

# ***Mukokuseki and the Narrative Mechanics in Japanese Games***

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“In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.”<sup>1</sup>

“I do realize there’s a cultural difference between what Japanese people think and what the rest of the world thinks.”<sup>2</sup>

“I just want the same damn game Japan gets to play, translated into English!”<sup>3</sup>

*Space Invaders, Frogger, Pac-Man, Super Mario Bros., Final Fantasy, Street Fighter, Sonic The Hedgehog, Pokémon, Harvest Moon, Resident Evil, Silent Hill, Metal Gear Solid, Zelda, Katamari, Okami, Hatoful Boyfriend, Dark Souls, The Last Guardian, Sekiro.* As this very small collection shows, Japanese arcade and video games cover the whole range of possible design and gameplay styles and define a unique way of narrating stories. Many titles are very successful and renowned, but even though they are an integral part of Western gaming culture, they still retain a certain otherness. This article explores the uniqueness of video games made in Japan in terms of their narrative mechanics. For this purpose, we will draw on a strategy which defines Japanese culture: *mukokuseki* (borderless, without a nation) is a concept that can be interpreted either as Japanese commodities erasing all cultural characteristics (“Mario does not invoke the image of Ja-

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1 Wilde (2007 [1891]: 493).

2 Takahashi Tetsuya (*Monolith Soft* CEO) in Schreier (2017).

3 Funtime Happysnacks in Brian (@NE\_Brian) (2017), our emphasis.

pan” [Iwabuchi 2002: 94])<sup>4</sup>, or as a special way of mixing together elements of cultural origins, creating something that is new, but also hybrid and even ambiguous. We opt for the second reading as this provides us with instruments that help us to look under these games’ (seemingly) nationless surface, analyzing their narrative mechanics.<sup>5</sup>

We start by focusing on one specific way to metaphorically cope with Japanese games by looking at statements of Let’s Players while playing Japanese video games (“1. Japanese video games: Drugs!”). We then introduce the notion of *mukokuseki*, by examining the contexts in which it was first used as well as explaining why the interpretation of it as a mingling of cultural traits is more useful for understanding Japanese games (“2. *Mukokuseki*: Japaneseness under the surface”). This also reveals our phenomenological and semiotic method of dealing with video games in general. By looking at different cases, we then discuss how the *mukokuseki* principle is inherent in Japanese games and their narrative mechanics (“3. *Mukokuseki* as narrative technique: Cases”), the principle of mixing becoming a general technique that also thrives as a unique feature of Japanese games (“4. Absurd overcomplexity, intriguing simplicity and mixing of everything: *mukokuseki* as catalyst”).

## JAPANESE VIDEO GAMES: DRUGS!

*music of Katamari Damacy in the background*

PA\_01 P: hey GUYS-  
PA\_02 PANdaclass here-  
PA\_03 and NOW it\_time for me to start a nEW let\_s play.  
PA\_04 this game is called katamari <<len> daMacy>;  
PA\_05 i know i never mentioned ANY of this to ANYone-  
PA\_06 beCAuse (.) i wanted it to be a surprise;  
PA\_07 cause THIS game,  
PA\_08 let\_s just say it\_s JApanese innovAtion mixed in  
with-

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4 28 years after its first appearance, *Super Mario 3D* (Nintendo, 2013) featured a Japanese-inspired level for the first time, the action taking place in the localities and on the rooftop of a Dojo. The level is labelled “Hands-On Hall”, which refers to the gameplay: the traditional Japanese sliding doors have to be opened by a swiping movement, combining narrative and gameplay mechanics.

5 This article is a shortened and revised version of our exploration on Japanese games and gaming culture, in which we focused on game mechanics and furthermore employed the term *magic cone*, a concept of the appropriation of Japanese gaming culture in the West, based on the notion by Johan Huizinga (cf. Kato/Bauer 2020).

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PA_09      <<len> DRUGS>.
PA_10      like (.) this game is <<len> SO trippy>;
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The above transcript quotes from a Let's Play (Pandacard 2014, transcript starts right at the beginning of the video),<sup>6</sup> in which the presenter Pandacard plays the beginning of the game *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004). He kept it as a surprise (L PA\_05-06) as the game seems to be something special to him, the prosodic emphasis underlining the uniqueness of "THIS" game (L PA\_07). The reason for keeping it a surprise is then qualified by introducing the expression "let's just say" (L PA\_08), this hedging indicating some difficulty in explaining the matter easily as well as signaling a certain caution concerning the statement that follows. By then describing the game as "Japanese innovation mixed in with drugs", the Let's Player hits the nail on the head: the weirdness of the game is right away located in the otherness of the Japanese. Pandacard takes this in a benevolent way as he retrospectively calls it an "innovation" (the game came out 10 years prior to the Let's Play). Furthermore, the provocative comparison to psychoactive substances is clearly staged by emphasizing it prosodically with special syntactical structure (L PA\_08) and slower and stressed pronunciation (L PA\_09). Following this forthright opening, the reason for the comparison is provided, but a certain difficulty in describing it remains, as the phrase "this game is so trippy", even with the heavy stress on "so" (L PA\_10), is still rather vague and redundant.

Of course, no Japanese game is better suited to be compared with drugs than *LSD: Dream Emulator* (Asmik Ace Entertainment, 1998). Let's Player Pewdiepie, who mistakenly had taken it for a horror game, replays it in one of his Reminisce-Let's Plays and instantly refers to the association of the game title (Pewdiepie 2017, the transcript begins at 00:00:14, L PE1\_06):

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PE1_01  P:  there is one (-) <<len> i !REAL!ly want to revisit.
PE1_02      EL ES DEE (-) dr!EA!m emulator.>
PE1_03      this game has a kind of a CULT following,
PE1_04      because of how much it STANDS (.) OUT.
PE1_05      there_s really NO gAME Like (.) THIS.
PE1_06      it_s basically (--) <<distorted voice with echo>
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6 The transcript has been created on the basis of the transcription system *Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem 2 (GAT2)*, cp. Selting et al. (2009). For the transcription conventions of this system or the meaning of individual symbols please refer to the key at the end of this article. The letter "L" is used to refer to specific lines.

!DRUGS! .>  
\\ /  
/

*Pewdiepie stares into the facecam, screen is distorted in terms of color, long pause*

At the beginning of this Let's Play, the references to the game being Japanese are scarce. Later in the game, it is revealed by Pewdiepie's actions, that he actually plays *as being in Japan*, trying to imitate the Japanese way of communicating – even including an opening politeness formula in Japanese (“hajime-mashite”, how do you do, L PE2\_04). He even bows in the local greeting manner, the camera pointing downwards for a brief moment before the greetings are uttered:

PE2\_01            <<disguised voice> let me just walk in this e  
                          wonderful RESTaurant.  
PE2\_02            well hello there kind SIR,  
                          \\ \_\_\_\_\_ /  
                          \ /  
                          *positioning face-to-face with the NPC*  
PE2\_03            WOW,  
PE2\_04            EE: <<scratchy voice> ee> <<staccato> hajimeMAshite.>  
                          \\ /  
                          for a brief moment, the camera points downwards  
PE2\_05            uu how you\_re DOin.  
PE2\_06            i wanna give me some fine (--) ↓ WHISkey.>

It seems to be obvious that experiences of Japaneseness, and even that of Japan itself (as a travel destination), are related to drugs in a metaphorical sense. This can be seen in the YouTube video by the “Game Grumps” (Let's Players Arin [A in the transcript] and Dan [D]) with the title “Learning About Japan! – Game Grumps Compilations” and labelled with hashtags “#gaming #japan #culture” (Game Grumps 2019, transcript starts right at the beginning of the video):

GG\_01 D:        so what did you think in (sic!) jaPAN arin,  
GG\_02 A:        <<p> i dunno it was GREAT,>  
GG\_03 D:        was it was it better than the OTHer trips?  
                  (1.0)  
GG\_04 A:        uuh ACID,  
GG\_05            eLesDEE,  
                  ((both laugh))  
GG\_06 A:        no no nothing can comPAre-  
GG\_07 D:        yeah it\_s TRUE; (--)  
GG\_08            i didn\_t SEE shit the way i thought i would when i  
                  was (-) ON jaPAN-  
                  ((both laugh))  
      (...)  
GG\_09 D:        it\_s VEry strange;

Dan and Arin are talking about their experiences – the reason being their recent trip to Japan – interestingly though not while playing “LSD” (L GG\_05), but *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo EAD 1996). Japan is so overwhelmingly impressive, that it becomes the drug itself (“when I was on Japan”, L GG\_08) and Dan sums up his experience as “very strange” (L GG\_09).

