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The Role of Culture In Video Game Characters

By Chris Pruett <c_pruett@efn.org>

Japan makes a lot of video games. The country is home to some of the largest game companies in the world: Sony, Nintendo, Capcom, Konami, Namco, and Sega, just to name a few. In America, Japanese games have a reputation for being very high quality and very strange, and video game publications will often chalk oddities in Japanese games up to “crazy Japanese culture.” Even the most straightforward games from Japan often contain cultural cues that throw American players off, and as a result many consider Japanese games to be somewhat difficult to understand.

Localization is the process of translating media from one culture to another. While this naturally involves the translation of text and speech to other languages, many other changes to the content itself must also be made to map values common to one culture to those of another. For example, Americans recognize a red octagon as a sign meaning “stop,” but many other cultures use different symbols to represent the same idea. Such cultural differences result in many games undergoing significant change when they are localized from one culture to another.

A good example of a difficult localization is Technos Japan’s cult classic, Downtown Nekketsu Monogatari, known in the United States as River City Ransom. Released for the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1989, Nekketsu Monogatari is one of many games starring Kunio-kun, the head of the local high school gang. Kunio-kun is what the Japanese call a Yankee or furyo, a juvenile delinquent typified by prowess at fighting and pompadour hair cut.
These characters from a comic called *Bebop High School* are quintessential examples of *furyo*.

Though *furyo* are usually portrayed as dimwitted bullies, they are also often treated with affection by authors of Japanese comics. Kunio-kun and his gang are definitely delinquents, but they are also the protectors of the school from rival gangs, and are somewhat goofy despite their toughness. The Nekketsu Monogatari series was delivered with a lot of humor in Japan, but since the characters are rooted in archetypes unfamiliar in the West, this humor was all but lost when the game was released in the United States.

The box art for Downtown Nekketsu Monogatari, as it appeared in Japan.
Comparing the box art for Downtown Nekketsu Monogatari with its U.S. equivalent, River City Ransom, provides an excellent example of the differences in approach between games marketed in Japan and the United States. The original version depicts the main characters as comical, lovable thugs, while the U.S. version looks like the cover to an action movie starring Jean-Claude Van Damme. Interestingly, the content of the game hardly changed during the translation process. The names of the characters were changed (Kunio became “Alex”), and the story line was altered, but the game itself remained unchanged. Even stripped of its cultural context, Nekketsu Monogatari was very popular in the United States because the game mechanics were intrinsically enjoyable across cultural boundaries.

Nekketsu Monogatari was hardly the first game to have its context significantly altered for Western audiences, nor was it the last. The replacement of comical characters with more realistic, mature equivalents remains a typical approach for Western importers, even though many Japanese games are censored for content deemed too risqué for American audiences [1]. More recent examples of this “extreme-ification” that many games undergo include the box art for titles like *Shenmue 2* and *Ico*. In such cases, the characters portrayed on the American
boxes appear much angrier and masculine than their Japanese equivalents. In addition to increased masculinity, most American versions of Japanese games are marketed with a very realistic art style. It has been widely noted that, generally speaking, American games put emphasis on artistic realism, while Japanese games tend to emphasize artistic style.

What is particularly interesting about this difference in approach to marketing and character design is that it is generally applicable to most of the video games produced today. Though there are exceptions, most popular American games focus on masculine lead characters, and employ an ultra-realistic art style, while Japanese titles are often much more stylized, and often employ a wider variety of characters.

For example, compare the protagonists from the top-rated American and Japanese games of 2004 [2]. Note that these were collected based on American reviews, and thus reflect American tastes. Also note that these images reflect the art used for marketing these games, which may differ dramatically from the art used for the actual game itself.

Five characters from the top-rated American games of 2004. From left to right: Ratchet and Clank, Sam Fisher, Master Chief, Carl Johnson, and Gordon Freedman

Five characters from the top-rated Japanese games of 2004. From left to right: Solid Snake, Ryu Hayabusa, Joe, Mario, Samus Aran

Generally speaking, these characters follow the same trends that affected Nekketsu Monogatari: the characters from American-made characters are masculine and portrayed realistically, while the characters from Japanese games are stylized and less masculine. Though these characters reflect quite different attitudes about design, all resonate with American audiences [3].
Perhaps the difference in approach reflects not only a difference in cultural values, but the target market to which companies wish to sell their games. The American box art for River City Ransom is clearly aimed at young males, an audience that traditional wisdom deems the core audience of video games in the United States [4]. Many games are altered to be attractive to this particular audience, though some have argued that such alterations may ultimately damage sales. In general, the audience for games is wider in Japan, especially among female gamers. The original box art for Nekketsu Monogatari was likely targeted at youths of both sexes, as are most of the Japanese characters listed above.

