Japanese Video Games, From Odorless to Fragrant

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Introduction

For several decades, video games of every sort of genre have constituted one of Japan's primary cultural exports. Yet, these video games, as Iwabuchi Koīchi argues in his work *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (2002), within the timeframe it was written, were "Odorless". This concept of "Cultural Odor" is described as such: "…the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images of ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the consumption process" [1]. This cultural odor can manifest as both odorless and fragrant. Odorless would imply that the particular product is sterile in nature, not associated with cultural features of a country of origin, and neither with images nor idea of its national way of life. Fragrance can be defined as something having a socially and culturally acceptable and pleasant 'smell', the product bearing the mark of cultural features of the country of origin and the imagery of the national way of life. Iwabuchi then moves to apply this concept to his three C's: consumer technologies (the Sony Walkman, Karaoke etc.), comics and cartoons (animation) and computer/video games[2]. In this thesis I would like to focus on the third C, the computer/video games. My reason for doing so is their abundance and relevance in modern-day society. Almost everyone who has access to a digital device (i.e., a phone, a computer, a console), has interacted with or played a video game before, even if it can be considered a one-off interaction. Many of these games are of Japanese making, and many game series that find their origin in Japan have become tremendously popular throughout the world. Take for example *Pokémon* (1996), *Mario* (1983) and the *Zelda* (1986) series. These game series have found their way into society as something that invokes both nostalgia and modern-day entertainment, as the series are still being added upon with new titles being developed every so often. However, these game series are not necessarily invoking cultural odor. Instead, they often take inspiration from western fantasy tropes, with very obvious references in the first Zelda game, *The Legend of Zelda* (1983) for example. This can be seen in the fact that it was a fairly simple "Knight rescues the princess" story, and the myriad references to Christian concepts, such as the cross adorning the protagonists' shield, and the cross-shaped tombstones in graveyards throughout the game[3]. Yet, these games still fall under the JRPG (Japanese Role-Playing Game) genre, which is a topic I will explore further in the literature review and beyond. I argue, however, that nowadays, Iwabuchi's claim of Japanese video games being Odorless can be challenged, as the times have shifted and changed, resulting in video games having evolved into entities that hold "Fragrance". More modern games seem to be using Japan, Japanese culture or Japanese history/mythology/folklore as a factor for their success. Take for example a game like *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019). This widespread interaction and cultural, historical and environmental insertion makes it clear to me that this last 'C', at the very least, warrants a re-evaluation. Therefore, I raise the following research question: "How have Japanese video games evolved from being Odorless to carrying their unique cultural Fragrance openly?".

To explore this evolution, it is vital to establish the timeline of how this cultural fragrance developed: where did it start, what kind of developments did it go through on a technical and cultural level, and where are we now? To do so, first comes a review of literature, an introduction to

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[1] Iwabuchi, Koīchi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002, 27.

[2] Iwabuchi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, 27.

[3] Zelda Dungeon. "The Cultural Influences in the Zelda Series", accessed June 26th 2023, https://www.zeldadungeon.net/the-cultural-influences-in-the-zelda-series/

the vital literature that makes my research possible. Through these works, I have found common themes and cultural aspects that are inseparable from video games both as a physical and cultural product. An in-depth explanation of Iwabuchi's definition of odor and concepts will be present, as well as an explanation of the concept of game localization. The importance of a comprehensive definition of cultural odor is after all vital to answering this research question. For this Thesis, I have chosen to utilize the case study method, and have therefore selected two separate Japanese videos games to that end.

The first of which is *Persona 5*, a game in the *Persona* series which is also used as a case study in the article *Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games* (2021) by Carmen Mangiron, more on this later. *Persona 5* is developed by ATLUS, a Japanese game studio which has been responsible for the previous releases of the *Persona* series and has also produced other popular releases such as *Catherine: Full Body* (2019) and the *Shin Megami Tensei* (1987-present) series. *Persona 5* puts you in the shoes of the protagonist, with the codename ´Joker´. The story is set in modern-day Tokyo, where alternate realities according to an individual's true desires take shape in various places, which have real-life consequences for the citizens, sometimes resulting in horrific accidents. The protagonist finds themselves in one of these environments and awakens to their powers—the power of *Persona*, the ability to make manifest desires into beings that will perform actions for you—which results in you being able to prevent the accidents in the real world from occurring. You, a high school student, and a group of friends you make along the way—that also have special powers—make it your mission to essentially steal the desires of the twisted hearts of adults, and form a group called the *Phantom Thieves*. My reason for choosing this game specifically, is because of its absolutely stellar reception in the West, being hailed by reviewers such as IGN as "…a new gold standard for Japanese RPGs and by far the best entry in the series yet" [4] and GameSpot calls it "…a refined, effortlessly stylish RPG that will be talked about for years to come" [5], and the fact that it is inherently a 'very Japanese' game, incorporating stylistic choices and culture that is seen in many games of Japanese make, while maintaining a modern setting.

The second entry, *Nioh 2*, takes a wholly different approach than *Persona*, instead focusing heavily on Japanese folklore and applying that to the Sengoku era (The Warring States period) of Japan. The protagonist plays the role of Hide, a half-human, half-*Yōkai* (*Yōkai* 妖怪, phantom, specter, demon, apparition, monster), with you experiencing what is essentially a highlight-reel of the Sengoku period, in which you meet many famous warlords such as Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), while trying to stop the evil *Yōkai* from being summoned by individuals who posses spirit stones. These spirit stones are said to make any dream come true, though it is more akin to giving you the power to summon powerful *Yōkai* to do your bidding through force. While striving to be as realistic as possible in its depiction of historical events, albeit dramatized and with the inclusion of *Yōkai*, it also makes use of many distinctively Japanese elements such as the existence of *Yōkai*, religious practices and the characters all speak period-correct Japanese. My reasoning behind choosing this video game together with *Persona 5* is that they display entirely opposite environments, in the sense that *Persona* takes place in a modern-day setting while *Nioh 2* instead opts to take the historical angle. Both however, I argue, hold fragrance; more on this in the following chapters.

Following the literature review section, I will give a brief history of the Japanese video game and the birth of the JRPG (Japanese Role-Playing Game) genre, explaining how Japanese games could proliferate so successfully across the globe, finding success anywhere inside and outside of domestic

[4] Goldfarb, Andrew. "Persona 5 Review." *IGN*, Accessed May 10th 2023, https://www.ign.com/articles/2017/03/29/persona-5-review

[5] James, Lucy. "Persona 5 Review: Style and Substance." *GameSpot*, Accessed May 10th 2023, https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/persona-5-review/1900-6416640/

borders. I have also included a section on positioning *Nioh 2* and *Persona 5* with the JRPG/WRPG divide (WRPG for Western Role-Playing Game) in mind. After establishing a framework through the literature review, setting a definition for Iwabuchi's cultural odor and providing an overview of Japanese video game history, I will analyze the two aforementioned games through this framework. It is here that I will provide argumentation for my claim that Japanese video games have evolved from being culturally odorless into products that carry fragrance. Through taking these two games as case studies, I shall provide insight as to how these games are perfect examples of media that have used Japan and Japanese culture not only as a setting, but also as a selling point, facilitating immersive enrichment of the in-game universe and attractiveness for the consumer. With these two video games being fairly recent releases, and both of them portraying entirely different eras and regions of Japan yet enjoying similar success, this analysis will provide a comprehensive answer to the research question. Finally, I will summarize my findings in the conclusion. Namely, how the two games have used different—albeit sometimes also similar—concepts, settings and features to portray Japanese culture in both its positive and negative ways to market themselves, thus carrying their unique cultural fragrance as both a selling point and as the philosophy behind the game design.