The comparison of Japanese games and of Japan itself to drugs is clearly an approach used by dedicated players to be able to understand and grasp the otherness that cannot be explained by putting it into their own words. And it is a way of dealing with the perception of cultural differences.

Another way to handle this topic is that chosen by big gaming companies: For big triple X productions, which are designed to serve an international audience, terms and guidelines as regards *culturalization* or *glocalization* seem mandatory because “cultural mistakes often prove to be costly for game developers and publishers” (IGDA 2012: 2).<sup>7</sup> However, this method of adapting Japanese games frequently does not meet the approval of Western players. A very prominent example is *Xenoblade Chronicles X* (Monolith Soft, 2015), where the adaptation was made – amongst other things – on the skimpy clothing of the Japanese PCs (e.g. of the 13-year-old Lin Lee, but for the male characters as well, see Figure 1).

Some avatar adjustments were also eliminated (e.g. the breast slider determining the chest measurements of the female characters). In the debates that followed, player communities spoke of censorship, and the casual comments by *Monolith Soft* CEO, Takahashi Tetsuya,<sup>8</sup> added fuel to the flames:

7 Very often, the case of *Kakuto Chojin* (Dream Publishing, 2002) is mentioned, where a single, randomly and carelessly chosen background audio file caused the recall of the whole, ready-for-sale project. In addition to the concept of *localization*, the paper *Best Practices for Game Localization* (IGDA 2012) by the *International Game Design Association* (IGDA) addresses the topic of *culturalization*, which comprises more than just translating the verbal material: “It’s important to consider this fact when thinking about a local market’s reaction to game content; not everyone is reacting in the same way and for the same reasons. So what does ‘culture’ mean for game content? First consider these two simplified definitions: Content: Information created for perpetuation and dissemination; in game titles, it’s basically anything a player will see, hear or read. Context: The circumstances or events that form a unique environment in space and time, within which information is created and managed.” (Edwards 2011: 21-22)

8 Japanese names will be cited here in the Japanese order (family name, first name).

For example, there was a discussion about the breast slider. Jokingly, I said, “Well would it help if we had a crotch slider for the male?” Obviously it was a joke, but they responded obviously it’s not gonna work out. I do realize there’s a cultural difference between what Japanese people think and what the rest of the world thinks. (Takahashi Tetsuya in Schreier [2017])

Figure 1: Culturalization in terms of men’s clothing in *Xenoblade Chronicles X*.



Source: Censored Gaming 2017

There are two interesting points in this statement by Takahashi: First, he does not seem to be concerned by the *culturalization* measures taken, but appears rather indifferent to this matter: “I really didn’t mind much at all, actually.” (Schreier 2017) Second, he confirms the existence of cultural differences, underlining this by speaking of the divide between “Japanese people” and “the rest of the world”. Nonetheless, the handling of cultural differences by means of *culturalization* is not the solution players want. As reader comments show, players prioritize preservation of originality over cultural adaptation:

I know Nintendo is a business and that our ratings system is different. But I don’t know how it is so hard for them to understand, we buy Japanese games because we like Japan! I don’t buy JRPGs for some overly-sensitive Treehouse [name of the American *localization*-team] hipster’s interpretation of Japanese content, watered down or sterilized for Western consumption. *I just want the same damn game Japan gets to play*, translated into English! (Funtime Happysnacks in Brian [@NE\_Brian] [2017], our emphasis)

It is also uncertain whether the majority of Japanese games can be adapted to Western conceptions at all. Their core seems to remain Japanese no matter what.

## **MUKOKUSEKI: JAPANESENESS UNDER THE SURFACE**

Coping with different cultures of origin is a precarious matter. In general, it brings forth fundamental incommensurable differences. Using drug analogies and arguments in favor of or against culturalizability are strategies to handle these difficulties and somehow describe the helpless out-of-control-state of mind (while being drugged with Japan). And even after the localization process, Japanese games still seem to remain Japanese under the modified surface. One term that helps to understand Japanese commodities is *mukokuseki*:

The term *mukokuseki* is widely used in Japan in two different, though not mutually exclusive ways: to suggest the mixing of elements of multiple cultural origins, and to imply the erasure of visible ethnic and cultural characteristics. (Iwabuchi 2002: 71, original emphasis)

The term is a composition that consists of two parts: *mu* (無, without, negation of) and *kokuseki* (国籍, nationality), so literally reads as ‘without nationality’ or ‘nationless’. As Iwabuchi explains, there are two ways of understanding this term: One of them – the second in Iwabuchi’s definition – outlines the fact that Japanese commodities often do not display their origins on the surface, so that for example characters in mangas, animes or video games are not depicted as Japanese:

The characters of Japanese animation and computer games for the most part do not look ‘Japanese’. Such non-Japaneness is called *mukokuseki*, literally meaning “something or someone lacking any nationality”, but also implying the erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics or a context, which does not imprint a particular culture or country with these features. (Iwabuchi 2002: 28, original emphasis; he cites the film producer and director Koi)

*Mukokuseki* in this sense was used to explain the rising international popularity of Japanese commodities since the 1990s, especially of manga and anime, but of video games as well: it was argued, that the products – commodities of popular culture – were becoming unproblematic and more digestible for Western audiences as their nationality had been erased, enabling a so-called seducing *soft power* (‘soft’ compared to the already established *hard power* of technological

export goods).<sup>9</sup> Concurrently, this national pride about the international euphoria for Japan was heavily criticized through the same term of *mukokuseki*:<sup>10</sup> As the products lacked the characteristics of nationality, their influence on Western culture was nothing but an illusion, conveying no Japanese values at all.<sup>11</sup> As we would like to show in greater detail, this understanding of *mukokuseki*, and the ways in which cultural markers are analyzed in this respect, are too blunt and superficial.<sup>12</sup> Most of these examples exclusively concern the external and visual appearance of characters in manga and video games. On closer inspection though, the communication of cultural markers and characteristics is far more intricate than the mere display of Japanese facial features:<sup>13</sup>

From our point of view, the complexity of culturality exceeds the narrow perspective on the surface of things. Its manifestation goes deeper and has to be treated more on a phenomenological level. As Cohn shows in his analysis of the visual language of comics, the visual classification allows us to identify manga and anime characters as Japanese even if they do not look like real Japanese people (cf. Figure 2):

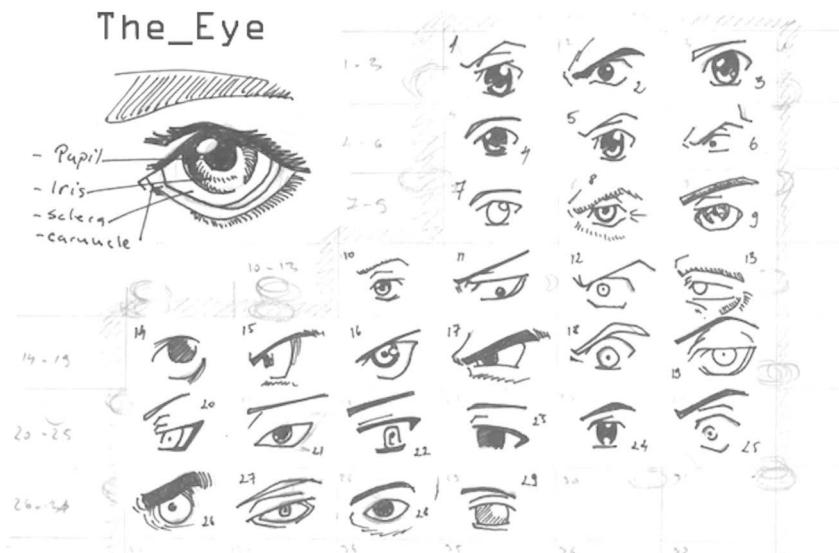
At this point, people around the globe can easily identify Standard JVL [Japanese Visual Language] unconnected to any particular author's manner of drawing. The 'style' has transcended individuals to become a visual vocabulary representative of Japan as a whole. Indeed, JVL is not constrained to manga, and recurs ubiquitously in cartoons, advertise-

