with their everyday life before flourishing in the other world. Kamiya Yuu's *No Game No Life* opens with an account of its main characters that can well be viewed as a key description of this particular aspect: When asked by a god what they thought of their life, they reflect: "There was no way to tell the goal, read the stats, or even identify the genre. Even if you followed the rules that were laid out, you'd be punished—and worst of all: those who just ignored the rules stood at the top."[16] Later, they are brought into a world governed by play, where violence is forbidden, and any problem is solved through a game on mutually agreed terms. *No Game No Life* has been a popular series, spawning multiple media mix projects. Like *Overlord, No Game No Life* navigates a precarious distinction between the 'reality' of the world and the game(s) it represents. Both are drawing from a sentiment established in the early 2000s, a time which media theorist Ueno Tsunehiro argues where a game-like world is preferable, not to escape, but because play can be managed, understood, and interpreted in a way the subject deems fair.[17] Isekai like *Overlord* and *No Game No Life* collapse the boundary of reality and play, specifically because, based on their antecedents, "each character is established as a player in the game...however, those players that are sensitive to the nature of the game outmaneuver and rewrite its rules."[18]

That said, isekai need not directly reference games to carry game logics. Earlier, we mentioned that many isekai are influenced heavily by game logic, even if they do not put immediate focus on direct stats and skills. An excellent example here is Nagatsuki Tappei's immensely popular *Re:Zero Kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* (*Re:Zero*), wherein the main character, Natsuki

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15 "Isekai tensei anime wa naze fueta? Sōdoāto onrain ikō no web shōsetsu būmu."

16 Kamiya, Yu: *No Game No Life*, Tokyo, Japan: Media Factory 2012.

17 Tsunehiro, Ueno: *Zeronendai no sōzōryoku*, Tokyo, Japan: Hayakawa Shobō 2011, p. 18.

18 Ibid.

Subaru, is transported into a fantasy world from one moment to the next.[19] While the novel is not strong on its direct video game elements, the main character does possess a mysterious power: Upon death, he is reset back to a specific point in time. At certain unclear intervals, after he successfully escapes tragedy for both him and his comrades, the point of reset is moved forward. This concept has a strong equivalent in digital games: auto-saves. Just like the player in any game with auto-saves, upon death, Subaru has his progress reset to the last auto-save and may try another approach to the problem. Once he overcomes the challenge, the game auto-saves in the background. *RE:ZERO* exemplifies the influence of game logic on isekai even when it is not readily made apparent through literal numbers-crunching and status screens. Of course, we cannot view these stories in a vacuum either.

Shoukan works often feature protagonists refusing the wishes of the one summoning them and deciding to do something counter to their intention. This trope can be read as a refusal of the classical game systems and hero narratives of RPGs.

Meanwhile, tenni stories' emphasis on bringing in objects and technology from our world into the fantasy world where they are usually viewed with amazement and wonder can be seen as a way to use the other world to establish a relationship of power. Ichirō Sakaki's *Outbreak Company* specifically reflects on this aspect of tenni when the character recognizes the government's intent of taking over the fantasy world's kingdom through the introduction of Japanese media, culture and language, reminiscent of the Cool Japan project, where Japan tried to export its media products to the rest of the world.[20]

Still, because isekai are clearly relating back to the real world and reflecting on games and game culture, we need to examine what and how they deal with these ideas. This investigation can be extended to pre-existing literature on games and culture. Roger Caillois argues that "the destinies of cultures can be read in their games."[21] Working off Caillois, if the type of game is a culture clue, then the type of game logic could be an extension of that cultural

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19 Nagatsuki, Tappei: *Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu*, n.p.: Shousetsuka ni Narou 2012.

20 Sakaki, Ichiro: *Outbreak Company*, Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha 2011.

21 Caillois, Roger: *Man, Play and Games*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press 2001 (1958), p. 35.

value set. If so, we ought to take these stories and their development seriously and examine them and how they paratextualize games and how these paratextualizations fold back onto games.

Drawing upon Alexander Galloway,[22] the representation of the game logic is no longer held back by material conditions; a game doesn't need to approximate some semblance of machinery logic upon which ideology exists (what Galloway calls the protocological control) but can suffice with pure representation because these stories are not necessarily interactive in the first place—they are representations of protocological control. And yet, they require the illusion of protocological control to function; the system has to be there and impacting the characters' choices, thus keeping up the faux-game throughout its protagonist's play-through. This paradoxical setting makes Galloway's idea of protocological control a particularly interesting lens for the examination of isekai.

Regardless of the methods employed, what matters is that isekai are at the heart of several testy negotiations between semiotics of interactive and non-interactive texts; the isekai story, representing a world, especially a game world, nevertheless attempts to map out some understanding of game logic, and therefore adopts an empty signifier in representing that logic—play is not just undertaken metaphorically but mapped out literally.

