

“Cosmopolitanism”, “Japaneseness”, and Video Game Studies: A Review of Mia Consalvo's *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*

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Abstract

The field of Japanese studies occupies many spaces of inquiry in popular culture and academic scholarship alike, illustrating the diverse ways products of Japanese culture, society, and technology have broadly influenced the global market. In *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*, Mia Consalvo considers yet another lens through which to understand Japan's influence, namely video games. Exploring Japan's video games in a variety of contexts – ranging from how individual game players relate to the study of Japan via encounters with video games to how the Japanese game industry designs games for global consumption – Consalvo's work considers intriguing relationships between cosmopolitanism, notions of Japaneseness, and globalization which open new directions of research for Japanese studies, game studies, and their intersection.

As someone who has spent extensive time collectively studying, traveling to, and living in Japan, I am well-versed in the myriad ways one might engage with the study of Japan across different media, consumer spaces, academic disciplines, and beyond. Products like anime and manga have entered popular culture well outside Japan's borders, spurring communities of scholars to research their history and influence in the consumer realm; Japanese technological industries have proven their popularity and preeminence across the globe, fostering in popular imagination a conception of Japan as a futuristic, advanced society; and the study of Japanese history, religion, language, literature, and visual culture persists as major foci of research at academic institutions around the world, areas of inquiry viewed as ways to peer into questions of where Japan as a country has evolved from and where it is going. This work is illustrated by the research of many scholars in the fields of media studies and Japanese digital humanities, including Ian Condry, Molly Des Jardin, Hoyt Long, and Jonathan Abel, to name a few. Scholarship in Japanese studies continues to be defined primarily in these domains, organized around those artifacts of culture, history, and society that seem most distinctly, recognizably Japanese. Yet at the same time, I am also aware of the many ways we encounter Japan on a daily basis in much more banal, mundane spaces, through interactions with products and cultural artifacts of Japan in the global marketplace that we may not realize are foreign in their origin. It is perhaps through such mundane encounters that there is much yet to be discovered as the study of Japan spills into new domains.

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In *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*, Mia Consalvo invites the reader to focus their attention on one such domain of encounters which has historically been both mundane and distinctive in its expression: video games from Japan and the Japanese game industry. Though (disappointingly) making little reference to neither the Atari gaming console nor the *Legend of Zelda* game series, Consalvo's book succeeds more in the task defined by the second half of its title, positioning the practices of Japanese developers both within the Japanese game industry as well as the global marketplace. In the process, Consalvo endeavors to interrogate the evolution of Japanese games between those spaces through several lenses that assess their relationship with globalization, notions of Japaneseness, and the global game industry at large: how has globalization influenced the ways that video games from Japan enter the global market, and in turn, how have Japanese games influenced the practices of the global game industry? What makes a game distinctly “Japanese”, and what might this suggest about how such practices have evolved within a rapidly globalizing gaming industry that is both consumptive and agnostic of such cultural differentiation? Using strategies ranging from the organization of multinational development and production teams to the recruitment of specialized

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localization expertise, the book suggests Japanese producers of video games have developed practices that tug at how consumers relate to video games from Japan, the “Japaneseness” of those games, and ultimately, the consequences such encounters have for creating communities of players that are globally mobilized.

Consalvo begins by crafting the framework that is intended to weave in and out of the chapters of the book, one oriented around cosmopolitanism, monolithic “Japaneseness”, and its origins in *japonisme* and neo-techno orientalism [Consalvo 2016, 1–15]. Though each in turn is discussed as a theoretical buttress for the analyses that follow, these conceptual abstractions are aliases for much larger discourses that unfortunately feel more distantly removed from the structure of Consalvo’s arguments in subsequent chapters than I would have preferred. While Consalvo gives these concepts a basic theoretical treatment in the introduction, I often found myself having to actively position the discussions that appear in each chapter back within this introduced framework, building and rebuilding the recurring thread of analysis along the way. In my own background in digital humanities, the relationship between digital humanities and cosmopolitanism is not readily apparent, particularly in the field of Japan studies where digital humanities approaches are yet nascent and often tangentially attached to traditional studies of history, literature, and culture. Despite wishing for a bit more guidance from the author on this recontextualization, though, I came to understand by the end of the book that these concepts are intended not so much as fixed waypoints but rather as often-shifting concepts that scope the book’s ultimate objective – to understand the study of Japan’s video games as itself an uncertain endeavor that is fraught with ambiguity [Consalvo 2016, 215].

Perhaps recognizing this ambiguity, Consalvo proceeds to approach the study with a strategy also fraught with its own shifts in boundaries. In the subsequent chapters, Consalvo explores a different facet of the Japanese video game industry, positioning each within a broader context of the global game industry. To begin, in chapter one, Consalvo discusses her study of a group of several non-Japanese players of Japanese video games, considering the extent to which those games spurred them towards cosmopolitan practices in varying forms [Consalvo 2016, 20]. Their practices range in depth and breadth, from casually studying Japanese language to living and working in Japan, representing a spectrum of cosmopolitan dispositions that Consalvo argues is an expression of globalization in action [Consalvo 2016, 22–37]. In the process, Consalvo interrogates the role that video games themselves have played: are such players predisposed to cosmopolitanism by other means, or did the video games these individuals played cause them to engage in cosmopolitan practices? Recognizing the many different ways cosmopolitan dispositions can be expressed – banal/mundane, consumer, pop, esthetic – Consalvo considers what it means to think of video games as a space of cosmopolitan activation, suggesting that game studies offers a new lens through which to theorize historical definitions of what cosmopolitanism truly means [Consalvo 2016, 38–40].