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- 9 Citing the political scientist Joseph Nye, Napier notes the uniqueness of soft power: “[...] soft power is seductive. It attracts; it ‘co-opts people rather than coerces them.’” (Napier 2007: 6). Iwabuchi describes this as “a shift from techno-nationalism to software-oriented, ‘soft’ nationalism” (Iwabuchi 2014 [2002]: 22). Interestingly, the lack of national identity was already discussed in connection with technological goods made in Japan, e.g. the Sony Walkman (Iwabuchi 2002: 28).
- 10 This cultural debate is known as the *Nihonjin-ron*, “‘treatise on what makes Japan separate’. The form had its origins as far back as the seventeenth century but reached an apogee in more modern times” (Pilling 2014: 36), culminating in the 1990s (cf. Iwabuchi 2002: 6-7; 213-214).
- 11 Iwabuchi cites the cultural critic Otsuka Eiji (cf. Iwabuchi 2002: 33).
- 12 Furthermore, the notion of *mukokuseki* is often diluted by the use of metaphors, as in the case of Iwabuchi himself, who points out the lack of any “Japanese bodily odour” (Iwabuchi 2002: 28).
- 13 As a public survey shows, the subject of depicting the nationalities of anime characters is quite a delicate matter, cf. That Japanese Man Yuta (2017).

ments, emoticons, and visual culture generally. One is pressed in Japan to *not* find this style in graphic representations. (Cohn 2013: 156, original emphasis).

Figure 2: Despite mukokuseki: Eyes as typical recognition features.



Source: Aoi-Ne-Blue 2009<sup>14</sup>

This semiotic example is useful for understanding the first part of the notion of *mukokuseki* as in the definition by Iwabuchi (see citation above): the Japanese way of creativity lies in indigenization, taking patterns and traces from foreign culture and mixing them with domestic elements to create something completely new and, paradoxically, Japanese through and through. Cohn's example of JVL is telling, because on the one hand, contemporary manga cannot be understood without its origins in traditional illustrated handscrolls (the so-called *emaki*, which have existed since the 12<sup>th</sup> century), but on the other hand, it is heavily influenced by the visual language of American comics as well (cf. Cohn 2013: 153). This and many other established cultural characteristics of commodities are therefore a hybrid mixture – a blend of the Japanization of Americanization, so to speak. In this mixed state, these commodities are not genuinely Japanese nor simply coated with Western properties and values so as to disguise the original

14 This image is reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

Japanese traits – they become a whole new amalgamation of cultural origins that is neither purely Japanese nor, in a sense, ‘colonialized’ by the West. Napier in her analysis on the Japanese influence as a fantasy and a fan cult states it accurately:

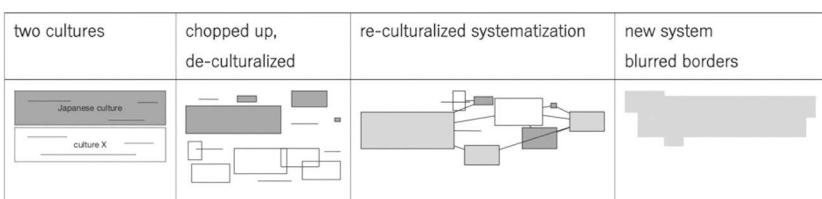
The characters in anime and manga are both ‘Japanese’ and at the same time ‘nationless’. Or, more accurately, they belong to the world of animation and caricature, of fantasy and unreality to the highest degree. Thus, when a non-Japanese enjoys or identifies with a character, he is identifying within a highly distinctive fantasyscape that combines elements of ‘real’ Japan within a cartoon imaginary. (Napier 2007: 210)

The fact that “Hello Kitty and the Pokémons characters still possess certain distinctively Japanese characteristics, even if they are not as obvious as facial or landscape features” (Napier 2007: 130), remains unnoticed at first sight. For more dedicated observers, its otherness is nonetheless perceptible.<sup>15</sup>

Not knowing that the programs they loved were Japanese but simply aware that they [Japanese animes in this case] seemed ‘different’ (Napier 2007: 176).

As for American children themselves, all whom I interviewed knew that *Pokémon* came originally from Japan. [...] [M]any said that, as a result of *Pokémon* and other ‘cool’ Japanese goods, they have developed an interest in Japan. (Allison 2014: 140-141)

Figure 3: *Mukokuseki* as de- and reculturalizing strategy.



Source: Hiloko Kato and René Bauer

15 In a similar way, Consalvo (2016: 1) states: “I never thought about where the games or consoles came from or who had made them. Yet even the few games and systems that I was familiar with reveal a mixture of American and Japanese games and systems comingling at the beginnings of a global game industry.”

The otherness, which obviously cannot be found on the immediate surface of things (e.g. of *Super Mario Bros.* or *Pokémon*, see below), in our opinion becomes tangible through the second way of understanding the notion of *mukokuseki*: it is a unique cultural technique that chops up cultural features and reculturalizes them by mixing in known domestic features, thus creating a new system (cf. Barthes 1983 [1970]), with whole new possibilities (cf. Figure 3).

The context in which the concept of *mukokuseki* was first introduced helps to understand it better. It initially served as a description for a new genre of Japanese action movies, which was created in the 1960s.

For Japan's oldest film studio Nikkatsu, the late 50s and early 60s represented a rapidly evolving, cosmopolitan playground in which Eastern and Western influences could be collated together in an explosive mix that ultimately resulted in movies that felt quite apart from either. These were the *mukokuseki eiga*. (Green 2018: 41)

The first movie of this new genre – as part of a series of nine with the *wataridori* (渡り鳥, wanderer) theme – was *The Rambling Guitarist* (ギターを持った渡り鳥, 1959) by Saito Buichi, which clearly refers to the lone gunslinger in the genre of Westerns. The plot centers on the titular young wanderer Taki Shinji who becomes embroiled with the local *yakuza* of the northern port town of Hakodate, embarks on a romance with the *yakuza* boss's daughter and has awkward encounters with acquaintances of his mysterious past. On the surface, this star-vehicle movie is Japanese, but – in line with the term of *mukokuseki* – an amalgamation of Japanese and Western culture can be seen throughout the entire movie. It includes the titular guitar (“ooz[ing] Western style”, “the most overt signifier of an old-school cowboy feel, but crucially, the song he's singing is in Japanese”, Green 2018: 43), the Westernization of the name of the main antagonist (George, who in the course of the plot turns out to be morally complex, even more so than the hero), the depiction of the modern Japanese woman (wearing Western clothes but living Japanese womanhood), and the unabandoned pursuit of a Japanese sense of morality and traditional values (the ‘good’ *yakuza*, tied both to conflicting concepts of *giri* [obligation] and *ninjo* [compassion]) – all this tying “into a deep-rooted system of signs and symbolism” (ibid 44).