The Protocological Nature of Isekai

Isekai are not only stories where characters go into another world. They also bring their understanding of how games work with them, making them a critique of what Mackenzie Wark refers to as *The Cave™*.[23] Wark argues that because the world in which we live has adopted the logic of quantifiable competition, gamers are drawn to digital games.[24] The reason they give is that while the real world is deemed as unfair, a digital game can be understood, tinkered with, and repeated. To Wark, "The Game has not just

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22 Galloway, Alexander R.: *Gaming: Essays in Algorithmic Culture*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, p. 101.

23 Wark, Mackenzie: *Gamer Theory,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2007, Kindle Edition, loc. 53.

24 Ibid., loc. 67.

colonized reality, it is also the sole remaining ideal."[25] Isekai thus are representations of that ideal. In one sense, they are equivalents to an individual's mode of play, given that (as we will see with Aneko Yusagi and *Tate no Yuusha no Nariagari*[26]) some of these stories are influenced by how authors play or interpret their play experiences with digital games. Thus, isekai not only represent a player in the game but also efface the difference between gamespace and the game itself; the protagonist is in another, real world. However, that real world has not only been colonized by the game; the protagonists know it. This generates a potential critical space, where characters notice the game-like qualities of this other world yet realize the very real dangers that face them.

In a broader sense, isekai tend to grapple with systems as part of their narratives. They are not only non-interactive fictions that represent games but, more specifically, they are non-interactive fictions that grapple with games as interactive systems, in particular, systems as a cluster of rules carrying both affordances and limitations. In a game, these affordances and limitations craft an atmospheric zone of control that Galloway calls protocol.[27] Here, Galloway distends the implication of Deleuze's decentralized control. While the term protocol is colloquially used to refer to "correct or proper behavior within a specific system of conventions," Galloway more specifically frames the discussion through distinct, contextualized rulesets that underpin an agreed-upon technological operation.[28] An individual within this ruleset, in effect, is under the spell of a protocological control, a set of rules where an ideology may be expressed, but the means of expressing that ideology only extend as far as the rulesets allow.

Galloway's description of protocological control is particularly important when asking how interactive systems deal with ideology. Traditionally, ideology within a system is an element that can be studied, but often a subject's interaction with that system is secondary to understanding the

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25 Ibid., loc. 114.

26 Yusagi, Aneko, "Tate No Yūsha, Ichi-Shō No Owari to Kobanashi," *Shousetsuka Ni Narou*; https://mypage.syosetu.com/mypageblog/view/userid/172188/blog key/589407/

27 Galloway, Alexander R.: *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2006, Kindle Edition, loc. 463.

28 Ibid, loc. 483.

contours of the system itself. For instance, according to both Louis Althusser and Frederic Jameson, a system's ideology can be mapped via a network of immediate, linear causal mechanisms.[29] However, both Jameson and Althusser are focused on the non-interactivity of system ideology. In comparison, the interactivity of games means players can approach the text in many different ways, with each experience leading to different interpretations of that system. Players can also choose to veer from a system's intended path, either in-game (through acts such as trifling) or outside the game (such as modding). The game is no longer a system that engenders a subject, but by providing such affordances, the subject ends up becoming what Galloway refers to as "autonomous locales" of expression, small pockets of movement within an accepted set of overarching, unshakable rules.[30] In this situation, though a game may have an 'ideology,' in that it expresses a general set of political arguments, the way in which players interpret those arguments are underlined by a set of interactions only possible by a set of hierarchical operations limiting and providing players with opportunities of navigation and interaction.

In that sense, an analysis of the digital game demands an analysis of interactivity and how it is interpreted. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway argues that "video games are allegories for our contemporary life under protocological network of continuous informatic control," stressing that "the more emancipating games seem to be as a medium, substituting activity for passivity or a branching narrative for a linear one, the more they are in fact hiding the fundamental social transformation into informatics that has affected the globe."[31] In other words, though a game's visuals, sounds, and text may all be proposing arguments or ideas through their aesthetics, they are all dealing with hidden machinery of sorts, an undulating database of information and rules which allows the process of operation in which these aesthetics have meaning. Therefore, how a game is played is just as important as what is in the game, and together both are only possible if such a set of rules is possible. At the same time, these rules become a ground zero for

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29 Althusser, Louis et al.: *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, New York City, NY: Verso 2016, p. 189; Jameson, Frederic: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2015, loc. 200.

30 A.R. Galloway: *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*, loc. 495.

31 A.R. Galloway: *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, p. 106.

expression, giving insight into what emerges, politically, in the act of play —what can and cannot be done, how information and values are parsed into informatic data, what can and cannot be changed.

Isekai, because they are byproducts of amateurs writing game-like fantasy worlds, are an effigy of protological control given that they, as non-interactive fiction, cannot procedurally express it. Since isekai are not systems, they do not have limits and affordances in the sense that games have. Likewise, because they set down no rulesets, they lack Galloway's autonomous locales; readers are not 'players' in the sense that they can choose which chapters to read without being confused. In terms of its media form, isekai are, in effect, like any other non-interactive, serialized fiction.