Review of Literature

First and foremost, as a basis for updating Iwabuchi Kōichi's observation that video games don't have cultural odor, I will be perusing his aforementioned article, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (2002). His viewpoint on the odorlessness of products developed in Japan, together with his points that, even though these export products are odorless, they still proliferate Japan and Japanese culture as being "Similar but Superior" to other Asian countries, tie in directly to my arguments on the evolution of Video Games as a cultural medium[6].

But what exactly is Odor, and how does Iwabuchi apply his definitions to his research subjects? As mentioned before, Iwabuchi defines Cultural Odor as "…the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the consumption process" [7]. What is important to note here is that, while Iwabuchi recognizes that on many occasions this term is related to the exotic, he goes on to mention that he is "…interested in the moment when the image of the contemporary lifestyle of the country of origin is strongly and affirmatively called to mind as the very appeal of the product, when the 'cultural odor' of cultural commodities is involved" [8]. This refers to the product in question gaining "Fragrance", a socially and culturally acceptable and 'pleasant' quality[9]. In his analysis, Iwabuchi includes the views of important content creators and others involved in the Japanese media industry, and their views on including Odor in their works. For example, Iwabuchi notes that Japanese animation director Oshii Mamoru recognizes that many artists, when attempting to draw characters that would be considered pleasing to the eye, choose not to use the "realistic" Japanese aesthetic but instead opt for either surrealism or Caucasian tropes[10]. Iwabuchi then goes on to mention that Japan not only exports consumer technologies, but also animation and video games as odorless products. Noting the abundant success of *Pokémon*, he claims that it has become a "…'made in Japan' global cultural artifact" [11]. At the time in America, it was seen that public opinion opted to label Japan a "…cool nation if it is capable of producing such wonderful characters, imaginaries, and commodities" [12]. However, as Iwabuchi goes on to mention, the "perceptible Japaneseness" is in many cases erased from the product so as to appeal to the global audience through the practice of localization, thus making it odorless[13]. Iwabuchi notes that this production/development technique is a large part of the reason as to why Japan became so relevant as an exporter of odorless products[14]. This can be seen in the earlier mentioned example of *Pokémon*, as the producers and developers are adamant in their erasure of anything distinctively Japanese[15]—barring a few *Pokémon* like *Ninetales,* a nine-tailed fox monster which is essentially in the imagery of a nine-tailed fox auspice, the *Kitsune*—from the series so as to appeal to a global audience. This is done through localized voice-overs—the Netherlands, amongst other countries, has distinctive Dutch voices for the characters in the *Anime*—and culturally odorless imagery and

[6] Iwabuchi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, 199.
[7] Ibid. 27.
[8] Ibid. 27.
[9] Ibid. 27.
[10] Ibid. 28.
[11] Ibid. 30.
[12] Ibid. 32.
[13] Ibid. 33.
[14] Ibid. 94.
[15] Ibid. 94.

sceneries. I support this argument, and will add that the cities and villages, countryside and other locations in *Pokémon* are more western in their design, but also fantasy-based, thus finding no real points of relativity in the real world, therefore facilitating the non-existence of cultural odor. The video games in the *Mario* series are yet another example of this, as *Mario* is based on Italian stereotypes, but incorporated into a fantasy world where green pipes facilitate travel and mushrooms make you grow bigger. However, I would argue that even *Mario* is not entirely exempt of cultural odor entirely, as he speaks with a stereotyped Italian accent. In more recent times, he is even portrayed as Italian American in *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* (2023). Still, the "Japaneseness" is erased and is therefore in line with the marketing tactic described by Iwabuchi. It is, however, a well-known fact that game series such as *Pokémon* and *Mario* have Japanese developers behind them. Additionally, Iwabuchi observed that franchises like *Pokémon* even warrant changes in playing behavior with children all across the globe, with Pikachu being better known amongst children than even Mario[16]. This stance on Japanese media means that, regardless of whether the product in question has odor or not, the public does see a strong image of Japan that is projected outwards through these particular export products. As mentioned, this is strongly relevant in more recent times, as we can see through the reception of the *Mario* movie, and also in more recent literature such as in the article *Is the Video Game a Cultural Vehicle* (2013), written by Chen Chi-Ying. Chen writes here on the proliferation of Japanese culture through video games in Taiwan. As Japan slowly but surely exported not only their animation, but also their video games, the youth present in Taiwan got increasingly invested over time into Japanese culture, generating the *Hari* (*Ha* for craving, *Ri* for Japan) Tribe. This is a group of people that is essentially only interested in Japanese products, be it clothing, media or indeed, video games[17]. The fact that this group of people also has an interest in video games hailing from Japan is telling that these products are not entirely odorless, as Iwabuchi implied in earlier times. Chen is not the only scholar to respond, as we can see, especially so when it comes to research done on *Pokémon*. For example, Nicholas Raes, in his thesis *A Pokébalancing Act: The Management of Japanese Cultural "Odor" in Pokémon* (2018), he argues that *Pokémon* as a whole is both a distinctively Japanese product, through its representative Japanese symbols and cultural depiction, and a "de-odorized" product as a result of the editors' effort to erase the inherent Japaneseness. He does, however, then go on to say that it was rather an attempt from the editors, rather than a success, which resulted in it becoming capable of appealing to multiple, varied audiences at the same time[18]. That said, Iwabuchi also explored other angles of research concerning Japanese cultural exportation—or lack thereof in his earlier pieces—and soft power. In his piece *Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding and the Question of 'International Cultural Exchange'* (2015), Iwabuchi writes that Pop-Culture Diplomacy—a in the 1970's implemented cultural diplomacy policy to soften the anti-Japanese sentiment in Southeast Asia—should "…broaden its aspirations" if it is to succeed, with him urging that it should create a pedagogical design that promotes self-reflectiveness when it comes to the historical events in international conversations about Japan[19].

When video games cross over domestic borders onto the international market, in an act of both cultural diplomacy and profitable export, localization is a practice often forced upon the product, to make the game accessible for all audiences. This manifests in ways such as translation,

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[16] Ibid. 33-34.

[17] Chen, Chi-Ying. "Is the Video Game a Cultural Vehicle?" *Games and Culture* Vol. 8, issue 6 (November 2013): 409.

[18] Raes, Nicholas. "A Pokébalancing Act: The Management of Japanese Cultural "Odor" in Pokémon." *Theses and Dissertations*, (2018): 184.