From a more historic and diachronic point of view, the strategy of *mukokuseki* – prominently emerging in the light of actual globalization – is in fact a very old and mostly successful Japanese method of coping with foreign influences: “Japan's long tradition of cultural indigenization is celebrated as the secret of Japan's prosperity and the core of Japan's national sense of Self” (Iwabuchi 2002: 59). This strategy of indigenizing characteristics of foreign cultures not

only pertains to the Americanization after World War II, or, further back, after the forced opening of the country by Commodore Perry's steamed *kurofune* (black warships) in 1853.<sup>16</sup> It can also be applied to the importing of features from the more advanced Chinese civilization, a process beginning at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. From 600 to 838, diplomatic missions of the reigning imperial dynasties were sent to China to learn from their successful neighbor about a range of subjects, including the written language (with all its consequences), rules concerning the structures of government, historiography and how to legitimize it, religion, and cultural assets like art and architecture.<sup>17</sup> “Of course, the Japanese adapted all that they learned to their own needs and tastes” (Vogel 2019: 2), and “[s]ometimes, what it brought was so altered as to become unre-

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16 In 1878, therefore 25 years later, the first Japanese warships arrived in Marseille: “This is nothing more than an exchange – Japan borrows from us our mechanical arts, our military art, our sciences [and] we take their decorative art” (critic Ernest Chesnau, cited by Napier 2007: 28). Cf. also McLuhan, for whom Japan was – in his understanding of “tribal ways” – a largely successful counterexample to the West: “Long centuries of tight tribal organisation now stand the Japanese in very good stead in the trade and commerce of the electric age. A few decades ago they underwent enough literacy and industrial fragmentation to release aggressive individual energies. The close teamwork and tribal loyalty now demanded by electrical intercom again puts the Japanese in positive relation to their ancient traditions. Our own tribal ways are much too remote to be of any social avail.” (McLuhan 2006 [1964]: 256)

17 “During this period, the Japanese mastered a written language, Chinese characters, that allowed officials to communicate over a broader geographical distance and to provide greater consistency in contacts among the highest officials in the capital and officials who served elsewhere. Japan developed standardized rules to clarify what local officials were expected to do and a specialized administrative staff to manage a larger and more complex organization. The Japanese learned how to write histories of former rulers to support the legitimacy of the current ones. They also learned about Buddhism and strengthened the legitimacy of their rulers by linking them with the natural order. They learned how to plan large communities in a systematic way and how to build large Buddhist temples. Furthermore, they imported Confucianism, which reinforced the importance of the loyalty of the subjects to their leaders and emphasized the rules of propriety to maintain a stable organization. They developed new art techniques and poetry styles after studying Chinese culture, and they imported musical instruments.” (Vogel 2019: 1-2)

cognizable" (Braudel 1993: 281).<sup>18</sup> This is best shown by the development of the Japanese tripartite writing system, consisting of Chinese characters (Kanji) and two syllabaries (Hiragana and Katakana) which were adapted from Kanji to match Japanese phonetics, as Japanese and Chinese do not have a genealogical relationship.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to realize how deceiving these indigenized cultural artifacts and assets are: At first sight (or seen by an ignorant foreigner), these everyday artifacts – written language, but also cultural buildings like temples or everyday goods such as chopsticks –<sup>19</sup> are not distinguishable or do not look unquestionably Japanese (they could also be Chinese). But a deeper look under the surface reveals the unique mixture of unprejudiced appropriation of foreign culture and self-confident adaptation to Japan's own cultural needs.<sup>20</sup>

*Mukokuseki* in this wider context is the modern synchronic form of indigenization with an even more deceiving strategy, as the cultural traits in the mixture

18 Pilling (2014: 33-34) is more cautious, but his examples point in the same direction: "This cultural appropriation and subtle subversion of outside influence is hardly unique to Japan. But the distance between Japan and the outside world, both physical and psychological, perhaps exaggerated the phenomenon. The Japanese adapt what comes from outside. They mix strips of seaweed or sea urchin in their pasta. They use the term sebiro to mean suit, mostly unaware that the word is a distortion of Savile Row, a London street famed for its men's tailors. More recently, they have taken western technology and modified it. In the inventive hands of Japanese engineers, trains became bullet trains, and mobile phones morphed into powerful computers (and electronic wallets) well before the onset of Apple's iPhone."

19 Depending on the country, chopsticks vary in size (the Japanese use shorter chopsticks for eating than their Chinese or Korean counterparts, but long ones for cooking), shape (Japanese chopsticks are often pointier than Chinese ones), material (Japanese chopsticks are mostly made of wood or bamboo, ones made of melamine or porcelain are common in China, Korea favors stainless steel), and in terms of their combined use with other eating utensils such as spoons (not common in Japan or Vietnam). On the chopsticks culture sphere, cf. Wang (2015).

20 From a historical perspective, it is interesting to see that Japan also dared to reject foreign techniques and influences later on after having gained a national self-confidence so to speak (for example Christianity, firearms [cf. Perrin (1979), but also Howell (2009)] or letter press [cf. Giesecke (2007), especially 432-441] and of course in the case of the seclusion of the entire country [*Sakoku* 鎮國, "closed country"] in the Tokugawa period [cf. Pilling (2014: 59-61)]).

do not appear to be visible on the surface anymore (other than in such cases as chopsticks, temples or written language). This also applies to video games, where characters do not look Japanese (*Mario*, characters in *Pokémon* or *Devil May Cry*). Narrowing the focus down to the narrative, we will show in the following case studies how the very Japaneseeness of these *mukokuseki* examples can be brought to light.

## **MUKOKUSEKI AS NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE: CASES**

### **Arcades as *loci mukokuseki* – the birthplace of new techniques, themes and Mario**

Japanese arcade halls or game centers (jap. ゲームセンター), are the places where *mukokuseki* has been existed since the first game center opened on the rooftop of a department store in 1931 (cf. Smith 2020). Of course, this amusement park did not yet offer games or arcades, but mainly catered for sports activities like archery, roller skating, bowling or bicycling (cf. Eickhorst 2006: 16) – strikingly, the latter all being Western sports activities. Today, game centers are a heterotopia, a world made of different motivational design and game mechanics: there is tinkering around, as well as try and error (play), but also earnest rule-based play (game), an exotic ambience and the performances of players, solo or in groups, regardless of gender (*Pac-Man* released in 1980 was especially designed for a female audience) or age (the same kind of equality applies to *Pokémon*, see below) – and all in a manner that, from a Western perspective, could be called uncommon, exaggerated or even freaky. Additionally, playing games often does not seem to be the main activity. Instead, visitors turn the place into their second home by doing homework together, eating or even napping.<sup>21</sup> In game centers, a world with strange rules is forged, a culture of otherness *par excellence* (cf. Figure 4).

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21 Cf. the insightful studies by Pellétier-Gagnon (2019), by Tobin (2016) and (2015), as well as by Guins (2014).

Figure 4: Loci mukokuseki – Japanese Game Center.



Source: screenshot (Kato/Bauer)

Other than in America, the land of origin of the modern arcade,<sup>22</sup> in Japan, these machines and their gathering places have survived despite home entertainment systems and smartphones. The amalgamation of cultures is most apparent in Okinawa, where game centers prospered from the beginning because of its American military base (cf. deWinter 2015: 332). Nowadays, the large concentrations of game centers in urban regions like Tokyo emphasize how firmly anchored in culture they are.

This development is remarkable as it was not clear initially if Japan would invest in coin-op games at all, given that they were a competitive threat to the existing *pachinko* halls:<sup>23</sup>

22 See Huhtamo (2005) for the archeology of arcade games, which of course goes back to European roots.

23 *Pachinko* are pinball machines originating from the French table game of the early modern period, *bagatelle*. In the 1920s, an altered form of these table games called the “Corinth game” was imported from America. These could be found especially as an attraction for children in candy-shops (cf. Sedensky 2012: 16); here the “pleasure and play”-background is prominent again (see below, 3.2). The first official pinball machine was introduced in 1929 and named *Pachi-Pachi* describing the noises it made. Due to space restrictions, the Japanese transformed them “by mounting them vertically rather than horizontally and borrowing elements from the European coin-operated

However, the Japanese government did express doubt that game centers, and later computer games, were a good cultural investment in a society that worked 6.5 days per week. David Rosen, a founding member of SEGA (SErvice GAmes) argued successfully with the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) that coin-op arcade games would provide an emotional release, and in 1957, was granted a licence to import coin-op games. (deWinter 2015: 321)<sup>24</sup>

As it turned out, the import of arcade games strengthened the already operating game hall community and *pachinko* culture even more, instead of diminishing them. One explanation can be found in the already existing technological and economical requirements that helped to boost the native arcade industry with clones of imported games and also with creations of their very own:<sup>25</sup> “The Japanese video game industry is one of those industries in Japan that was imported from the United States during the twentieth century, but that was able to somehow ‘improve’ the model.” (Picard 2013)

One factor in the success of these games also lies in the – again borderless – understanding of hardware and software as being an inseparable unity. This holistic approach resulted in the never-ending creation of innovative interfaces, always on the lookout for transformations of the arcade-machine itself, and enabled intricately new game experiences, first by enhancing the simulation of real life activities, e.g.: *MotoPolo* (Sega, 1968, a soccer game with motorcycles, therefore a very early form of *Rocket League* [Psyonix, since 2015]); *Periscope* (Namco, 1965/Sega, 1966, a game with submarines which included looking through a periscope); *Stunt Car* (Sega, 1970, a combination of traditional arcade and racing games); *Wild Gunman* (Nintendo, 1974, with light guns and full-motion videos),<sup>26</sup> *Speed Race* (Taito, 1974, the very first game with a back-

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gambling device called allwin such as a lever in place of a plunger and circular tracks to supplement the traditional bagatelle pins.” (Smith 2020: 103)

24 Cf. also McLuhan (2006 [1964]: 255, our emphasis): “As extensions of the popular *response to the workaday stress*, games become faithful models of a culture.” On the Western founders of Taito and Sega, cf. Smith (2020).