However, in representing a game-like fantasy world, isekai often end up inadvertently revealing ways in which protocological control manifests. Because the game-like elements are treated naturally, isekai end up being sites of protocological critique. For example, in Aneko Yusagi's *Tate no Yuusha*, the main character Naofumi is falsely accused and thus exiled.[32] Unable to effectively wield anything other than a shield and without any allies, Naofumi must resort to enslaving a young girl (Raphtalia) to fight for him. On one level, Naofumi's distant, largely nonchalant attitude to slavery could be seen as a damning legitimization of slavery in some respects. However, as Galloway mentions with regards to the game CIVILIZATION III, "[details (and ideas)] of lived life are replaced by the synchronic homogeneity of code pure and simple. It is a new sort of fetish altogether."[33] A similar sublimation occurs here; while Naofumi is exiled and forced into slavery, his compatriots are upheld and supported by the monarchy. As part of the reason, Aneko Yusagi notes that Naofumi and his compatriots represent different play styles in Mass Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMORPGs), where Naofumi more closely reflects a decline in specialized builds due to a decline in online team-based MMORPGs.[34] Naofumi's enslavement can also extend to pre-existing arguments of control. Though Aneko Yusagi has never proposed any protocological basis for slavery, Naofumi and Raphtalia's relationship is scarcely

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32 Aneko, Yusagi: *Tate no Yuusha no Nariagari*, n.p.: Shousetsuka ni Narou 2012.

33 Ibid., p. 103.

34 Yusagi, Aneko: "Tate No Yūsha, Ichi-Shō No Owari to Kobanashi," in: *Shousetsuka Ni Narou*, December 10, 2012; https://mypage.syosetu.com/mypageblog/view/userid/172188/blogkey/589407/

different from a player's relationship to a party member. Naofumi, as a player stand-in, represents not only a player lacking sufficient party members (as Aneko Yusagi implies) but whose purchase of a slave is similar to the purchase or acquisition of a team member in an RPG. In this instance, players, like Naofumi, are both determinants of their party members and their loyalty; it is only by the player (and Naofumi's) will that the party member can leave.

Some of this system critique can be incredibly blatant. In Atekichi's *Saikyou no Shokugyou wa Yuusha demo Kenja demo naku Kanteishi* (Kari) *Rashii desu yo*, the protagonist Manabe Hibiki accidentally jumps over into another world.[35] He quickly realizes he is an "Inspector," a class whose ability involves summoning user interfaces on objects and individuals in this new world. These interfaces take on the form of RPG-style status windows, providing limited insight into anything he focuses on.

Figure 2: Saikyou no Shokugyou's Interfaciality

Source: Atekichi and Takeda Atsushi, *Saikyou no Shokugyou wa Yuusha demo Kenja demo naku Kanteishi (Kari) Rashii desu yo*, pp. 9-10

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35 Atekichi and Takeda Atsushi: *Saikyou no Shokugyou wa Yuusha demo Kenja demo naku Kanteishi (Kari) Rashii desu yo*, Tokyo, Japan: Alphapolis 2017, pp. 9-10.

However, after immediately running into a native of this other world, Manabe quickly realizes the power of the Inspector class: in breaking down the disparate elements of the world before him, Manabe can determine not only the status but also the relative strength, rarity, and overall condition of any given person or object. In this case, Manabe's class is obscenely valuable, and although he is woefully underpowered compared to the locals, his skills are instantly in high demand. Like *Tate no Yuusha*, *Shokugyou wa Yuusha's* setting occurs in a scenario where the protagonist is not only aware of the game-like elements of this other world, but because the natives do not interpret the world as game-like, the protagonist carries a distinct advantage. This advantage translates into a discussion of system mechanics and gameplay—that how characters take control or advantage of these mechanics reveals how authors might think of how systems relate to players.

Additionally, due to the fiction's non-interactivity, elements that would be understood as ubiquitous game features (such as user interfaces) find themselves awkward in non-interactive, non-virtual settings. *Shokugyou wa Yuusha*, in pedestalizing the user interface, also reaffirms the natural advantage players have when navigating informatic systems. In this case, Manabe's Inspector class fulfills a similar role to Naofumi's approach to slavery: both of them, attempting to consider the role of a playable system in a non-interactive narrative, end up not only adopting a representation of informatic control but also indirectly discussing how such informatic control situates, shapes, and affects the players and the world in which they are playing. Both examples, however, remain firmly non-interactive analyses of interactive systems. What happens when isekai, being non-interactive, become interactive?

Why Games, and Why Isekai Games?

As previously mentioned, the popularity of stories on sites such as Syosetsu tends to result in major publishers licensing isekai stories and creating official light novel adaptations. These will often be adapted further into manga, anime, or even video games as part of the media mix phenomenon. With the interlocking of industries in the creation of the media mix adaptation, we can inspect how isekai stories translate between media. Furthermore, one central difference with regards to isekai games is that not only are they ludic

representations of fiction, but they are ludic representations of a genre of fiction whose very form is a reflexive analysis of a game's protocol logics.