[19] Iwabuchi, Koīchi. "Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding and the Question of 'International Cultural Exchange'." *International journal of Cultural Policy,* 21:4 (June 23, 2015): 429-430.

dialogue changes to accommodate cultural differences, and even going as far as to change in-game assets to look more culturally appropriate for the destined market. This business practice generated a profitable, odorless model of export for the Japanese media sector. Specifically, the practice of "Localization" started to play an enormously important role for the Japanese developers, and I argue that a closer look at what localization is and why it is so important is in order. Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon's thesis, *Video Games and Japaneseness: An Analysis of Localization and Circulation of Japanese Video Games in North America* (2011) provides an excellent overview of practices applied to Japanese video games when being localized for the US. Pelletier-Gagnon notes that some video games undergo transfiguration, where "culturally inappropriate" gameplay elements are modified to fit the cultural context and restrictions for the market the game is going to be released in[20]. This aspect of localization and its transfiguration is also explored by Francesca Di Marco in an earlier piece: *Cultural Localization: Orientation and Disorientation in Japanese Video Games* (2007). Here, Di Marco focusses on the European market, but we can see similarities between localization policies. For example, Di Marco highlights an example of how Miku, the protagonist in the game *Fatal Frame* (2001), underwent various cosmetic changes to show a more adult-looking character instead of exhibiting the more child-like features seen in the Japanese version[21]. Additionally, in *The Localization of Japanese Video Games: Striking the Right Balance* (2012) written by Carmen Mangiron, it is explained to us that the act of localization is not only the translation of text, but also the translation of experience[22]. She also writes that "…when localizing a Japanese game it is advisable to aim at striving for a balance between a domesticating approach and an exoticizing approach, considering the features and genre of the game, as well as the audience to which is it addressed" [23]. The practice of localization refers to, as Mangiron states, the act of "…adapting a game technically, linguistically and culturally in order to sell it successfully in other territories, and it involves complex technical, linguistic, cultural, legal and marketing processes" [24]. Additionally, As mentioned before, Di Marco explains it as the translation of not only text, but also experience. It is important to note that in the process, the localization staff is often given what is essentially a "…carte blanche to modify or recreate any element of the original that they deem necessary or indeed include new references to the target culture in their translations" [25]. Localization has been an integral part of Japanese video game exportation, as the language is not spoken actively outside of Japan and seen as a significant barrier of entry for the international audience. Additionally, many Japanese cultural phenomena have no counterparts in the western world, and even within Asia. This, then, is the experience that is being translated. Where the earliest example of Japanese arcade games often already had English text from the get-go, *Pac-Man* (1980) was the first game that had more thorough localization process into English[26]. Mangiron explains to us that the original name, *Puck-Man*, was quickly changed by the United States localization team, as they feared it would not be long before someone would change the *P* to an *F*. Additionally, the names of the in-game ghosts that chase you around the level were altered, and this was subsequently the first time that Japanese names were omitted in favor of more western counterparts, so as to prevent disengagement due to the language barrier[27]. Additionally,

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[20] Pelletier-Gagnon, Jérémie. *Video Games and Japaneseness: An Analysis of Localization and Circulation of Japanese videogames in North America.* Montreal: McGill University 2011, 110.
[21] Di Marco, Francesca. "Cultural Localization: Orientation and Disorientation in Japanese Video Games." *Localizatció de videojocs, Número 5* (November 2007): 2-3.
[22] Mangiron, Carmen. "The Localization of Japanese Video Games: Striking the Right Balance." *The Journal of Internationalization and Localization,* Volume 2, Issue 1 (January 2012): 3.
[23] Mangiron. "The Localization of Japanese Video Games: Striking the Right Balance.", 15-16.
[24] Ibid. 3.
[25] Ibid. 3.
[26] Ibid. 5.
[27] Ibid. 5.

the hit arcade game *Donkey Kong* (1981) had the monumental change of the main characters name, from 'Jump-man' to 'Mario', which was simply the name of the Nintendo of America office landlord[28]. This seemingly minor change was imperative in the overseas success of the games, and nowadays, *Mario* is one of the most successful and well-known characters from a video game to date. This trend of subtle transfiguration has also been noticed by Di Marco, where in her case study of *Fatal Frame*, she observes that the protagonist *Miku* has been altered in proportions and face structure so as to appeal more to the American market, since it was deemed more appropriate to have more adult features on the character. Di Marco notes that "In the Localized releases, Miku wears a red shirt under her white blouse (…), her hair has been lightened, she has grown taller, and her features are more realistic and westernized than the somewhat anime-styled Japanese version. Her speech has also been restructured in the localized versions to sound more like a young adult" [29].

Again, we see an erasure of the Japanese aesthetic and cultural odor so as to appeal to the overseas audience. Pelletier-Gagnon, in his analysis of the localization of Japanese games for the North American market also observes trends in the localization process. He notes that first and foremost, many games undergo a transfiguration of the front cover of the physical packaging[30]. These changes can be quite drastic, as the localization team is faced with the challenge of engaging the audience through recognizable objects and art-queues which are, of course, different for many locales. In his case study of several games, he notes that on the cover of *Ico* (2001), the somewhat empty and uncanny painting on the Japanese cover is instead replaced by the main character wielding a wooden sword, with the female counterpart in the background, showing a more aggressive image. Additionally, he notes that in the localization process of *Kirby: Squeak Squad* (2006), the protagonist that is the pink blob with feet is displayed with one of said feet sticking out of the original game box art space, giving a sense of depth, and *Kirby* is featured with a more aggressive look in its eyes[31]. This trend of aggression would be employed to make it easier to associate with the genre of action and being male-oriented. This is so as to implicate to the consumer that there is a certain experience to be had in the game, in these cases one of action and adventure.

These analyses of the localization of Japanese video games provide me with a framework of knowledge when it comes to why Japanese video games have started exhibiting fragrance. Mangiron also wrote *Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games* (2021), which provides a more general overview of video game localization in more recent times, and how the practices have evolved over time, building upon her accumulated knowledge from articles such as her own in 2012. In said article, she also mentions the *Persona* game series, the localization of which received criticism in the western hemisphere, as the quality of translation was not appreciated by fans of the series. They pointed towards how "… it did not sound natural in English and contained several errors, such as mistranslations, typographical errors, and inconsistencies in the translation of Japanese honorifics" [32]. This resulted in even the establishment of a website titled *Persona Problems*, which is mimicking the style of the game's design, and highlighting the aforementioned problems[33]. Krammer displays lines such as "Forgiving him was never the option…" and "It means they are holding nothing back and are serious to kill us!". Naturally, these lines are not entirely correct in their grammatical structure and comprehensibility, which is therefore an

[28] Ibid. 5.
[29] Di Marco. "Cultural Localization: Orientation and Disorientation in Japanese Video Games.", 2-3.
[30] Pelletier-Gagnon. *Video Games and Japaneseness: An Analysis of Localization and Circulation of Japanese videogames in North America*, 42.
[31] Ibid. 43-45.
[32] Mangiron, Carmen. "Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games." *Arts* 10, no.1 (January 26, 2021): 10.
[33] Krammer, Connor. *Persona Problems*, accessed May 10th 2023, http://www.personaproblems.com/

understandable gripe, as it breaks immersion for the player. This subsequent outrage implies that in modern times, the consumers expect localization to be largely flawless. There are still people who defend such translations, as for them it rather speaks to the exotic quality of the game. For example, some fans argue that they like the fact "that they can feel the Japanese behind the translation" [34]. Personally, I agree with Krammer's subsequent response, arguing that the foreign nature of a product should not be felt through erroneous translation, but rather through immersive, correct localization. Still, these gripes did not halt the success of *Persona 5* in the west, as noted before, with reviews being extremely positive overall.