25 This strategy compensated for lack of sponsorship from the armaments industry, e.g. in comparison to the USA. On further influences in terms of socio-economics, cf. Picard (2013) and deWinter (2015).

26 On the development of electric rifle games, which originated in the United Kingdom in the late 19th century, cf. Smith (2020: 110): “In Japan, gun games became the premier coin-op amusement through the efforts of David Rosen.”

ground that scrolled vertically and the first arcade game that was exported to the USA),<sup>27</sup> and other play items such as *Love Tester* (Sega 1972).<sup>28</sup>

Figure 5: *Space Invaders*: new technology and themes.



Source: screenshots (Kato/Bauer)

After the first imports of Western arcade games like *Pong* (Atari, 1972), the Japanese game developing scene started to make their own mark. An innovation both in terms of technology and narrative was *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978, cf. Figure 5).

This arcade game used microprocessors instead of electric circuits and cleverly took advantage of already known technologies that electromechanical arcades provided, adding something new in terms of technology: “That was the first game in Japan to use a CPU with joystick. It was after that when Sega started making similar games, with a CPU and a joystick.” (Szczepaniak 2014b: 272) Furthermore, it is a game that makes one thing clear: you are alone, against the rest of the universe. A complex setting, which might even be called theatrical, creates a world with graphics and animations that seem to be inspired by manga: the aliens of the game look more cute than scary, and they explode radially according to the usual manga style.

27 Other noteworthy titles: *TV Basketball* (Midway, 1974), *Sea Wolf* (Midway, 1976).

28 For an overview, see <https://segaretro.org>.

With *Galaxian* (Namco, 1979), similar game mechanics were technically as well as thematically refined by Namco: it was the first arcade game in color, and the player was confronted with insects instead of aliens (cf. Figure 6).

Figure 6: *Galaxian: invasion of the insects from outer space*.<sup>29</sup>



Source: screenshots (Kato/Bauer)

While the outer-space theme was retained, the adversary is not an unknown extraterrestrial species, but originates from the familiar home planet, reminiscent of radioactively mutated monsters like *Godzilla* (1954) or *Mothra* (1961).<sup>30</sup> Thus, the Japanese arcade has emancipated itself, creating its very own imaginative space where the development of every narrative and visual idea now seems possible.

One important difference to Western game development lies in the creation process, with the existing technology as starting point. This is also expressed by designer and producer Inafune Keiji (*Mega Man* series [Capcom, 1987]):

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29 The inscription in red characters reads: “Is this a challenge to civilization?! – Invasion of the monsters from outer space! Defy them! Galactic warrior!”

30 Linking the monster invasion to nuclear weapon testing is of course meant as an allegorical take on the atomic bombings of World War II. Cf. Coulmas (2014) for the corresponding events of the *Daigo Fukuryu-Maru* incident on March 1, 1954.

I think for example with Mega Man, we looked at the colours and we said: ‘OK, what does this colour limitation mean for our character? How can we make the best character from this limitation?’ Whereas my image with maybe some Western developers is that they drew a picture of a character’s design, and they said to their programmer or whoever: ‘Right, now put this in the game.’ (Inafune in Szczepaniak 2014a: 497)

One famous example is Mario’s red cap: “[...] his red cap was there so his hair wouldn’t have to fly around when he jumped” (Kohler 2016 [2005]: 34). *Donkey Kong* (Atari, Nintendo R&D1/Nintendo, 1981), where Mario made his first appearance (by his original name of Jumpman that indicated his main action), “was the first game project in which the design process began with a story” (*ibid*). Seen through Western eyes, the handling of the narrative seems strange: the story is named after an ape that clearly resembles the movie monster King Kong,<sup>31</sup> with the absurd name of “Donkey Kong”. Understandably, the American sales managers were perplexed:

‘Donkey Hong?’, ‘Konkey Dong?’, ‘Honkey Dong’? It made no sense. Games that were selling had titles that contained words such as mutilation, destroy, assassinate, annihilate. When they played ‘Donkey Kong’, they were even more horrified. The salesmen were used to battle games with space invaders, and heroes shooting lasers at aliens. One hated ‘Donkey Kong’ so much that he began looking for a new job. Yamauchi (CEO Nintendo) heard all the feedback but ignored it. ‘Donkey Kong’, released in 1981, became Nintendo’s first super-smash hit. (Sheff 1993: 49)

Despite the name, it was not King Kong that served as the blueprint for the game story, but Popeye. And even though efforts to obtain a license did not work out, the nature of the relationship between the protagonists – seen through Japanese eyes – remained the same, as Miyamoto Shigeru explained later:

Even after the Popeye license fell through, I was still thinking about the relationship between Popeye, Bluto, and Olive Oyl. Their relationship is somewhat friendly. They’re not enemies, they’re friendly rivals. (Kohler (2016 [2005]: 36)

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31 Of course, Nintendo was sued by Universal Studios. The renaming of the player character as “Mario” goes back to Mario A. Segale, who was the owner of the warehouse in a suburb of Seattle where Nintendo stored their arcade games that were sold in America (cf. Nintendo UK 2015). See also the homage to King Kong combined with Godzilla in *Bayonetta* (Platinum Games, 2009).

In retrospect, this friendly rivalry makes perfect sense as narrative groundwork for the expansion to an immense story universe that still goes on today: the success of the *Mario* series shows in the impressive number of more than 200 games that feature the short, friendly plumber, making it the most successful Nintendo game series.<sup>32</sup> The infinite seriality is reflected in the unlimited nature of the playable game world in *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985): “The ‘Mario’ games were more interesting because there were always new worlds to conquer, each one more magnificent than the last.” (Sheff 1993: 50) The disparate thematic settings – the world of the princess (castles, walls and moats) and that of the plumber (sewer system), animated with diverse animals and plants (tortoise, mushrooms and the piranha-plant *pakkun*) – are mingled to form a new, family-friendly (represented by Nintendo’s Famicom) *mukokuseki* game world:

Adults enjoy Mario too. They respond, Miyamoto feels, because, the games bring them back to their childhoods. ‘It is a trigger to again become primitive, primal, as a way of thinking and remembering.’ Miyamoto says. ‘An adult is a child who has more ethics and morals. That’s all. When I am a child, creating, I am not creating a game. I am in the game. The game is not for children, it is for me. It is for the adult that still has a character of a child.’ (Sheff 1993: 50-51)

One reason for the worldwide success of these games arguably lies in the (superficial) *mukokuseki* interpretation: “Mario does not invoke the image of Japan.” (Iwabuchi 2002: 94) By looking under the surface and taking into account the design of Mario’s appearance, the groundwork of a different relationship between hero and villain that was borrowed from the West, as well as the reactions of the sales managers, the fundamental Japanese-ness of the game’s narrative structure and design is revealed.