Here we will focus particularly on the relationship of isekai and games. Isekai themselves aim to adapt games into a non-interactive medium. It is notable that isekai do not generally constitute an attempt to adapt a particular game into a linear narrative. Rather, they generally try to adapt a signified meta-game of sorts, a conglomerate of familiar tropes.

Game adaptations of isekai (hereon isekai games), on the other hand, are unique in their attempt to map a faux-game—a fundamentally non-interactive story that focuses on upholding interactivity, an empty signifier of protocological play back—onto a real ludic system.

Isekai as Black Box Analysis

Generally speaking, isekai authors are not professional game designers. Some authors have created video games as hobby projects, but the overwhelming majority does not have a game development background. So how do they go about designing these faux-games that are 'played' as part of the narrative? We can view the act of writing isekai as introspection on the games that defined it. Of course, the choice of games depends on the individual author, and as outlined earlier, it's not truly a one-to-one matching either. What we can see instead is a representation of the game design the authors have experienced.

It is an act similar to a relatively unstructured version of what Ian Bogost refers to as black box analysis,[36] that is, the act of analyzing the game without directly accessing its source code. The act of adaptation of these games will thus be prone to translating clearly distinguishable, easily recognizable elements of these games, such as status screen or levels. These concepts are almost ubiquitous to Japanese RPG games and, as such, can be seen recreated in many isekai stories, even those that do not take place in-game worlds. Similarly, we can see that well-known tropes are also transferred, be it the idea of Slimes as weak starter monsters (*Suraimu Taoshite Sanbyaku-nen; Shiranai Uchi ni Reberu Makkusu ni Nattemashita; Tensei Shitara Suraimu*

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36 Bogost, Ian: *Persuasive Games,* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2010, p. 75.

Datta Ken)[37] from the DRAGON QUEST games (which has been replicated in other JRPGs such as, e.g., the ATELIER series)[38] or the concept of the "Demon Lord" as a central antagonist figure. These concepts are formed together into an empty cultural signifier, the faux-game, that evokes the gaminess of the games it was inspired by but does not recreate it.

The texture of the faux-game created lies within the specific games that formed the individual backdrop for the author's design. These can be a more classical JRPG, an MMORPG, or take a turn away from the classical RPG space altogether. An example of the latter is the subgenre of Otome game isekai. Otome games (literally maiden games) are a genre of games primarily targeted at women, usually visual novel-style dating games with a female protagonist and multiple male love interests. The Otome game isekai typically feature a female character from our reality being reincarnated into a classical otome game, sometimes even as the villainess rather than the game's main character. They are primarily written by women and are more often read by a female audience as well.[39] We can see that the culture of the games played reflects back onto the isekai made, and the isekai read, mirroring Caillois.

As mentioned early on, the myriad of stories hosted on Syosetu and the like form an often ironic, hyper-aware relationship of the work with its genre conventions and tropes. The reader is 'in on the joke' in that often the protagonists on these stories will comment on the similarities of the otherworld with a game they have played, take the idea that their own familiarity and knowledge of games is an accurate model for the workings of the world or even go as far as to have the character be aware of isekai fiction and react to becoming an isekai protagonist themselves.

Here, a deep dive in the *Okina Baba's Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka?* serves a particularly unique example.[40] In it, the whole main character's class is killed and reincarnated into another world, though with the twist that the main character is reincarnated as a spider-type monster in a dungeon. Despite the

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37 Morita, Kisetsu: *Slime Taoshite Sanbyaku-nen Shiranai Uchi ni LEVEL MAX ni Nattemashita*, n.p.: Shousetsuka Ni Narou, 2016.

38 *Atelier Marie*, Gust Co. Ltd 1997.

39 N.N.: "Talking to Inori," in: *Pause and Select*, April 19, 2020; https://www.pause andselect.com/articles/talking-to-inori

40 Baba, Okina: *Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka?*, n.p.: Shousetsuka ni Narou 2015.

insistence that the world presented is a true reality, it features exceedingly game-like elements, with whole pages being taken up by literal status displays at times, detailing Skills, HP Points, Mana, and the like.