A large quantity of games has crossed over Japan's domestic borders over the years, which makes it so that many games can be considered a case study when researching cultural proliferation of Japanese video games. Rachel Hutchinson has provided an excellent literary work in the form of her book, *Japanese Culture through Videogames* (2019), in which she explores three separate case studies: the first chapter examines *Katamari Damacy* (2004), the second chapter covers *Ōkami* (2006), and lastly she investigates the representation of Japan in the fighting game genre through *Karate Champ* (1984) and *Street Fighter* (1987)[35]. Additionally, Hutchinson explores the presence of certain ideological tropes and critiques within in the discourse surrounding Japanese video games, where she mentions game series like *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, that contain the aforementioned criteria[36]. Specifically, I believe the fact that Hutchinson examines the JRPG (Japanese Role-Playing Game) genre is of great importance here, as these games have been global bestsellers, with examples like *Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels of the Starry Skies* (2009) and *NieR: Automata* (2017). The games I have chosen for my case study also classify as JRPGs, although *Nioh 2* might also classify as a "*Souls-like*" at the same time, implying it is similar to From Software's (1986) *Dark Souls* games in gameplay pattern: grueling difficulty and tactical, deliberate decision making. The reason I believe this is of great importance is because of their extremely prevalent relevance throughout the history of Japanese video games as a whole. J.D. Mallindine, in her article *Ghost in the Cartridge: Nostalgia and the Construction of the JRPG Genre* (2016), writes that not only is the JRPG the only genre defined by a location (save for its counterpart, western RPG's, referred to as WRPGs respectively)[37], the games play as an entirely unique experience on their own. Yet, even fans of the genre struggle to define as to what exactly makes it a JRPG as opposed to other RPGs. A certain sense of mystery and ambiguity is apparent. That does not stop players from attempting to define the genre, as can be read in *Kawaii Japan: Defining JRPGs through the Cultural Media Mix* (2015), where Douglas Schules notes the words of the founder of The JRPG Club, a targeted forum for those who have interests in the specific genre:

"I consider a JRPG to be a game that was originally developed and released in Japanese. Even when Western developers try to make something "Japanese" or vice versa, there will always be aspects of the original culture informing the material contained within. A Western take on a JRPG (which makes up most of indie RPG development right now) or a Japanese take on the WRPG (Dragon's Dogma, Dark Souls) wouldn't necessarily change a game's genre, nor would games that are designed with international release and easy localization; look at someone like Murakami Haruki, who writes with the English translation in mind. No one would say his writing isn't Japanese." [38]

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Hutchinson, Rachel. *Japanese Culture through Videogames*. London: Routledge, 2003, 14.
[36] Ibid. 101-178.
[37] Mallindine, J.D. "Ghost in the Cartridge: Nostalgia and the Construction of the JRPG Genre." *Gamevironments* 5 (2016): 80-81.
[38] Schules, Douglas. "*Kawaii* Japan: Defining JRPGs through the Cultural Media Mix." *Geemu and Media mix: Theoretical Approaches to Japanese video games* (2015): 62.

Mallindine instead goes deeper into the meaning of the feeling a JRPG gives the player when immersing themselves in the game. She finds that the meaning of this, explained in a video by Extra Credits, is more so about how "…people play JRPGs and WRPGs for the different types of affect these games engender for the player, an affect that can't be limited to the creator's geographical location or art style" [39]. From this, it can be seen that not everyone is entirely confused on the genre, yet it still does not exactly pinpoint the genuine nature of the JRPG. While beyond the scope of this paper, I strongly believe in the excitement of this topic and hope that other scholars will contribute more works to its cause. Interestingly, many of the games that fall under the JRPG genre are not the same in gameplay, as both of the aforementioned games are very different in that regard, though Hutchinson does not deeply explore this aspect. Perhaps in further research, this could be included. In the third section, Hutchinson opted to cover the impact of the war on Japanese video games and the perception thereof. As Japan obtained no victories in the second world war, the genre of wargames has been an uncomfortable one for domestic developers, as there is no viable victory narrative to be spun[40]. Overall, this book contains very useful information, as the games that I have chosen as case studies for this thesis are recent released, and Hutchinson's book itself is also from a fairly recent time, which means there is much to make use of regardless of the fact that her case studies might be older releases.

With all of these works as a literary base for my analysis, I have endeavored to provide the best answer possible to the research question in the following chapters.

[39] Mallindine. "Ghost in the Cartridge: Nostalgia and the Construction of the JRPG Genre," 92.
[40] Hutchinson. *Japanese Culture through Videogames*, 15.

A Brief History of Japanese Video Games and the birth of the JRPG

As mentioned before, a brief history of the Japanese video game and how it came to be such a dominant product of export throughout the world is in order. Video games do not find their origin in Japan, as the first official video game was developed in the US by Steve Russell at MIT in 1961, titled *Space War*. Extremely simple in its setup—yet advanced for its time—it involved two spaceships vying for victory by shooting each other until the enemy was destroyed. As it was unprecedented, the game quickly gained popularity. This game, however, was not meant to be sold in the first place[41]. The Japanese interest, however, came later, as in 1972, after Nolan Bushnell founded Atari in the US and developed the hit game *Pong*. Japanese developers at the time had only elemechas (Arcade machines that requires an insertion of a coin to start their movement sequence and gameplay mechanics[42]) on the market. It was the development of the Pong console that prompted tech companies to import a copy, to test it out and conclude their own findings. One of these companies, Taito, then copied the game and sold it—unlicensed—under the name *Elepon*[43]. Over the following years, some releases were remarkably successful, but it was *Space Invaders* that truly marked the start of the booming gaming industry in Japan. It was developed by Tomohiro Nishikado, a developer at Taito, and was essentially an instant success. After its launch in 1978, the arcade machine was so popular it was soon impossible for Taito to meet the demands with their limited production capacity, and it began licensing other domestic developers to assist in the process[44]. Several technological advances were made both in Japan and overseas, but when it came to the overseas market, namely in the US, it faced a market collapse in 1983. It was in this industrial landscape that Nintendo, which was founded in 1889 as a toy company in Japan, found a way to resurrect it and at the same time gain a strong position within the market[45]. Its first success came in the form of *Donkey Kong* (1982), for which they offered risk-free inventory to coax the initially reluctant buyers who were heavily impacted by the market crash into investing into their systems. This approach was effective and resulted in one out of three households in the US market having a Nintendo system by 1990[46].