### ***Pokémon: Japanese ambiguity and nostalgia***

Alongside the *Super Mario* series, *Pokémon* (Nintendo, since 1996) is one of the most mentioned titles in the *mukokuseki* discussion. With its multiverse expand-

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32 An offshoot is the *Kaizo-Mario* genre, also known as *Asshole-Mario*. These fan projects use hacks of *Super Mario World* to create unique, extremely difficult levels: “Behind these Kaizo games lies a certain mentality: they are about challenging the player’s skill and patience, but also try to balance this with a sense of fun, mischief and discovery” (Lipscombe 2018) – a very own world of *mukokuseki*, so to speak (on mastering as a Japanese game mechanic cf. Kato/Bauer 2020).

ing crossmedially into nearly every form of entertainment commodity (games, manga, anime, movies, collector's cards, merchandise) and being integrated into everyday life in many different ways,<sup>33</sup> this global phenomenon is indeed the figurehead of *mukokuseki* Japan. Again, it seems fair to assume that the unproblematic renaming of the human protagonist boy from Satoshi to Ash in the Western localization process proves the odorlessness of the narrative, where it does not appear to matter whether the characters are Japanese or not. However, it is a fact that the structure and dynamics of the character's development had to be altered and localized for the Western audience. This is strong evidence that a unique cultural manifestation exists underneath the neutral surface:

When Pokémon entered the marketplace of the United States, the image given it was more dynamic and bolder than the cuteness accorded it in Japan. Brighter colors have been used in the advertising, for example. And instead of making Pikachu the central character, Ash has been forefronted, under the assumption, not entirely borne out, that American kids need a heroic character with whom to identify [...]. In *Mew Two Strikes Back*, for example, the US director, Norman Grossfeld, altered the storyline to make the cloned Pokémon, Mew Two, clearly evil, and the battle Ash waged against it, definitively 'good' – two features that were much hazier in the Japanese original. (Allison 2014: 142)

As Allison has shown in her analysis, ambiguity "in the sense of a murkiness that blurs borders rather than gets contained by them (good/bad, real/fantasy, animal/human)" (2014: 143), is a central aspect in the Japanese understanding of things, even being reflected in the Japanese understanding of 'cuteness'. Pokémons, or pocket monsters, are the prototype of these ambiguous *kawaii* (cute) beings, strong and dangerous, but tamable, faithful and constant companions of human kids, which transform into a handy pocket size within the pokeballs.<sup>34</sup> Here, the border between imagination and reality starts to blur as well: Pokémons are not only to be found on portable consoles (Game Boy, Nintendo DS), but, especially in Japan, also in manga books, on collector's cards, as merchandising and therefore are, in fact, portable companions. In this way, these "children's mass fantasies" become an incarnation of a postmodern-capitalistic materialism in a culture where "the border between play and non-play, commodity

33 Cf. also the extensive analysis by Allison (2006).

34 Cf. also the possibility of playing Dark Sonic in *Sonic Adventure 2* (Sega, 2001): "What our six-year-old discovered was that there are (besides still others) two different models of what counts as being or doing 'good'." (Gee 2006 [2003]: 613)

and not, increasingly blurs.” (Allison 2014: 137; 150)<sup>35</sup> Allison introduces the notion of *polymorphous perversity* (“mixing, morphing, and moving between and across territories of various sorts” [ibid]), and thus makes this hybrid structure tangible for a Western audience.

The recent hype around *Pokémon Go* (Niantic, 2016) has clearly shown: the whole *Pokémon* series crosses age boundaries, in defiance of Western unambiguousness; four-year-olds are hooked by the games and the animation series in the same way as teenagers, older players looking for nostalgia can catch the monster in the real world with the now available pokeball accessories (Pokéball Plus). And the involvement strategies also prove to be gender-neutral, reminiscent of the Japanese game centers (see above, 3.1). It is well known that the inventor of *Pokémon*, Tajiri Satoshi, was an arcade maniac, spending hours and days with games like *Space Invaders*.<sup>36</sup> Besides these arcade origins with their age- and gender-crossing structures and the beating of highscores and adversaries, the narrative mechanics of collecting and stock taking that dominate the *Pokémon* world with its countless monsters can be seen as uniquely Japanese: collecting as an activity is omnipresent in Japan and reflected, for example, in the *Otaku* culture,<sup>37</sup> in other game titles such as in the *Katamari* series or in general in the *Gacha* genre, where the collecting of real and virtual collector’s cards is used as a fan-based expansion of successful games. Stock taking of countless entities on the other has a highly educational value: “*Pokémon* is centrally about acquiring knowledge”, as part of an almost ‘*Bildungsroman*’-like journey of learning from a Western perspective (cf. Buckingham/Sefton-Green 2004: 21).

In 1999, a Time magazine cover story titled *Beware of the Poke-Mania* was dedicated to the hype coming from overseas. It provided some telling background information about Tajiri Satoshi, who at the beginning of the article was depicted as an outcast, making even his parents cry because of his childish pas-

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35 Cf. also Napier (2007: 131).

36 “He was such a fanatic that one arcade gave him a *Space Invaders* machine to take home” (Chua-Eoan/Larimer 1999: 84). None other than Shigeru Miyamoto says about him: “Mr. Tajiri didn’t start this project intending to make something which would become very popular. He just wanted to make something he wanted to play himself”, Kohler (2016 [2005]: 228).

37 This *Otaku* culture was, for example, also integrated in the *Katamari* series (Namco, since 2004), cf. Jones (2008: 66).

sions.<sup>38</sup> His intentions behind creating such a game also became more understandable from a cultural point of view:

Yet collecting Pokémons and pitting them against one another is not a new kind of quest, simply one tweaked with technology. In Asia, fathers and grandfathers still tell of growing up in the midst of World War II, of nights of not knowing what to do with yourself except sneak into the tall grass of the countryside to catch crickets, then take them home, cupped in your hand, to raise in the dark of matchboxes, training the insects for fights with the crickets of other boys who have been on the same nocturnal hunt. The more experience each cricket has had, the better a fighter it becomes – the tiny surrogate for the boy unable to fight in the war going on all around him. Pokémons is that kind of game. (Chua-Eoan/Larimer 1999: 86)

As for today, collecting living insects still is a nostalgically beloved activity of kids in their summer holidays, also being used as a narrative element in anime, television drama or games such as the *My Summer Holiday* series (Millennium Kitchen, since 2000). In Tajiri's case, the solitary concentration on collecting and taking stock of insects as well as cracking highscores was balanced nonetheless against the desire to interact with others.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the 'Game-Boy Link Cable' not only provided the possibility of trading with other pocket monster owners, but was even designed to be mandatory for the completion of one's own collection, making interaction a congenial core activity of the game. Here again, the subtle and skillful interconnection between game and narrative mechanics emerges clearly.

### **Cutscenes: Narrative motivation, background information and entertainment made in Japan**

Japanese games have always been described as being narration-heavy when compared to Western genres: the game action is embedded in stories and thus provides narrative depth to the ludic actions. Of course, the crossmedial over-

38 Before that it reads: "In Japan, where the Pokémons were born, Ash is called Satoshi; and Satoshi was made in the image of his creator, Satoshi Tajiri, a young outcast who, as a boy living just outside Tokyo, collected insects and other tiny creatures of field, pond and forest." (Chua-Eoan/Larimer 1999: 83)

39 "Since the late 1980s, the trend in game design has been towards greater complexity that, demanding intense concentration, pulls players into solitary engagements with their virtual gameworlds." (Allison 2014: 145)

flow into story universes (e.g. of *Pokémon* or *Mario*, see above) nurtures and expands this affinity already inherent in individual game stories even more. In this context, cutscenes are an often used narrative mechanic.

First introduced in arcade games, the so-called intermissions that were born *ex negativo* – Western arcades did not at that time provide any narrative elements – already comprise all of the three main characteristics of modern cutscenes: narrative motivation, expansion of background information and context, and supply of reward and entertainment at the same time.<sup>40</sup> *Space Invaders Part 2* (Taito, 1979) first introduced these intermissions, which can be described as transitions that secure a narrative sequentiality: instead of exposing the player seamlessly to the next wave of adversary alien spacecrafts, the intermissions show how the alien mothership escapes while transmitting distress calls. This provides the player with useful information (the next attack is impending!), not only based on logical consequences but also on narrative motivation.

