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REVIEW OF ATARI TO ZELDA BOOK: JAPAN'S VIDEOGAMES IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS

Atari to Zelda Book: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts

by Mia Consalvo

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For those who grew up in the 1980s or 1990s videogames and Japan can be seen as synonymous with one another. Whilst videogames were not a Japanese invention, it was only after the videogame crash of 1983 in North America that the medium shifted east and found its new (or for many true) home in Japan. For over 20 years Japan remained at the centre of the videogames medium, but even though today its influence is not as all encompassing as it once was, its early legacy still permeates across the medium.

Mia Consalvo has provided a densely packed exploration of how Japan's videogames have travelled to the West and what the Japanese industry has been doing in order to compete and remain relevant in response to the rise of the North American industry. Consalvo manages to both provide historical insights into the shifts that have taken place within the medium as well as exploring the implications of the actions taken by Japanese publishers and developers in their efforts to remain on terms.

Even though the focus is on Japanese videogames, Consalvo's book is primarily about how they arrived to the West and what state they were in when they did. Videogames, like all media products tend to go through some kind of cultural appropriation, and this is nothing new. For example, when the original Japanese film *Gojira* (1954) was brought to the United States and was dubbed into English, it was renamed *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (1956). The same process also saw the removal of many of the political, social, and anti-nuclear elements that were significant in the original film and helped define it. Furthermore, it also received new especially created footage, which introduced an American journalist as the embedded narrator.

Similar processes occur with videogames that come to the West, particularly during the early days of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), which itself was renamed and redesigned for the West compared to its original version, the Nintendo Family Computer (Famicom), in order to be more appealing and familiar to Westerners. Often at the behest of the Japanese publishers, videogames had aspects of the story, character names, or religious references changed or removed. This was under the assumption that the Western market, in particular North America, would be reluctant to embrace something that was unfamiliar to them. However, due to the technical limitations at the time, the stories were very basic, making the changes less noticeable or impactful upon the experience. As the technical prowess of the medium grew exponentially, however, so too did the videogames themselves, bringing with them new complications when it came to localising. For some videogames (particularly Role Playing Games [RPGs]) the sheer amount of text, and later voice over, made the process of localisation, let alone translation, very difficult, and also costly.

Consalvo identifies the implications that these additional costs have had, and the subsequent reluctance to risk that have informed many Japanese publishers/developers at some point. In doing so she focuses on the response made by both specialist Western companies that have worked with smaller Japanese developers to bring their games to the West, as well as "ROM Hackers" who are fans that have worked unofficially to provide translations for games that have failed to leave Japan. The latter group is fascinating as these people operate in a legally precarious position, as they are working with other company's Intellectual Property (IP), and nearly always without their permission or blessing. Yet the fan translators are persistent in their aims and some, such as the *Mother 3* translators at Starmen.net, state that if an official translation is ever released then they will remove their work from their site (which they did for their *Mother 1* translation when it finally came to the West 26 years after it released in Japan).

This attitude identifies the devotion and good will of fans, but also their commitment towards both Japanese games and helping to expand the audience of particular titles, something the games own publishers are unable/unwilling to do in these cases. The appreciation of Japanese culture is important throughout the book, and whilst videogames were not the first cultural media export to the West, they were the first experience of Japanese culture for many of those who Consalvo interviewed during her research. It is through this exposure to videogames that led some to gain a greater appreciation of a culture foreign to their own, but also, Consalvo argues, participating in a cultural cosmopolitanism. This is not necessarily focused on the act of buying products from a foreign culture (although that is an inescapable element of the videogames medium) but the consumption of media with the gradual evolution of an individual's home media taking into account these foreign aspects. The result is a hybridisation of media from different cultures.

Despite this hybridisation, putting "Japan's Videogames into Global Contexts" is actually a bifurcation of the medium. There is a significant disconnect between Japanese games at *home* and Japanese games for the Western markets. This is evident in the growing difference in the emphasis on handheld and console systems between Japan and the West (especially North America). One only needs to compare the sales charts of Japan and the U.S.A. to clearly see the contrast in preference between these two markets, or compare sales figures of handheld systems, such as Sony's PlayStation Vita, which is considered by many to be a failure in the West (with new videogames being released sparingly), while it is still continuing to have healthy sales in its native Japan as well as healthy software support.