In the same timeframe, something more akin to the games I have analyzed was released by Nintendo: *Dragon Quest* (1986, titled *Dragon Warrior* in the US). It is precisely this game (series) that facilitated the birth and shaping of the JRPG genre[47]. As mentioned before in the literature review, defining the JRPG genre is extremely difficult, and Koyama echoes this in his chapter *Evolution of a Genre: Dragon quest and the JRPG* (2022), mentioning that the J in JRPG does not automatically mean that every single RPG to come from Japan falls under this category[48]. Even within the *Dragon Quest* series, *Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels of the Starry Skies* received mediocre ratings due to the fact

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[41] Aoyama, Yuko and Izushi, Hiro. "Hardware Gimmick or Cultural Innovation? Technological, Cultural and Social Foundations of Japanese Video Game Agency." *Research Policy* (March 2003): 426-427.
[42] Koyama, Yusuke. *History of the Japanese Video Game Industry*, Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2023: 15-16.
[43] Ibid. 18.
[44] Ibid. 21
[45] Aoyama and Izushi. "Hardware Gimmick or Cultural Innovation? Technological, Cultural and Social Foundations of Japanese Video Game Agency.", 427.
[46] Ibid. 427-428.
[47] Koyama, Yusuke. "Evolution of a Genre: Dragon Quest and the JRPG", in *Japanese Role-Playing Games: Genre, Representation and Liminality in the JRPG,* Pelletier-Gagnon, Jérémie, and Rachel Hutchinson eds. Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022: 19.
[48] Ibid. 20.

that the game mechanics that were somewhat expected to be included in the game, such as pre-established characters in the player's party (read: adventuring party, group) chatting with each other, were not present. The players felt that this took away from the narrative and was therefore not a true JRPG, and this was echoed in reviews and articles about the game[49]. It did, however, retain the turn-based nature more often than not seen in JRPGs, an absolute staple of the genre. Turn-based implies that the player character, his or her party members and the adversaries they face take turns in combat, the order often dictated by character statistics.

Games that have come out of Japan ever since the first hit success of *Pong* all have one thing in common: the sense to develop both hardware and software equally. As Aoyama and Izushi state, the Japanese computer hardware and software industry often saw software as a "necessary evil" [50]. Nintendo instead opted for a different approach, and focused on developing both in-house. Another reason for their success is the connection between the manufacturers of consumer electronics and platform developers, which resulted in the sharing of knowledge between industries, thus propelling forth progress at a rapid pace, especially so for Nintendo which had myriad collaborations to facilitate new designs and testing thereof[51]. The game industry also provided an avenue for artists and programmers to work in an entirely new field but applying the same skills. Japan has an abundance of artists (read: *Mangaka*, who create and produce strip cartoons in a unique style called *Manga*) and talented developers that they could transfer to the new industry, facilitating their pop-culture proliferation. It allowed the industry to employ workers for more favorable wages and game them opportunities for growth not seen before[52]. All in all, the Japanese industry learned from the overseas market, and then put their own spin on the concept, thus resulting in an entirely unique off-shoot branch from the main tree that is the gaming industry. This also comes paired with the earlier mentioned production technique in which the inherent Japaneseness of a game is thoroughly erased by developers in an effort for international appeal. Yet, it seems, that regardless of their efforts, the JRPG still established itself successfully as something that—even when the game is not made by a Japanese developer, such as an in indie (independent developer) game—it is still considered as inherently Japanese, or at the very least carrying intrinsically Japanese game design/philosophical qualities. It is then through smart capitalization of the markets, the rapid adaptation and development of software in Japan and the unique formula of game design philosophy (i.e. the making of a JRPG) that propelled Japan to a dominant position within the video game industry, which is still continuing to create its legacy to this day, marking its trail with fragrant video games around the world.

[49] Ibid. 20-21.
[50] Aoyama and Izushi. "Hardware Gimmick or Cultural Innovation? Technological, Cultural and Social Foundations of Japanese Video Game Agency," 428.
[51] Ibid. 431.
[52] Ibid. 438-440.

The JRPG/WRPG Divide, and Situating *Nioh 2* and *Persona 5*

Interestingly though, the word JRPG did not originate in Japan, but was instead coined in a British article for the game *Tales of Symphonia* in 2004[53]. Curiously then, it seems that the JRPG, while indeed birthed by *Dragon Quest* as a prospective genre, was only recognized somewhat officially 18 years after the initial game's release. Koyama also provides us with a valuable table showing the differences that set apart the JRPG from the WRPG in the form a table, citing Schules, Peterson and Picard, with a table from their work *Single-Player Computer Role-Playing Games* (2018)[54]:

JRPG Traits	**WRPG Traits**
Confinement to the world (Implying set level structure, explorative freedom limited)	Sandbox exploration (Free exploration, often open-world settings)
Defined Characters (Meaning, set, non-customizable characters with unique personalities, including the player character)	Customizable characters (While other characters in the story might be non-customizable, the player character usually is)
Anime/Cartoon art style	"Realistic" art style
Limited narrative choices, singular story	Narrative plurality, multiple story paths and endings
Fantasy world setting	Medieval world setting

These findings are particularly interesting to me, as the two games I have chosen as a case study can both be categorized as a JRPG and a WRPG in some way, showing the flexibility of genre definitions and how in-flux the categorization is within the field of games. When examining *Persona 5*, it sits comfortably within the confined world, full exploration is not entirely possible as some areas are blocked off until later in the game, and certain levels are only accessible during certain stages of the game. It also has defined characters, with unique, vibrant personalities and that interact with each other during missions and beyond, giving the player an immersive experience. However, *Persona 5* is not a game that employs a limited narrative, as the player character is faced with sometimes difficult choices that can change the ending sequence of the game, as there are currently five different endings that are possible to be experienced. Out of these five possible endings, there is one truly canonical ending, whereas the other are divided into three "bad" endings and one "good" [55]. The art style, however, is entirely in the Japanese *Manga* fashion, and therefore firmly planted within the JRPG genre. The world setting is a debatable topic, as it mixes both reality and fantasy. The game takes place in modern-day Tokyo, with realistic districts, train stations and schools that you would

[53] Koyama. "Evolution of a Genre: Dragon Quest and the JRPG", 21.
[54] Ibid. 21.
[55] Feyrer, Avery. "Persona 5: Which Ending is Canon?" accessed June 26th 2023, https://www.thegamer.com/persona-5-true-ending-canon/#:~:text=In%20total%2C%20there%20are%20five,contract%20in%20the%20Velvet%20Room

find in the real world. The other dimensions that you encounter and enter, however, are entirely fantasy, and often times manifest in abstract and unique ways. Yet, for its mixing and matching, *Persona 5* is still a game considered by many to absolutely be a JRPG, and its unmistakable Japanese cultural fragrance (Turn-based combat, immersive interpersonal character interaction, narrative driven gameplay, all of this resulting in positive reviews worldwide) make it hard to argue with this definition.