Figure 3: Status Screen in Kumo desu ga nani ka's English Translation

<Human	**LV 14**	**Name: Julius Zagan Analeit**
Status:	HP: 476/476 (green)	MP: 497/497 (blue)
	SP: 455/455 (yellow)	: 401/455 (red)
	Average Offensive Ability: 469 (details)	Average Defensive Ability: 465 (details)
	Average Magical Ability: 488 (details)	Average Resistance Ability: 476 (details)
	Average Speed Ability: 435 (details)	

Skills:

[Magic Power Perception LV 10]	[Precise Magic Power Operation LV 1]	[Magic Warfare LV 9]	[Magic Power Conferment LV 8]

Source: Baba, Okina: *So I'm a Spider, So What?*, New York City, NY: Yen Press 2019, vol. 5, pp. 166-167

Large passages of the novels follow the main character exploring the game system, trying to min-max it, considering different gameplay choices, and speaking about the way she is dealing with different combat scenarios using her skills. She is in fact engaging in that exact same type of black box analysis described earlier, but this time it occurs on a diegetic level within the main character's narration. Moreover, as the books progress, they establish the game system as the central mystery by revealing that it was added to the world at a later point in time with a yet clear goal in mind. Suddenly the reader is asked to analyze the game system they have witnessed, recognize its affordances, and build a theory as to what purpose the system might serve,

bringing the idea of analyzing the protocological control full circle, between the author, protagonist, and reader.

Such examples show that the connection of translating interactive game systems as a multi-level recreation of the signifier of a game without using interactivity is central to the writing process of isekai. The implication of the game adaptation, therefore, is a deconstruction of the empty cultural signifier of a game's protocol, i.e., it is a cultural subject imagining how a game thinks and shapes its players as a subject, which is then translated into a system of its own.

Therefore, there are two kinds of systems at play; a metaphorical, memory-based, signifying system of a played game that is completely im-material and imagined by an author, and then a real, physical, coded system that the game adaptation takes on. How does such a translation back into the signifier function? What form does the attempt to transfer a hyperreal game experience back into a real one take?

The isekai game is at the crossroads of these two elements, and how they interact with each other reveals how protocol extends even beyond its own formal control into signifying ones.

III. ISEKAI GAMES AND THEIR PARATEXT

Re:Monster and Sublimating Control

Re:Monster is a web novel written by Kogitsune Kanekiru revolving around a young man named Kanata Tomokui in an alternate timeline of Earth where people have psychic powers, known as Esper powers.[41] After a party, Kanata is killed by his subordinate. He is then reincarnated in another, medieval fantasy world as a goblin named Gobu-Rou. However, he quickly realizes that his Esper powers remain, though they manifest themselves differently: Gobu-Rou is able to consume and absorb the powers of anything he eats. With this advantage, he seeks to climb to the top of his tribe and build a nation. Originally published on Shousetsuka Ni Narou and then re-published as a light novel by Alphapolis, *Re:Monster* is a nikki-choufuu (daily ledger) styled story where characters—primarily Gobu-Rou—outline the events of

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41 Kogitsune, Kanekiru: *Re:Monster*, n.p.: Shousetsuka Ni Narou 2011.

that day. Using simple, diary-like prose, Kanekiru's style is largely out of convenience, aiming to maintain a simple, linear story structure.[42]

Like many isekai, *Re:Monster* uses interfaces and gamey mechanics despite the setting's insistence that it is a 'real world.' In *Re:Monster*, when characters obtain items or learn new skills, the text is interrupted by paragraphs that outline precisely what they are learning, mimicking a user interface. This interface focus repeats itself in the *Re:Monster* manga, a comic adaptation beginning in 2014. Like the original web novel and the subsequent light novel, the *Re:Monster* manga would make heavy use of both the nikki-choufuu style (Figure 4, left) but also game interfaces (Figure 4, right):

Figure 4: Ledger Style Storytelling
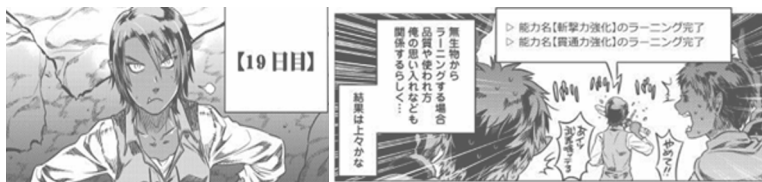
Source: Kogitsune, Kanekiru: Re:Monster vol 1, Tokyo, Japan: Alphapolis 2015, pp. 9-10

Though Gobu-Rou initially ponders about the nature of the world and whether it is truly a game, the story quickly discards such notions, and much of *Re:Monster* focuses on Gobu-Rou's rise to power and the expansion of his goblin tribe as a political power on the world stage. In this sense, much like *Tenohira* from the beginning, *Re:Monster* is reminiscent of a kenkoku-ki, a nation-building story, but *Re:Monster* more aggressively incorporates an interfacial understanding of the world's setting into its narrative.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Gobu-Rou's approach to acquiring more power. Not only is Gobu-Rou's ability to absorb power similar to acquiring new abilities, but by doing so he can physically evolve, transforming into different classes. His tribe members, under his tutelage, can do the same; in this case, the 'evolution' of the tribe members refers to class changes

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42 N.N.: "Talking to Kanekiru Kogitsune," in: *Pause and Select*, February 12, 2019; https://www.pauseandselect.com/articles/talking-to-kanekiru-kogitsune

standard to RPG games, where characters in a party can unlock more specialist, stronger classes. Additionally, in *Re:Monster*, stats are not just a quantification of abstract power, but in video game fashion, a direct passage to greater power. Characters can allocate skill points, leading to specific 'builds' which are treated as natural elements of the world.