*Pac-Man* (1980) also uses intermissions, but rather than motivating the ongoing game action as in *Space Invaders Part 2*, they primarily serve as entertainment and provide additional information about the characters: the ghost called Blinky gets caught on a pixelated nail and tears his robe, and reappears in the next intermission with patches, before dragging the cloth behind him in the third. These intermissions expand the narrative in a more humoristic and nonsensical way, underlining the ambiguity of the cuteness of deadly ghosts (similar to *Pokémon*, see above, 3.2).

The very first title that uses a cutscene as an introduction came out only one year later at the very beginning of the *Donkey Kong* series: significantly, the kidnapping of Jumpman's girlfriend not only serves as background and motivation for starting the game action, but also introduces, in a very subtle manner, the micromechanics of climbing up the ladder, which is key to the gameplay. Meanwhile, 40 years after their first appearance, cutscenes are not always a popular feature in games:

We love to play the game, and not waste 15 Minutes during the first time skipping all those cutscenes. (setsunaaa 2015)

i've done plays through while skipping all cut-scenes and, while it can feel disjointed [...] i think it's a better experience overall. (LoG-Sacrament 2013)

I get it when it's a cutscene heavy game (Japanese games especially). (csward 2016)

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40 Cf. Klevjer, who speaks of “reward by entertainment” (2002: 195).

In these cases, cutscenes are not taken as motivating, informative, rewarding and entertaining elements, but as a waste of time that luckily can be avoided by skipping them. The perceived cutscene-heaviness of Japanese games in fact can be seen in the 141 answers on an internet forum, replying to the question “What game has the longest intro cutscene?” (Menitta 2016). The games that stand out are *Ōkami* ([Clover Studio, 2006] referred to 31 times; in fact being 18 min long), *Metal-Gear-Solid* series (17x; 7-16 min), *Persona 4* ([Atlus, 2008] 16x; 20 min) and *Xenosaga* ([Monolith Soft, 2002] 10x; 13 min). It does not seem necessary for a game to have intro cutscenes that long, but the only positive answer addresses the reason:

this thread made me realize that I really like long intros, world setups that bring me into the world before even doing anything. Never really thought of it before, guess I treated it as a given. (WilyRook, #59 in Menitta 2016)

In the case of *Ōkami*, the long, even doubled-up narration at the beginning is clearly intended to help the player adapt to the world of ancient Japanese folk tales and myths: “The passive role of the player in this sequence, merely clicking on the screen to progress through the text, heightens the feeling of being told a story.” (Hutchinson 2019: 48-49) From a Western viewpoint, this large number of cutscenes combined with an abundance of text is somewhat difficult to digest. It also suggests that game genres such as visual novels are clearly meant to be popular in Japan only, given its strong culture of writing (*Hatoful Boyfriend*, see below).

## **ABSURD OVERCOMPLEXITY, INTRIGUING SIMPLICITY AND MIXING OF EVERYTHING: MUKOKUSEKI AS CATALYST**

The world record for the longest cutscenes is held by *Metal Gear Solid 4* (Konami, 2008, 27 min at a stretch, and 71 min combined). In general, the whole *Metal Gear* series comes up with a unique amount of cutscenes, nonetheless enjoyed by the gamer community. This is corroborated by an article entitled “Which game has cutscenes you actually enjoy watching? Tell us about the ones you don’t want to skip”, in which video game journalists name their favorite cutscenes. Andy Kelly associates the cutscenes in *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* (Platinum Games, 2013) with a kind of jolly absurdity.

You know when a cutscene starts in a Platinum game you're gonna be entertained. And *Rising* is the peak of their powers when it comes to daft cinematics. To the point where they're almost more fun than the actual game at points.

Fusing the most indulgent theatrics of anime with the outrageousness of Japanese video-games, *Revengeance* is a celebration of the absurd. Which is amazing considering it's a game based on the dull co-star of MGS2. (PCGamer 2019)

The *Bayonetta* series (Platinum Games, since 2009) is another well-known celebration of the absurd. In a forum on steamcommunity.com, users Cake and Setnaro X exchange their thoughts about this:

Cake: RIDICULOUS. I don't think I've ever rolled my eyes as much as I have whenever there's a cutscene in this game. Why is there so much nonsense?

Setnaro X: Story purposes. You can easily skip through all the non-interactive cutscenes instantly by holding the right trigger and select button at the same time if it's really that bothersome to you.

Cake: It's not bothersome, it's just . . . weird. Almost as if they went out of their way to make it as silly as possible.

Setnaro X: Bingo. Welcome to PlatinumGames' storytelling. Their writing is pretty much the usual tongue-in-cheek shenanigans you'd expect from an over-the-top Japanese action flick. (Cake/Setnaro X 2017)

For Cake, the nonsensical cutscenes are not “bothersome” and therefore not to be skipped. However, it does not seem so easy for him to cope with the otherness of *Bayonetta*'s cutscenes, and he searches for a word to describe it (shown by the dots: “just . . . weird”). Setnaro X's explanation for the underlying absurdity is twofold: it refers to the storytelling of a game production company (“Welcome to PlatinumGames' storytelling”), and the fact that it clearly serves Japanese narrative mechanics (“from an over-the-top Japanese action flick”).

For other Western players though, the exaggeration and absurdity of Japanese games can take on unacceptable proportions. YouTuber TheGamerTron, who in general loves to play Japanese games, explains in his video “Why I dislike Japanese Storytelling in Video Games” that these absurd insertions are the “biggest issue” for him and make him feel as if he is on drugs:

The pointless bullshit, the pointless weird shit [...] the weird out of nowhere shit. [...] I swear, watching some anime, it makes me feel like, am I under the influence, did I actually drink some alcohol or do some narcotics before watching this, because it doesn't seem right. (TheGamerTron 2017, at 00:09:36)

TheGamerTron talks of animes here, but the video shows cutscenes from *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish* (Platinum Games, 2010) during his discussion of this, in his opinion, tiresome topic.

As we have seen in the case of the Let's Play of *Beautiful Katamari* (see above, chapter 1), the strategy of comparing Japanese games to a drug trip seems helpful for coping with the excessive absurdity and strange mixture of things. In that sense, *Beautiful Katamari* is the perfect example, where story, absurdity and the simplest mechanics are mingled to perfection: “[...] the story's premise is a more or less transparent pretext for gameplay that is non-narrative with a vengeance — you just roll a ball.” (Jones 2008: 52)

With the Platinum Games titles and the *Katamari* series, we have already digressed from the pool of examples that are based on the *mukokuseki* principle, by dealing with games that are Japanese through and through. Still, the fundamental mechanic seems to be the same: unceasing and unabashed mixing of everything at every level. Seen in this light, the *mukokuseki* principle that first helped to establish a Japanese game industry in its own right has become an independent catalyst for creativity of its own. Our last three examples will focus on the mixture of deceptive simplicity, nonsensical joy and uncanny narrative continuity.

Simplicity as a narrative mechanic seems to be one answer to this often excessive mixture of over-exaggeration and absurdity. Nonetheless, the nonsensical aspect still remains an important part of these games. *Frogger* (Konami/Sega, 1981), for example, is one of the oldest arcade games in which the rules of the real world do not apply anymore: the goal is to achieve a happy ending (albeit endlessly postponed) by guiding a frog over a multi-lane motorway and a river. On the micro level, the cars drive in opposite directions in each of the lanes, and – even more irrational – safe places like logs and water lilies may float down the same river, but on different currents. The fact that the frog dies if it falls into the water, is the high point of the nonsense.