Nioh 2, also developed in Japan, is a mixed bag, however. It even deviates from its *Souls-like* genre designation. The reason for its deviation is that the *Dark Souls* games that are developed by From Software—often considered WRPGs—have an open world setting, in which almost everything in the game world is accessible, providing you have the skill and determination to go there. *Nioh 2* instead opts for a level-based system, which has areas that are either a part of a larger area as a whole, or variations of certain areas with a different route or something akin to these deviations. This is something that you could consider to be a JRPG quality. The player character is entirely customizable, but the other non-playable characters (henceforth to be referred to as NPCs) are entirely unique and have their own interpersonal interactions, which is essentially a mix between J- and WRPG style choices. In terms of art style, *Nioh 2* falls under the "realistic" category, where the humans are very realistically animated, and the anatomy is largely correct. This can be seen especially so in combat, where it is possible to dismember or decapitate your foes. The *Yōkai* in the game are folkloric in nature and I would argue are therefore also realistic in their depiction. The narrative, however, is limited, there are essentially no choices for the player to make that genuinely impact the storyline, as it is rather a retelling of Japanese history with fantasy elements rather than an isolated storyline. The world setting is almost entirely realistic, as it incorporates the historical areas in which certain battles were fought, with locations such as the Battle of Okehazama being a playable area in the game. Naturally, with the inclusion of monsters, this realism changes, and some of the areas are more fantastical than others, with otherworldly and folkloric elements changing the locale to match. As *Nioh 2* mixes different elements from both J- and WRPGs, it would be natural to resort to saying that it is just that. Interestingly enough, however, *Nioh 2* is considered more of a WRPG by most, and can also be defined as an action game for that matter.

With these differences in mind, it can be seen that the two games vary greatly in their approach, but still retain their depiction of Japan, Japanese culture and other such elements as a selling point, albeit in different ways. I would argue, then, that they both carry an unmistakable cultural fragrance. So how do these two games exhibit their fragrance respectively?

The Days of Eld in *Nioh 2*

Nioh 2, as introduced earlier, is a game that takes you through the highlights of the warring-states period—also known as the Sengoku period—of Japan, where you play a pivotal role in the shaping of the nation through your deeds on the battlefield. You do so by taking on enemy forces that are either human or of the more powerful and dangerous variety, the *Yōkai*. And so, what makes this game fragrant? First and foremost, it is best to look at *Nioh 1*—the predecessor—for clues. In an interview for vg247, Hayashi Yosuke, the executive producer for Team Ninja, states that they initially made *Nioh 1* for a Japanese audience. It was to their surprise that it worked as well as it did in the west, generating a loyal fanbase for the series[56]. This creative process means that, unlike games made in the past, or games made for international consumption, which underwent the production process which was described by Iwabuchi, thus erasing the Japaneseness, was not applied to this game whatsoever. Instead, the game stayed true to its roots, incorporating Japanese culture, references and practices into its environment, gameplay and game systems. The positive reception led Team Ninja to continue this tradition, making *Nioh 2* even "more Japanese" than its previous iteration[57]. Where you played as an—non-customizable—English speaking character named William in the first game, you were now able to fully customize your characters appearance, voice and other features. Your character in this game also does not have voice lines, barring a few nods and agreeing harrumphs, which allows for greater player insertion and immersion in the world, as your character interacts with other NPCs. These NPCs all speak period-correct Japanese, and your character understands this, because canonically you were born—at the beginning of the games story—to Japanese parents. While it is possible to set the entire language of the game's voice acting to English, many players tend to stick with the original Japanese voice-over. The story is also, in Hayashi's own words: "…quite accurate and authentic so it can be educational", which they utilize so as to, as Chris Priestmann, the interviewer, puts it: "…ground the mysticism" [58]. For those more familiar with the characters, it will also create a sense of awe and immersion, as the player gets to speak with famous historical figures such as Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), his wife Nōhime (1533/35-1582, speculative) and Maeda Toshiie (1538-1599). These characters have all played an important role in the history of Japan and are also somewhat dramatized in the game itself to make their impact even more grand than it already was. I would argue that the inclusion of such important figures, without altering their purpose and ideals, and the presence of the period-accurate linguistics, qualifies as giving the game a cultural odor, and one that is more akin to fragrance, as consumers who are interested in Japanese history will be very familiar with these names and will appreciate the authenticity.

The historical aspects do not end there, as the armor and other clothing and garbs available in the game are all quite realistic in their design, with the armor often not being too colorful unless it was worn by someone of high status, and it also follows thematic queues. Many of the armor sets in game can also be seen in museums throughout Japan, as reddit user toxicvsm notes in his post *Real Life Counterparts of Armor seen in Nioh 2* (2021). This aspect assists in creating an even more immersive experience for the player, thus experiencing what actual armor and clothing looked like during the Sengoku period of Japan.

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[56] Priestman, Chris. *Nioh 2 Interview - Team Ninja's fight to return as one of the great Japanese action game studios.* Febuary 5, 2020. https://www.vg247.com/nioh-2-interview-team-ninja-great-japanese-action-game-studios (accessed May 10, 2023)
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

The "increased Japaneseness" that Hayashi speaks of can also be seen in the veritable cast of *Yōkai*, which range from the more obscure to the well-known. This is done so as to appeal to fans of the series in the West, a grounding point for those who are perhaps not entirely familiar with either Japanese history or the references to certain historical figures that you will find throughout the game, but familiar with the monsters in western games. *Yōkai*, in Japan, are not considered mythological, although they are considered supernatural. Instead, they are better described as folkloric entities, that exist, or have existed in the past. Some of them reside within the realm of the living, others in the realm of the dead, while some tend to travel between our realm and other, different dimensions so to speak. For example, a tree might fall in the forest. If no witness was present, it is often described as the work of a *Yōkai*. Almost all of the *Yōkai* in *Nioh 2* have some form of historical reference, and many of them are directly from the encyclopedias written and illustrated by Toriyama Sekien (1712-1788). In his time, he researched, wrote and illustrated on the *Yōkai* of Japan, and made several encyclopedic works that depicted these creatures, which rapidly gained popularity in Japan. It is clear upon cross-examination that creatures like the "*Waira*"—an ox-like bodied creature with 2 arms that end in sharp claws—are directly inspired by Toriyama's drawings. For fans of Japanese folklore, and non-fans alike, the monsters provide unique encounters with designs entirely foreign from what they might be used to in more Western games. Hayashi explains his motivations for including them so heavily as the following: "Something like Japanese history, we learn at school in Japan, and *Yōkai* are Japanese folklore, so it's something we already know, we are very familiar with (…) I felt that something really familiar in Japan tends to be, not boring, but too local to Japan. But we wanted to keep that as *Nioh*'s identity, to appeal to the West" [59]. I therefore argue that by including these *Yōkai*, whether you are familiar with them or not, is another element of cultural fragrance.

Another important part of *Nioh 2* is naturally the combat. For this, one needs weapons, of which there are myriad. There are a grand total of fifteen weapon types in the game, offering players a unique experience while wielding them. It can almost be said that playing with a different weapon means playing another game, since the style of movement and attacking is so distinctively different between them. Even within the same weapon type, there are some unique variations. The player is also able to customize their entire set of moves, allowing for an entirely unique playstyle that only you can replicate. For the historical characters in the game, the developers have chosen weapons that would have fit their personality, and these weapons are also obtainable as items for the player to use, each one providing unique and interesting bonuses. For fans of Sengoku era weaponry, ranging from the well-known Katana, the Japanese sword, to the gunpowder-based ranged weapons, the weapons are undoubtedly a fragrant element of the game, steeped in history and battlefield pedigree.