However, *Re:Monster* more darkly and cynically embraces questions of servitude and systemic control through how Gobu-Rou acquires newer team members. In *Re:Monster*, goblins reproduce largely through capturing and impregnating unwitting female adventurers and villagers. While Gobu-Rou is cognizant of the immorality of these actions, he nevertheless engages in them. While he laments the unfortunate fate of the captured women, Gobu-Rou is also not above capturing and tricking them into becoming his concubines. Unsurprisingly, many of these women are also capable fighters and become central pillars of his military force. Though the narrative presents the women in *Re:Monster* as choosing to stay with Gobu-Rou's tribe due to their affection for him, the story has inadvertently revealed a power relationship hidden in gameplay: party members are functionally slaves. The Stockholm Syndrome-Esque behavior of these women belies the fact that parties and their compositions are critically concerned with control. In a game, players are often the sole determinant of their party members' position. In this sense, *Re:Monster* is reminiscent of JRPG games such as SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: NOCTURNE and FINAL FANTASY TACTICS, where parties are large, specialists are numerous, and functionally have no agency. This constellation is similar to Aneko Yusagi's *Tate no Yuusha*, where slavery, as mentioned above, is arguably a non-ideological byproduct of what are ostensibly protocological representations.

In attempting to reflect a sense of party-gathering and control, *Re:Monster*, like *Tate no Yuusha*, translates systemic control into very visible actions of bodily control. In a game, party members do not and cannot leave unless the player decides it is the case, in effect making these characters slaves. In *Re:Monster*, they are quite literally slaves, enthralled by Gobu-Rou and his tribe. In this sense, *Re:Monster* partly critiques the player's control in a party system, suggesting that while party members are individuals, their loyalties and positions within the party are ultimately at the behest of the (player) leader. The end goal, it seems, is to become stronger. However, while the system may be partly critiqued in the web novel, light novel, and manga, what happens when it is turned into a game?

Figure 5: Akane Guides the Player Through the Re:Monster iOS Game

Source: RE:MON (AlphaGames Inc. 2017, O: AlphaGames)

Adapted into a mobile game in 2016, simply titled RE:MON, the *Re:Monster* game focuses on a player character who builds and constructs their own nation. As it is common in real-time strategy games, the player uses units on a board to attack enemies. By fending off successive waves, players level up their player-characters as well members of that player-characters' tribe. By doing missions, players can gain stars, which net more chances to 'roll' for strong characters, with each successive level and yielding larger maps with

more challenging foes. Though Gobu-Rou and his tribe appear throughout the story, RE:MON, in effect, focuses on a different tribe altogether.

RE:MON banishes *Re:Monster's* protocol critique, suggesting that systems can naturalize their own control networks. While *Re:Monster* attempts to legitimize (sometimes lengthily) why certain characters join Gobu-Rou's tribe, RE:MON makes no such claims. Though some characters will join as part of a smaller story arc, players can simply roll stronger characters and grind the ones they have. Though the game has a story arc, one can play RE:MON almost entirely without an answer as to why any given team member has joined their team. In *Re:Monster*, the members join and stay because of Gobu-Rou's actions and motivations, oftentimes through a mix of charismatic leadership, fear, and forceful assimilation. In RE:MON, members join because that is simply how the system of the RPG game works.

RE:MON also, in translating *Re:Monster* into a game, ends up revealing how systems can substitute for what are otherwise orthodox tools of non-interactive storytelling. An assumed primacy of system-as-storytelling extends beyond party members: in RE:MON, the player, like Gobu-Rou, can absorb the abilities of the monsters he eats. This is in contradiction with the novels and manga in which that absorption is Gobu-Rou's unique ability. In *Re:Monster*, Kanekiru takes great pains to explain the origins of Gobu-Rou's ability to absorb the powers of his victims; after all, it is his Esper power. In comparison, there is no origin given to the player-character of RE:MON; they simply have the ability, for the sake of fun. However, at the same time, having the absorption skill, like the character rolling, reveals that systems can function as storytelling stopgaps of their own. In other words, what is expository information in non-interactive narratives can be easily explained through systemic features in interactive ones. As with the party system, if the players are given a unique skill by game design, they can experience a similar story to the novels and manga, even if the games explain much less. Furthermore, what ties together the interactive and non-interactive is a broader idealistic representation rather than a direct translation of one media form to another. Kanekiru implied as much, noting that the theme of *Re:Monster* is "becoming strong to eat," arguing that the story has something innately "game-like about it."[43]

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43 Shiki: "(Intabyū: Dokusha Purezento Ari) Honkaku Riarutaimu RPG 'Ri Monsutā (*Re:Monster*).' Shōsetsu Gensaku 'Kin Ki-Ji Kitsune' Sensei to Kaihatsu Direku-

Development director Hideaki Muraishi also stressed the game-like, developmental nature of the original novels and manga, stating that "the setting of the game has an RPG-like aspect."[44] At the same time, he carefully warned that "if we translated the original media into a game, the balance would be broken, so it was a little difficult figuring out how to adjust it."[45] However, because the system is its own form of control, and because the game's development is more interested in capturing an abstract theme of consumption, the RE:MON game ends up embracing some of the very elements of its source material critiques.