But even if we assume that the market of video gamers in America is narrower in the United States than in Japan, it is hard to deny that American consumers value many types of character designs. All of the games listed here scored quite highly among American reviewers, though it is interesting to note that the games of American origin generally scored slightly higher than those from Japan. Clearly, American consumers are willing to accept some games that do not star masculine and angst-filled characters.

But if that is the case, why have American game developers shied away from alternative character designs? Can it be that game developers truly believe that American games consist solely of males between the ages of 14 and 25 who want to see nothing but guns and explosions? Could the culture of video games in America really be so stagnant?

Fortunately, the answer is, for the most part, no. Having worked in the games industry for several years now, I am quite confident that most game developers are much more interested in fun experiences than in guns or explosions. It would be quite easy to lay the blame on the publishing companies responsible for bankrolling video game development, as it is generally agreed that innovation in the industry is slow because of the high financial risk unique games pose to investors. But publishers are only responding to their own ideas of a secure investment, which is really a commentary on how American culture perceives itself. Truth be told, American developers do produce a large number of titles that vary in artistic style and execution, though they are generally aimed exclusively at a younger audience and often fail to impress reviewers.

The dichotomy between American characters in video games and those from Japan is a reflection of deep cultural differences in attitudes toward comic media and popular culture. American culture has traditionally dictated that comic books (and video games by extension) are a medium for young males, regardless of content. In contrast to America, the Japanese culture does not tend to regard comics, video games, or animation as media designed for a specific audience. The culture permits these types of media to be enjoyed by all walks of life, and consequently the market for comic media is much wider than in the United States [5].

Given that American culture tends to associate animated media with very young audiences, it is easy to understand the concern that many people feel when they see mature content in games or comic books; recent laws aimed at regulating video game sales to minors reflect the same fears that drove Frederic Wertham to claim that comic books would drive children to delinquency.
in *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. And though such stereotypes may not reflect the market [6], our culture often considers them the truth.

The proliferation of masculine, angst-filled, non-comic-booky characters in video games may in fact be a reaction to American stereotypes about who games are for. If a developer wishes to create a game that may be enjoyed by adults his own age, he must be sure that the culture will judge his work to be “for adults.” What better way to distance a character from Bugs Bunny and Yogi Bear than by making it as realistic and gritty as possible? In a sense, masculine American video game characters are a cry for legitimacy.

Cultural attitudes change and shift with times. The comic books indicted by Wertham and his supporters fifty years ago are tame by today’s standards, and the public’s anxiety about the medium has waned. Video games will surely experience a similar acceptance, especially as those who grew up with games become older and more socially influential. Perhaps soon American game developers will not feel the need to rely on ultra-realistic art styles to communicate that their work is intended for adults. Things can only change with time, but if cultural standards for video games are indeed relaxed in the near future, a whole frontier of exciting possibilities await the medium.

**Footnotes:**

1. For an extremely interesting side-by-side comparison of how some classic games were censored for their U.S. release, see this page: [http://www.filibustercartoons.com/Nintendo.php](http://www.filibustercartoons.com/Nintendo.php)

2. Note that I have omitted Nintendo’s *Metroid Prime 2*, even though it scored very highly among reviewers. This game was developed by an American company (Retro Studios), but the Metroid license and Samus Aran character are Japanese in origin, which makes it a difficult game to pin to either culture. Samus Aran appears in the Japanese list for her role in the other Metroid title of 2004, *Metroid: Zero Mission*, which was developed in Japan.


Notice that the only character to appear in both the American and Japanese list is Solid Snake, the protagonist of Konami’s *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*.

4. However, this “wisdom” is wrong. The Entertainment Software Association found that 39% of gamers are women. [http://theesa.com/news/noteworthy_news.php](http://theesa.com/news/noteworthy_news.php)

5. It is wide enough, in fact, to permit pornography to be produced as animation. American culture would likely reject the entire notion of animated smut on the basis that Americans generally believe animation to be a medium specifically designed for children.
6. To quote the Entertainment Software Association’s research again, the average age of game players in America is 29. http://www.theesa.com/pressroom.html

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on February 4, 2014 at 10:40 AM said:

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