It is also the smaller features that are present in the game, the in-game systems that you do spend a lot of time interacting with as a player, which are still in line with Japanese culture. You are able to pray at shrines to restore health and restock on items. There are also certain items that are unmistakably linked to Japanese religion and folklore, such as the lantern plant fruit, which is typically used as decoration to guide a loved one's spirit back to the world of the living, and the Tengu's fan, which is often carried by Tengu, a bird-like *Yōkai*. In addition, there are certain weapons that are considered *Yōkai* on their own, offering a bonus to the player when they have felled enough foes, resulting in the weapons gaining sentience and speaking to the wielder. This is a refence to the "Tsukumogami" in Japanese folklore, referring to tools and objects that, after a period of a hundred

[59] Ibid.

years after they have been abandoned or thrown away, gain sentience[60]. While these objects do not necessarily hold any weight outside of Japan, it still adds to the appeal of the game for the fans, adding to its already strong cultural odor that was purposely imprinted upon it by Team Ninja in the design process.

There is also an argument to make for the localization of the game. While the game is playable in English, the Japanese voice-over is still included in international versions, and can be subtitled with correctly translated English for ease of understanding. The alteration and transfiguration of characters, designs and/or language, that Di Marco so aptly noted in their essay, is not present in *Nioh 2*, as it stays true to its original design. Certainly, the English voice-over changes a few things, and contextualizes the lines, but not to the extent that was applied to games like the earlier mentioned *Fatal Frame*, as can be seen in, for example, the armor and other outfits that are present in the game.

It is through this examination that I find it is these factors that make *Nioh 2*, an unmistakably Japanese game, so culturally fragrant. This game is in no sense of the word a culturally odorless product as described by Iwabuchi, but instead a rich and vibrant cultural product. I would even argue that it can be utilized as a cross-learning tool for folkloric and historical students, who are interested in learning more about *Yōkai*, as the game contains a massive database of entries which examine the characteristics and mannerisms of all the *Yōkai* and historical characters in the game.

[60] Geschiedenis Japan KU Leuven. *Tsukumogami.* 2014.
http://mediawiki.arts.kuleuven.be/geschiedenisjapan/index.php/Tsukumogami (accessed June 26, 2023)

The Contemporary Cityscape and Complexity of the Heart in *Persona 5*

Persona 5, developed by ATLUS, takes us to modern-day Tokyo. Gone are the samurai of eld, and instead we arrive in a modern world, complete with cars, public transport, smartphones and the monotony of contemporary city life. You play the role of a high school student attending Shujin academy in Tokyo, who is here effectively on probation, as you have been—albeit unjustly so—for defending a woman from a man that was harassing her. Although you did not have a physical altercation with the man, he had a high standing, and you were therefore getting the short end of the stick. You stay with a friend of your parents who happens to live conveniently close to the new school you will be attending, and so the story begins. Even from this setting alone, without any other elements included, the cultural fragrance of the game is strong. The areas you find yourself walking through, be it alleyways, main roads or train stations, a great number of these that you see in the game can be found in real life, mundane or otherwise. Brian Ashcraft, in his article *Persona 5 is Smart, Fun and very Japanese* written for Kotaku, notes that many of the locations that you find are prevalent in *Persona 5* are very reminiscent of the Showa era (1926-1989) of Japan. He notes that when people refer to something as retro, they use phrases such as "Looks Showa" to emphasize the classicality[61]. Many players of the game have also taken to twitter to showcase the locations they recognize in the game, which are extremely reminiscent of the Showa era and simply realistic in their depictions. This is also appealing to Western fans of the series, as they get to experience what being in Japan is like on a day-to-day basis through simply playing the game. An influential reason for this factor weighing towards the fragrance of *Persona 5* is that fans of the series are often also interested in Japanese day-to-day life, as the game itself is partially a social simulator as well. For example, as a high school student, you are expected to participate in classes, but it also allows you to go out with friends into the city to do something as simple as drink a coffee, or to experience having a part-time job. In the game, these events increase your bond with a character, or increase your stats and reward you with money, but the social nature of the activity in a distinctively Japanese setting is appealing to some. The social aspect of Japan can also be seen in the games clever usage of (social) media. The accidents that are occurring throughout the game world are documented on the news in café's and other places, and commented on by NPCs around the character. The game also includes an in-game messaging system through which your friends and acquaintances communicate with not only you, but also each other, their unique personalities on full display. *Persona 5* director Katsura Hashino, in an interview with Kat Bailey for vg247, is also fully aware of the power of social media, as he notes that "Whenever a political scandal occurs in Japan, people go crazy on social media sites" [62]. He also uses the game's narrative to confront the player with the consequences of his or her actions, wanting to display the weight of choices and influence they are projecting upon the game world. It is here that Hashino wants to display the power of "bonds" with others. He means this both in an in-game mechanic sense, where nurturing your interpersonal relationships with other characters strengthens you and solidifies your cause, but also in the way that people who have a strong bond in real life can influence and cause changes in the real world[63]. In the game, it also takes a wealth of time to truly

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[61] Ashcraft, Brian. *Persona 5 is Smart, Fun, and Very Japanese.* October 6, 2016. https://kotaku.com/persona-5-is-smart-fun-and-very-japanese-1787477997 (accessed May 10, 2023)
[62] Bailey, Kat. *Persona 5's Katsura Hashina on his Favorite Characters, Japanese vs. Western storytelling, and Anxiety.* April 5, 2017. https://www.vg247.com/persona-5s-katsura-hashino-on-his-favorite-characters-japanese-vs-western-storytelling-and-anxiety (accessed May 10, 2023)
[63] Ibid.

get close to the NPCs in the story, each of them slowly opening up to you over time, revealing their baggage and innermost secrets with you once you have reached a high stage of bonding as a result of spending time with them. As Lucy James states in her *Persona 5* review for GameSpot, "…they [the characters] go from being mechanical tools that you engage with to strengthen their Personas, to real people you can identify and sympathize with" [64]. While this is not an inherently Japanese feature as a whole, I argue that such a "grounded in reality" approach still warrants fragrance, as the considerate nature of Japanese culture and the intricacy of Japanese society shines through.

In true JRPG fashion, the game also deviates from the realistic setting by including fantastical and abstract environments that would have no place in the real world, thus satisfying the fantasy world metric. The goal of the story, and the initial motivation for the characters to band together and form the *Phantom Thieves*, is to purify the hearts of adults who have lost themselves to their innermost desires and turmoil by stealing what is called the "Ethereal Treasure", that which represents the corrupted heart of the affected individual. After mistakenly wandering into one of these spaces that holds one such Ethereal Treasure, a so-called "Palace", you learn that the twisted personalities of adults are manifesting these environments and that includes the myriad creatures you can find there, which are the namesake of the series: *Persona*. These also include mythological creatures like *Yōkai* seen in Japanese folklore and equally depicted in *Nioh 2* (I.e., the Tengu)[65]. These Palaces are also all unique, hand-crafted by the developers to reflect in intricate detail the identity of the corrupted individual. All of these places, including the real world depicted in *Persona 5*, are stylized in the *anime*/*manga* style that is recurrent in the series as a whole. The difference between the two worlds is quite vivid, however, as the Tokyo depicted is very sterile, grey and urban, the Palaces are vibrant, abstract and striking. Both, however, exhibit the cultural fragrance of Japan. The modern-day Tokyo is a given, in its realistic and almost mundane but accurate depiction, whereas the Palaces instead cater to the fantasy-like setting seen so often in a JRPG. I would also argue that tackling societal problems through "stealing" a corrupted individual's malice is also a very JRPG-esque gameplay element, with games like the *Final Fantasy* (1987-present) series often engaging with the psychological complications of the heart and mind.