ママにゲーム隠された (*Mama ni gemu kakusareta*, hap inc., 2017) is a novel “casual yet surreal escape game” (description on Google Play). Already the title is more complex than it might seem and is in fact difficult to translate: on Google Play, the title is stated as *Hidden my game by mom 3* (Hidden 2018), Wikipedia labels it as *Mom Hid my Game* and also Let's Players refer to it in the latter way. The literal translation is “by my mom the game has being hidden”, the passive voice underlining the abnormal might of mom and the importance of the gaming device in contrast to the helplessness of the boy, who is desperate to

find it.<sup>41</sup> The visuals and point-and-click design are very simple, but the appeal and the suspense of the game lie in a rather subtle narrative mechanic, of finding out where mom has hidden the device and where she has hidden herself – bumping into her before getting the console means a fail – mixed with a nonsensical touch. First, her hideouts are almost ridiculously easy to find, but gradually, they become more and more disguised, making the atmosphere of the game fun and uncanny at the same time. Later on, the measures taken to prevent the boy/the player from getting the device grow highly absurd. The more or less obvious hideouts are for example guarded by crocodiles and motorcycle acrobats, which need to be outwitted. This basically never-ending story of the boy outsmarting his mom contains a surprising twist after 49 levels, which represent days: the boy barricades himself in his room for the next 950 days, and the solution of the last level is to release him from his *hikikomori* state (social withdrawal syndrome), uniting him with his mom and family.

It is a narrative strategy that emphasizes the bittersweetness of things and merges play-and-pleasure with tragedy and sadness in a sudden, unabashed manner. Often, the (Western) audience is caught on the wrong foot, lulled in by the blithe Japanese game world of the hilarious and easy-going absurd.

This is also the case with *Hatoful Boyfriend: A School of Hope and White Wings* (PigeoNation Inc., 2011). Here, the mixing strategy seems to go over the top by mixing everything at every level. The game's genre is the visual novel, in which lavish images and a great many textual inserts are combined into a multi-branched narrative. The player takes the role of the story's protagonist, interacting through extensive text-based conversations with various characters and altering the story's ending by making different choices (prompting an invitation to replay the game after the first playthrough).

Of course, the visualizations clearly refer to manga, with the player clicking through images that are not animated in general, only “[a]t certain pivotal moments in the story, more detailed images drawn especially for those scenes and enhanced by more cinematic camera angles and CGI are included.” (Cavallaro 2010: 90-91) From a Western perspective, visual novels are often falsely equated with dating sims, where the player controls a usually “male avatar whose goal is to date, and converse with, various female characters in order to form a romantic relationship” (ibid 94-95) in a high-school environment. In *Hatoful Boyfriend*, this is indeed the case, but with important twists: the avatar is a female and the dating sim mode is only the first round of the game. The setting of the game is

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41 On the concept of self, represented by the structure of Japanese language, cf. Hasegawa/Hirose (2005).

fairly nonsensical: In an alternate world taken over by sapient birds (the dystopian background is not fully revealed in the first round of the game), the player – a human named Hiyoko, meaning ‘chick’ – starts college at St. PigeoNation’s Institute, an elite school for birds that has invited her as human liaison to prove the possibility of peaceful co-existence and even friendship between birds – mainly doves – and humans. The title of the game is already highly ambiguous and oscillates between different readings – in Japanese, ‘hato’ means dove, but the often inconclusive Japanese pronunciation of the English words results in further different possibilities, playing with its contradictive meanings: heartful vs. hurtful (and even hateful). And this is not a coincidence: if the player has completed four specific endings (out of thirteen) of the first part and is willing to ‘fulfill the promise’ (instead of living a normal life), the second round of the game is unlocked, known as *Bad Boys Love* (or *Hurtful Boyfriend*).

Figure 7: “Kawaii!” – Pewdiepie as ‘weabitch’ during his Let’s Play of *Hatoful Boyfriend*.



Source: Pewdiepie 2014, screenshot (Kato/Bauer)

In this storyline, the protagonist soon goes missing, with the game turning unexpectedly from a drippy love story into a veritable murder mystery mixed with horror. *Hatoful Boyfriend* is in this sense a deceptive game, as the pinkish background and the purple text box invoke a lavish atmosphere of easy-going romance (cf. Figure 7). But a closer look at this introduction of a character already reveals an excessive, almost uncanny mixture of things: the quail (a photo of a

real bird) is depicted as it would look in human form (a manga character). It is difficult to tell from the bird's appearance, but all the human forms of the male love interests of the female protagonists look rather feminine, blurring the gender lines. And in the case of Kazuaki Nanaki, the name is Japanese, but the character is not (cf. Figure 7).

*Hatoful Boyfriend* is a prototype of the otherness of Japanese games, playing excessively with the blending of oppositions: non-Japanese and Japanese, text and image, human and animals, male and female, friendship and cruelty, romance (dating simulator) and murder mystery, mellow schooldays and postapocalyptic background. Many Western players were set on the wrong track by this game – one of them summing it up as follows:

Here's what I expected from *Hatoful Boyfriend*: a lighthearted dating sim filled with bird puns and typical Japanese high school tropes. I got that. I also got punched in the gut with emotions many times. As a result of playing this game, I am now suffering from PTSD: Pigeon Tragedy Shock Disorder. (Ali 2014)

## CONCLUSION

*Hatoful Boyfriend* was positively received in the West in general, but in the case of Pewdiepie's Let's Play, it could not win the audience's favor. Against his will, the Let's Player had to drop it after only one part, as a result of generating too few likes. This example shows that some of the Japanese games and narrative mechanics might be just too weird to be easily watched by a Western audience. Of course, this underlines the incommensurability of different gaming cultures.

However, this should not to be seen too negatively. As Bhabha (e.g. Bhabha/Rutherford 1990) has shown in his critique of multiculturalism and by providing an alternative way of dealing with otherness – by accepting it and creating a third space instead of incorporating or colonializing it –, it is essential to be able to accept and acknowledge the other culture. Against this backdrop, the Japanese strategy of *mukokuseki* can be regarded as a solution that was perfected by and for Japanese culture, driven by the fundamental principle of pushing the home-grown gaming culture to its limits. And this strategy could serve as a mirror to reflect Western ways of dealing with other cultures as well.

In this article we used the concept of *mukokuseki* as an instrument for comprehending the otherness of Japanese games and for understanding some of the narrative mechanics that are to be found under the surface, which so often ap-

pears to be non-specific in terms of nationality. This comprised the intertwined approach of game and narrative mechanics (soft- and hardware, so to speak), the mixture of old and new dealing with the desire for innovation together with the urge for nostalgia, the unflinching copying or even plagiarization of the best practices and the already known, blurring the lines between real and digital, the overflow of stories and their incorporation into ever more expanding crossmedial story universes, the coexistence of contrasting narrative topics and excessive use of absurd and nonsensical storylines, always serving play-and-pleasure, but also hiding surprising twists that break with traditional narrative patterns. It appears that the de- and reculturalizing *mukokuseki* strategy, with its mixing of own domestic elements with ones borrowed from the West, has become a fundamental principle of Japanese game design. Western players try to cope with these strategies by using drug metaphors or by immersing themselves into the game world by acting out their own idea of Japaneseness. Nonetheless, as the example of Pewdiepie shows, his gestures and prosody when expressing the exaggerated *kawaii* feelings still remain that of a foreigner: “sorry, my weabitch took over” (cf. Figure 7). It is clear though that playing Japanese games affects Western players as well, as they subtly become a part of the *mukokuseki* machinery.

### Key to GAT2 transcriptions

(the list below only contains the conventions relevant to this article)

°h	breathing in
( . )	micro pause, estimate, up to approx. 0.2 seconds
(--)	medium-length pause, estimate, approx. 0.5 to 0.8 seconds
(1.0)	timed pauses
robert_s	words joined together within units
((coughs))	para- and extralinguistic actions and events
<<whispers>>	para- and extralinguistic actions and events
	accompanying speech
(( . . . ))	gap in transcript
=	fast, immediate follow-on contribution by speaker
:	extending, lengthening by approx. 0.2 to 0.5 seconds
acCENT	focal stress, accentuation
accEnt	secondary stress
ac!CENT!	pronounced stress

Fluctuations in pitch at the end of intonational phrases:

?	steep rise
,	medium rise
-	even level
;	medium drop
.	steep drop

Intralinear notation of fluctuations in stress and pitch:

<sup>^</sup> SO	rising-falling
' SO	rising
↓ SO	jump in pitch to a noticeable low and constant accent

Changes in volume and pace of speech:

<<ff>	>	fortissimo, very loud
<<p>	>	piano, quiet
<<lent>	>	lento, slow

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