Japanese publishers are aware of this distinction, and this is noticeable in the operational decisions these businesses are making. Consalvo focuses on three different Japanese videogame companies; a single chapter devoted to the corporate actions of Square Enix, and in a separate chapter looking at the approaches of Capcom and Level-5. She goes into depth examining the different strategies of multiple Japanese publishers/developers and demonstrates that there is no clear approach that a single company can take. The native market is still significant for Japanese companies and cannot be ignored, but it is a difficult balancing act when it comes to addressing the desires of both the Japanese and Western markets, as there has been a divergence, which becomes more evident over the past decade with the move towards High Definition graphics for home consoles. Japanese developers have struggled more than their Western counterparts during this transition, and as the West embraced ever-bigger television screens, many in Japan found comfort in their handheld devices.

The global videogames market still continues to grow (although the extent to which does fluctuate), but Japan's share of the market has shrunk significantly after less than a decade, from 50% in 2002 to 10% in 2010. This decline was not ignored by developers, with former Capcom developer Keiji Inafune announcing at that year's Tokyo Game Show that Japan's developers were "at least five years behind" their Western counterparts.

Inafune's solution was to form his own independent studio (Comcept), which he felt would better allow him to adapt to the current desires of the market. Other Japanese developers, such as Shinji Mikami (Capcom), Koji Igarashi (Konami), and notably Hideo Kojima (Konami), have left the stalwarts of the Japanese videogame industry to escape the bureaucratic systems that were failing to modernise and adapt not just to Western ideas but more efficient means of creating modern videogames.

Consalvo rightfully acknowledges the demise of the middle element of the videogames industry; the larger publishers have become bigger, whilst smaller publishers (for a multitude of different reasons) have disappeared with their IP swallowed up by the highest bidder. Midsize developers are also largely a thing of the past, unable to compete with larger studios on budget and lacking the flexibility of the other side the industry-- the indie (independent) developer. The number of indie developers has continued to grow and has contributed to the scale of consistent new videogame releases now available. This shift has been a global one, but one that Japan has struggled to adapt to. Nintendo famously refused to acknowledge indie developers that didn't have a dedicated office until only a few years ago, where it now (along with the other console manufacturers) goes out of its way to accommodate and promote indie games on its systems.

This sluggishness in adapting to modern ways of working is not isolated to the videogames industry; the entire electronics industry has been struggling for just as long with more innovative companies rapidly taking market share. Sony has taken a long time to alter its strategies, but it has been its videogames division, Sony Interactive Entertainment (formerly Sony Computer Entertainment), that has helped sustain Sony as a whole for the past few years. With the PlayStation 4 (PS4), Sony has been able to reclaim its position as once again being the bestselling console of the current generation, taking back its title from American company Microsoft and its Xbox series of consoles. What the PS4 demonstrates is that Japan is still capable of providing a console experience that people around the world want, and that it is possible for Japanese companies to look inwards and take note of where they went wrong in the past (the PS3 wasn't a failure, but it was never thought of as a success either).

This revival is what *Atari to Zelda* comes across as being about. Mia Consalvo is trying to explore the rise, fall, and resumed relevance of the Japanese videogames industry. Japanese videogames are imprinted on the minds of millions of gamers all around the world. These memories continue to influence current and future games in development.

Even though it is unlikely that Japan will ever return to the dominant position it once had in the global industry, its legacy will remain for the coming decades in games across the globe. But that's not to say that Japanese games *themselves* will no longer be relevant. With a greater willingness from larger companies, and more freedom for smaller developers, uniquely Japanese games will continue to come out of the country, and as long as they reach the West, they will find their audience.

Mia Consalvo provides an engaging book that offers many fascinating examples that help to explain the transitions that the Japanese videogames industry has gone through and how this has translated to the Western market. Those new to videogames will find a new adventure that they were unaware of, whilst long time videogame players will learn countless new aspects about their favourite pastime. This is aided by the fact that Consalvo has purposefully avoided concentrating on more well-known (and more extensively covered) examples like Nintendo and its many franchises such as *Super Mario*, *Pokémon*, and *The Legend of Zelda*, allowing new insights to be unravelled, and a wider understanding of the implications emanating currently from Japanese videogame publishers and developers based on their perceived understanding of the current global industry. How she has been able to include so much into just over 200 pages is astonishing given how much ground is covered. Whilst it doesn't feel like much more could be included without diluting the pace and context of the book, it does provide others with plenty to follow up from and to incorporate into their own research. For anyone looking for a condensed overview of the trajectory of Japan's videogames industry, this is should be required reading.

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