When it comes to localization, *Persona 5* seems to be hit-or-miss in its quality and cultural translation of the originally Japanese text and voice-over. As mentioned before, many fans of the series were unpleasantly surprised at the messiness and outright erroneous translations, resulting in strangely constructed English sentences and confusing interpersonal intricacies between characters. Honorifics that are often present in Japanese language, which are already a problematic element to translate, were not given proper treatment by the localization team, which added another layer to the problems plaguing the localization process. Krammer, in another article on the matter titled *Persona 5's Translation is a Black Mark on a Brilliant Game* (2017) written for EuroGamer, states that "Errors range from grade-school grammatical flubs and character voice catastrophes to complete mistranslations that fundamentally alter the meaning of the text" [66]. Though, according to Krammer, it does seem that many of the fans simply do not pay too much mind to these errors, as it seems to somewhat of a trend with JRPGs to be mediocrely translated in some cases. But this is only the vocal/textual part of the localization. *Persona 5* itself was not subject to any transfiguration or alteration of the art, as the players still get to experience the game as it was made in Japan, depicting

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[64] James, Lucy. *Persona 5 Review: Style and Substance.* March 29, 2017. https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/persona-5-review/1900-6416640/ (accessed May 10, 2023)

[65] Bhardwa, Shyam. *Japanese Culture and Folklore in Persona 5.* December 2019, 2022. https://blog.gaijinpot.com/japanese-culture-and-folklore-in-persona-5/ (accessed June 26, 2023)

[66] Krammer, Connor. *Persona 5's translation is a black mark on a brilliant game.* May 17, 2017. https://www.eurogamer.net/persona-5s-translation-is-a-black-mark-on-a-brilliant-game (accessed May 10, 2023)

the cityscape of Tokyo and the vibrant Palaces in their full glory, rich in cultural Fragrance.

As noted by Ashcraft, ATLUS has gone all-out in their endeavor to create a game that is entirely how they wanted it to be[67]. Cultural minutiae have no need for explanation, and societal concepts that are intrinsic to the Japanese populace are included without reserve. This is intended by Hashino, as he states that the game is "…unabashedly Japanese, going so far as to cover Japanese politics a bit. I can't imagine what kind of response that will garner from Western fans" [68]. The game also aims to tackle societal problems as a whole, with the initial conviction of the main character for seemingly doing the right thing but getting punishment because of a difference in status, and certain other characters abusing their power being on full display as story elements. It is precisely this factor that makes *Persona 5* so rich in its fragrance. Akin to *Nioh 2*, the developers have abandoned the sterilization of cultural odor, and have instead opted to go as far so as to include even the most mundane Japanese surroundings in their work, to show their authenticity in this pursuit of their vision. I would argue that, on top of this, it also derives popularity from the fact that is, inherently, so unabashedly Japanese.

[67] Bailey, Kat. *Persona 5's Katsura Hashina on his Favorite Characters, Japanese vs. Western storytelling, and Anxiety.*
[68] Ibid.

Conclusion

In his work *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Iwabuchi explains to us that Japan as a country exports culturally odorless products, mostly technological or media-based in nature. Through his analysis of his three C's, consumer technologies (the Sony Walkman, Karaoke etc.), comics and cartoons (animation) and computer/video games, he concluded that none of these products had any odor that would invoke the quality of Japaneseness. Implying, none of these products get associated with the cultural features, images, ideas or (stereotyped) way of life of Japan. He then goes on to mention that the Japanese video game development, for games that are aimed at the international market, is one of erasing Japaneseness, so as to appeal to global audiences more easily. This can be seen distinctively in the global success that is *Pokémon*, although other scholars like Raes have argued against this claim, and instead looked for symbolism and inherently Japanese locations and features in the series, that the developers, editors and localizers were unable to erase.

To further explain Iwabuchi's definitions and methods, I explored not only his work that forms the basis for this thesis, but also the work of other scholars on the topic of the phenomenon that is the Japanese video game. By examining works on localization, it can be seen that this process can often be a very rigorous and invasive process, with varying levels of influence upon the product. There is the translation of the game's original language to, for example, English, which can influence the end-quality of the product immensely, as fans of the game expect a quality rivalling that of the original language, without altering the text so much so that is alters the context or story. It can also mean editing in-game files, affecting the appearance of characters depicted in the game to streamline integration with the designated market that the product is destined for. This localization process can also include the deodorization of a product, as Pelletier-Gagnon concluded in *Video Games and Japaneseness: An Analysis of Localization and Circulation of Japanese Video Games in North America*, finding that often even the box art of the video game is edited to display something more engaging for local cultures.

I also examined the history of Japanese video games and how they came to be. Through smart marketing tactics that capitalized on a weakened market, Nintendo rose to dominance, thus paving the way for many Japanese game studios to follow suit over the years. Additionally, I explored the Japanese Role-Playing Game, starting with Hutchinson's work. I included the JRPG in my history of Japanese video games as *Dragon Quest* was such a pivotal release and facilitated many games to come by providing a framework and design philosophy, albeit originally simple. It is undeniable that the JRPG has withstood the test of time regardless of its sometimes-simple formula, however, as even in the current day and age, JRPGs seem to be enjoying the same popularity as if nothing has changed. Following the birth, I examined the divide that has formed between the JRPG and the WRPG, and highlighted their distinctive features that make up their differences. Afterwards, I compared my chosen titles *Nioh 2* and *Persona 5* to these categorized metrics and situated them in their respective genres to give a clearer picture of how the game was designed and developed.

Afterwards, I followed the same path as Raes, but instead brought to the table more modern games in the form of *Nioh 2* and *Persona 5*, two Japanese-made games that have been released in recent times. Through a thorough analysis of core elements that make up the games, I examined how Iwabuchi's "odorless" theory held up. In doing so, I concluded the following: both games are inherently unique in their design, art direction and gameplay mechanics. All of these elements combine into a whole that exhibits a strong cultural fragrance, thus counteracting Iwabuchi's

statement on video games being entirely odorless. Instead, the games are rich with Japanese cultural features, imagery, ideas and (sometimes stereotypical) ways of life. Additionally, they were bother received with high ratings from reviewers and consumers alike in the Western hemisphere of the world and beyond. Although both games pursue entirely different avenues of Genres and gameplay elements, with entirely different stories, they both project their cultural influence outward strongly, upon not only the consumer, but also the market.

I would therefore argue that the design philosophy and production process used in *Nioh 2* and *Persona 5* is not entirely unique to them, but rather can be seen as a trend in the reemergence of success for the Japanese video game market internationally. Opting to not erase the Japaneseness and cultural qualities of the games while still retaining its appeal even after crossing domestic borders means that the Japanese video game has attained cultural fragrance. While Iwabuchi's words undoubtedly strike true even in modern times when it comes to Japanese video game development, it is quite often the games that are made without this rigorous deodorizing, pure in their form and cultural representation, that seem to do well.

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