The Sound of Settling

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By Chris Pruett

Editor’s Note: Chris Pruett has been our Gaming Editor for several years, and has written on a wide variety of gaming topics for a very large audience. As a software Engineer for Google he has recently chosen to transfer to Google’s operation in Japan. As Chris is fluent in Japanese and very comfortable in Japanese culture, particularly Japanese cyber-culture, we have agreed with his suggestion that he might begin writing on broader themes from Japan. This initial piece in his “Cyber-Japan Series” sets the daily scene in which he lives....

“The train is about to leave,” the recorded voice says. “Please exercise caution.” It is a female voice, that of a competent, mature (but no older than 40), trustworthy, woman. The same voice announces the direction of the elevator at my job. “The elevator is going up,” it says. A few minutes before the bathtub at my new apartment fills itself, the disembodied female voice reports that the bath will be ready “pretty soon” from a small speaker in the kitchen. Our new vacuum, which we purchased when we moved into our apartment, cheerfully warns us that it will automatically clear the dust filter every time we turn it on. My sister-in-law’s car, like many nowadays, complains in the same, smooth, safe voice that she has yet to insert an automatic toll card into the dashboard.

I imagine that somewhere here in Japan lives the Automated Report Voice Woman (ARVW). Having been identified as having the most trustworthy-sounding voice in the country (even when it is played back through low-fidelity equipment), Automated Report Voice Woman has gone on to record thousands of greetings, warnings, and automated messages. I can picture her spending each day in a recording studio saying things like “the phone card you inserted has expired,” and “your transaction is complete” into a microphone. In my mind, she is a conservatively dressed, 30-something who might have considered a career in television news if she was not already raking in the dough as Japan’s singular Automated Report Voice Woman. Her posture, I assume, is excellent.

But as pervasive as Automated Report Voice Woman’s messages are, she cannot hold a candle to whomever it is that records all the jingles here. Japan is full of jingles—little short melodies that
indicate everything from when it is the right time to cross the street, to when the rice has finished cooking, to when the garbage truck is about to back up. Sometimes they are well-known tunes; the train station in Okayama, for instance, plays a xylophone version of “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” to announce the arrival of each train (the announcement is completed with a short message from ARVW in her normal tone). But usually the tunes that are emitted from microwaves, cars, elevators, automatic doors, and parking garage pay stations are short and unrecognizable riffs, two or three-bar phrases that stick around just long enough to get your attention. They might easily be mistaken for cell phone ring tones if turning a phone on in public was not such a social faux pas here.

While we are on the subject, cell phones are another Japanese paradox. Japan has the coolest cell phones in the world: you can use them to buy things in lieu of a credit card, you can watch broadcast TV on them, you can check train schedules and send e-mail to your friends and even use them to video conference (if you do not mind terrible video quality). Everybody, and I mean everybody, has a cell phone in Japan. And yet, and yet, actually using your cell phone to call people in many public places is frowned upon. The rules of politeness dictate that talking on your cell phone around other people in any sort of semi-quiet environment (like the train) is off limits. So of course you must keep your phone set to silent mode as well–if people are irritated by listening to you talk on the phone, they are also clearly not going to abide by your 8-bit Ride of the Valkyries ring tone. And just in case you forget the no-ring-tone rule, ARVW has a recorded announcement to remind you. Should you be deaf (in which case a ring tone seems pretty pointless anyway), the rule is also posted on the walls of the train car at regular intervals.

Actually, you can learn a lot of Japanese public etiquette from posted signs. In addition to rules about where cell phones may be used, trains have recently begun to carry signs designed to remind you that, for example, second-hand cigarette smoke is irritating to other people. The last time I lived in Japan was in the late 1990s, and during that period I might have jumped to the conclusion that such explicitly articulated social norms are just a modern version of the strict rules that govern traditional ceremony and polite society in Japan. But now I think that the posting of such rules—which are mostly common sense to the average Japanese citizen—is a way to prevent potential offenders from defending their behavior. It is much easier to confront a stranger about their actions in this country if you have the backing of some official rule; with a sign on your side, you can argue that your opinion is that of the majority, and therefore the other party is in the wrong, which is enough to win almost any dispute. Not that people get into public arguments in Japan all that frequently. It is not very cool to draw attention to yourself so explicitly, and the ability to “grin and bear it” is a virtue. But such arguments could occur, and if they did the pro-rule side would have the upper hand, so politeness signs act as a deterrent. That is my latest theory, anyway.

Despite having lived in Japan before and having studied the language and culture for close to half of my lifetime, I still find surprises lurking in the details of day-to-day life. Early visits to this country left me awestruck at the different wavelength at which everything seems to operate, but with increased exposure the culture has begun to make a whole lot more sense. Nowadays, the
things that I thought were unfathomable a decade ago seem pretty straightforward. Instead, it is
the subtle differences, the tiny details, that make sense to the natives but not to me, that I find
the most interesting.

Each morning I walk from my apartment to the local train station. Before boarding the train I
make sure that my phone is set to vibrate. A cheerful jingle announces the arrival of my train,
and as I board the comfortably familiar Automated Report Voice Woman’s voice thanks me for
choosing this line. On the way, I read a book that has been carefully wrapped in paper by the
bookstore so that the people around me cannot tell what I am reading. I disembark at my
destination and am simultaneously thanked and cautioned by ARVW’s messages playing from
different parts of the station at the same time. On the escalator, I remind myself to stand on the
side to let others pass. This is Tokyo, so I stand to the left; in Osaka it would be to the right. On
the street I pass a kid who is wearing what appears to be a bleached white Russian trooper hat.
His shoes have little horns coming out the tips. He is waiting with about fifty other people outside
of a pachinko parlor; it seems a new type of machine has arrived and the hardcore players are
already queued up. In the lobby of my office building, everybody mysteriously waits in front of a
particular elevator door, even though there is no guarantee that it is the one that will open first.
On the way home I notice a line extending out the door and down the block at the local KFC;
later my wife explains that this is because today is Christmas Eve.

I am in Japan and it makes no sense. I love it.

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4 THOUGHTS ON “THE SOUND OF SETTLING”

Brittani Shelling
on February 5, 2014 at 3:58 PM said:

Come Newbie, sono costantemente alla ricerca on-line per gli articoli che mi può trarre
beneficio. Grazie

Rossana Whitner
on February 6, 2014 at 4:33 AM said:

Prachtige lens! Keep up the good work
Shirly Varty on February 6, 2014 at 5:37 AM said:

This was truly a revealing piece of work. The ad libitum list that you organically produced has certainly given me inspiration to continue admiring the fact that you are capable of producing material that truly reflects the disposition of a cognizant individual.

Brian Agliam on February 6, 2014 at 12:07 PM said:

Grande argomento 😊 credo di aver visto almeno il 50% di questi commenti sul mio blog.