As a product, RE:MON is more focused on maintaining the media mix relationship underpinning the franchise and less concerned with taking its predecessor's critique and interrogating these structures. It resolves these interrogations by directly embracing them. In fulfilling what Otsuka Eiji calls a "grand narrative," or overall ur-setting,[46] RE:MON employs the very systems *Re:Monster* critiques. The case suggests that play becomes a form of protocol on its own: Muraishi and his team's emphasis on mimicking the universe while trying to make the game fun undermines the critique of systems that digital play takes for granted. And yet, in orbital fashion, everything—even a critique of that consumption—ends up needing to revolve around it.

KonoSuba and Protocological Mundanity

Akatsuki Natsume's *Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo!* (*KonoSuba*) is a comedy-light novel series that originated on Syosetu like many other isekai. The light novels revolve around Satou Kazuma, who, after his untimely death, is given a choice by a goddess named Aqua to keep his memories, reincarnate into a parallel fantasy world, and take one thing of his choosing with him. Annoyed at Aqua's bad attitude, he asks to take her with him into the new world, and she is forced to comply and join him. They become

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tā Ni Intabyū!" in: *Boom App Games*; https:// game.boom-app.com/entry/remonst er-interview20160209

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Eiji, Otsuka: "World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative," in: *Mechademia*, vol. 5, pp. 99-116, here p. 108.

adventures, and a lot of the comedy is based on playing off RPG tropes. Kazuma's stats are extremely average, with only higher-than-average luck and intelligence, while Aqua's are the exact opposite. While she is theoretically very powerful, her inability to spend her skill points in smart ways (e.g., she purchases a skill just because it makes pretty fountains she can show off to people at the guild) and general incompetence create the main dynamic of the show. In typical JRPG fashion, further party members join them later on: Megumin, a mage dedicated entirely to the extremely powerful art of "Explosion Magic," which leaves her unable to move after casting it a single time due to its mana cost and Darkness, a crusader knight who possess great capabilities but fails to hit enemies. She is a masochist and will lose concentration and instead fantasize about the worst-case scenario amidst encounters. Together they form something akin to a classic JRPG party, as one might see in FINAL FANTASY, with a melee, caster, healer, and tank.

In *KonoSuba*, Kazuma is originally asked to reincarnate in the parallel world to defeat the Demon Lord (again referring back to classic RPGs) but flat-out rejects this sentiment; first with the intention to simply enjoy his life in a game-like world, then once financial troubles hit him, to get rich and then further to just enjoy himself or deal with problems as they arise. Though the party does end up defeating some of the Demon Lord's generals, it is never done premeditated—instead, they stumble into these victories without knowing. In *Grasshopper—Games, Life and Utopia*, Bernard Suits introduces the idea of the prelusory goal: "a specific achievable state of affairs," e.g., the act of "crossing a finish line first" (but not necessarily fairly)" in a race or in golf the act of "getting a golf ball into a cup" (but not necessarily by using a golf club).[47] If we think about isekai as adaptations of systems, then the prelusory goal Kazuma is presented with is defeating the Demon Lord. Interestingly, he rejects the prelusory goal and instead creates his own ones (to enjoy his time, to get rich, etc.). In *Konosuba,* we can see something interesting crystallize: the line between the lusory and prelusory becoming distinct in isekai. For prelusory means just as such, "before the game," and the goal of a game has to be set from the outside of it. Through the layer of abstraction that the reincarnation provides, we start seeing the game come into view at all. Without it, Kazuma would simply be a character in a world,

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47 Suits, Bernard: *Grasshopper. Games, Life and Utopia*, Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press Ltd 2005, p. 50.

whichever it may be, but it would not be prelusory. Through the distinct presentation as a separate mode of existence Kazuma enters, the game is truly able to take hold.

Figure 6: Konosuba Cast at the Adventurer's Guild

アクア

「一千万と一千万で二千万エリスねっ！　シュワシュワ何杯飲めるかしら？」

Source: KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO! -KIBOU NO MEIKYUU TO TSUDOISHI BOUKENSHA-TACHI!- (Entergram 2019, O: Entergram)

Of course, the story can progress as is in *KonoSuba* because all protocological control is only illusive; how then does an adaptation with real, binding protocol function?

KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO! KIBOU NO MEIKYUU TO TSUDOISHI BOUKENSHA-TACHI! is an adaptation of the *KonoSuba* franchise into a PlayStation 4 and PlayStation Vita game released June 2019 in Japan. In this traditional first-person dungeon crawler, the player takes control of Kazuma and goes into dungeons with the rest of the main characters to fight monsters, fulfill quests, and level up. This gameplay is broken up through frequent intermissions of story scenes wherein the characters joke around, comment on the plot, or play off each other. The game presupposes some knowledge of the franchise. It features frequent callbacks to jokes, all the skills are named after ones mentioned in the books, and they are distributed in an appropriate fashion between the characters. For example, Megumin does possess her signature Explosion magic, and it will reduce her MP down

to nothing upon usage while dealing devastatingly high damage to any monster.

However, when playing the game adaptation, something is lost. In essence, *KonoSuba* is a story wherein there is no clear rhythm or plan; it is the very denial of the plan that is the starting point for the series. And despite the game's jokes and wacky story-tidbits, what is perhaps most notable about the adaptation is the game loop that takes center. Any and all actions have to go through the menus; story sequences are telegraphed in dungeons ahead of time; the dungeons themselves are labyrinths that are slowly traversed through, illuminating them slowly but surely. Characters raise their level, quests are completed, and everything becomes more and more systematic and structured. Even the signature attack cut-scene-like animations that are played during battles lose their sense of excitement over hours of repetition. Ironically, the freedom, surprise, and havoc created through them had been key aspects of the original work.

Figure 7: Konosuba Party Exploring a Labyrinth

Source: KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO! -KIBOU NO MEIKYUU TO TSUDOISHI BOUKENSHA-TACHI!- (Entergram 2019, O: Entergram)

By adapting the story into a true protocological system, the type of game has changed altogether and is no longer able to transfer Kazuma's own prelusory goal. Isekai concern themselves with the in-between, the thoughts of the characters, the potential of the system, and the fantasy of the game. The loop,

the mundane, is glossed over. *Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka?* may describe in second-to-second detail what skills were used in an encounter, what the decision-making of the main character was, how the HP and Stamina are affected, and finally how many experience points the monster ended up granting down to printing pages of status screens. However, once the fight or chapter is done, it will skip ahead and have the main character comment on having fought numerous monsters. She will basically report back to the reader her findings or thoughts since the last chapter. We can imagine how it went down, now let's talk about the situation at hand, the next challenge. It's a move akin to a cooking show skipping past a part of its preparation phase by pulling out a new dish that's one step ahead in the recipe.

Through adaptation back into a game, the story regains rigidity and repetition, which go in hand with any game but were aspects that had faded in its faux-game form. The critique *KonoSuba* offers us is that when the protocol takes control, the narrative is no longer able to sustain itself.

Conclusion

Though isekai have the potential to be spaces of systemic critique, especially when it comes to systems in digital games, in both the cases of Re:Mon and Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo! Kibou no Meikyuu to Tsudoishi Boukensha-tachi!, adapting such critique into a digital game reaffirms just how powerful protocological control can be. For *Re:Monster*, the text, perhaps inadvertently, investigates power, specifically just how much power a player-character commands over their party members. In its non-interactive form, Kanekiru's characters employ blatantly immoral acts (such as enslavement, conquering, and sexual assault) to tether the characters into a tribe, maintaining the semblance of an RPG system. However, when translated into a digital game, such critique disappears, and any visible commentary on the nature of a system's power over its nodes subsides in the face of systemic operation. In the case of *Konosuba*, the text opposes the rigidity of an orthodox game narrative through comedy while maintaining its identity as an RPG world. Kazuma's reincarnation provides him with a classical call to action, the prelusory goal to his role-playing game, which he rejects outright. Instead, his story is able to maneuver unique situations and inversions of role-playing tropes that never settle into a predictable rhythm. However,

upon adaptation, any critique and autonomy from the RPG is stripped by the overwhelming control the game loop has over the experience. In both cases, the adaptations end up undermining the essence of their original works—both are critiques of systems but once adapted into systems they lose their respective critiques.

At the same time, both *Re:Monster* and *Konosuba*, while they are discussions of systems and how these systems are played, represent a broad idea of how players interact with such systems. Though both texts heavily draw upon JRPG conventions upon which they levy their critiques, they are notably abstract about which JRPGs and how much influence they draw. However, while game adaptations of isekai are still relatively rare, given their tendencies to be part of a strong media mix push, the likelihood of more isekai games in the future is high. Furthermore, as more direct games-as-system analogue isekai become popular (such as Satoru Yamaguchi's Otome Game NO HAMETSU FLAG SHIKA NAI AKUYAKU REIJOU NI TENSEI SHITE SHIMA-TTA…), in theory, these future game adaptations could more effectively translate the systemic arguments of their sources into more effective procedural rhetoric. However, a stronger presence of the faux-protocol in a work could also lead to the opposite effect, with adaptations struggling more to recreate the possibly inconsistent and complex game design of these works. How the strength of the influence of game systems in their linear-narrative adapted form maps onto their ability to be functionally transferred back into an interactive system remains to be seen.

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