In reading chapter one, I found myself reflecting on my own experience playing Japanese video games. Much like the many individuals profiled in Consalvo’s research, I too was exposed to video games from Japan at an early age and captivated by them without fully understanding what it meant for those games to be from Japan. Here and in the following chapters, Consalvo discusses Koichi Iwabuchi’s notion of “cultural odor” – or the sense of Japanese origin that comes attached to and has been historically designed out of exports from Japan – as something that the players who were interviewed either embraced enthusiastically or paid little attention to [Consalvo 2016, 33]. For those players who were unaware of the games’ Japanese origin, discovery of their Japaneseness resulted in different responses, inspiring some to study the culture, language, and history of Japan in other deeper ways. As someone whose own early interest in Japan was at least partially informed by encounters with Japanese video games, I greatly appreciate Consalvo’s inclusion of these players’ perspectives for they demonstrate that in game studies, the experiences and practices of individual consumers can tell us much about the industry’s evolution.

After this focus on players, Consalvo then moves on to discuss the games themselves, conducting an environmental scan of the variety of games produced by Japanese developers across different consoles and genres [Consalvo 2016, 65–96]. Despite Consalvo’s attempt to assert otherwise, however, I unfortunately felt as though chapter three read more like the author’s description of her personal experience of playing games or interacting with different conventions of gameplay in Japanese games, than a holistic assessment of why an analysis of those games is important in the first place. In the end, Consalvo endeavors to position discussion within a larger consideration of Japaneseness, exploring the features of games that make them seem distinctly and uniquely Japanese [Consalvo

2016, 93–6]. As the author demonstrates, games' expressions can come in many forms – by way of language, cultural reference, gameplay feel, geography, genre, and platform – and as such, pinning down the origins of Japaneseness in such games is as slippery as defining Japaneseness in the first place.

It is at this point that Consalvo pivots her analysis to respond to this apparent ineffability through more indirect means. Here the discussion of Japaneseness is transitioned away from defining what it is and where it comes from and toward an analysis of those practices that are designed to minimize or erase that very Japaneseness to enhance a game's consumption in foreign markets – game localization [Consalvo 2016, 121–3]. Consalvo explores the many activities that come with localizing Japanese games for foreign audiences and the variable energy Japanese game companies invest in that process, suggesting that a key recent evolution in Japanese game developers' practices abroad is the extent to which they work to translate the cultural and linguistic “noise” of Japanese games into an experience that transcends their foreign origin. It is also where Consalvo elaborates upon an important concept introduced earlier, that of the “culture broker” [Consalvo 2016, 103] who makes decisions about how to best transform the strongest signals of Japanese origin (in video games) into their analogous expression in other cultures [Consalvo 2016, 123]. In describing the translation-like art of adapting Japanese video games for global markets, Consalvo writes, “localized content is never a true picture of another country or culture but is usually more a pastiche of symbols, icons, and broad references. The job of the localizer is more akin to [Mark] Peterson's culture broker, whose job is to create harmony from the noise or discordance of another language and another culture, complete with its accents, idioms, slang, and shortcuts” [Consalvo 2016, 126]. Consalvo thus suggests that localization experts do precisely this work and are culture brokers themselves; localization endeavors not to necessarily erase a sense of the foreign but rather translate the experience of the original into an analogous experience in societies and cultures outside of the one in which it was created [Consalvo 2016, 143–4]. Much later in the book's concluding pages, Consalvo rounds this discussion out with an intriguing parallel to early principles of *japonisme*. In the same way that art collectors of the nineteenth century influenced the products that were exported out of Japan to serve the tastes of Western consumers, so too have Japanese video games become directly influenced by and sometimes designed for the desires of foreign markets [Consalvo 2016, 219]. Far from being something to entirely eliminate, however, a game's perceived Japaneseness can sometimes be regarded by gamers as something desirable, which suggests that localization as a practice can occupy a useful dialogic space between developer and consumer [Consalvo 2016, 148].

As we approach the end of the book, Consalvo finally invites the reader to consider yet another lens of Japanese video games at a more macroscopic level, looking at the practices of entire companies and the industry itself [Consalvo 2016, 149–178]. In the same way that individuals can be assessed along a spectrum of cosmopolitan dispositions, so too can video game companies. This is a lens that Consalvo had opened at an earlier point in the book when discussing Square Enix in particular, a Japanese game developer whose games have significant international acclaim. There, Consalvo notes, “The company's activities are cosmopolitan in many ways: its aggressive entry into multiple markets, expanding use of localization, acquisition of Western studios, and ever-expanding portfolio demonstrate its commitment to travel to multiple lands, learn about the other, take risks, and be transformed in the process” [Consalvo 2016, 119–120]. Continuing this conversation against a backdrop that considers Japanese games' foreignness as an inextricable facet of their mobility, Consalvo posits an intriguing idea: that Japaneseness, when not regarded as something to be actively scrubbed out of Japanese video games, can sometimes be used as a defensive rhetoric by Japanese video game companies to minimize risk [Consalvo 2016, 178]. The idea is rooted in notions of Japanese exceptionalism, or *nihonjinron*, and suggests that since Japanese esthetic preferences in video games are so different from those of Western companies, Japaneseness by default could explain when and why Japanese games fail to succeed beyond Japan's borders [Consalvo 2016, 177]. In this way, Consalvo's assessment of Japanese game developers is inflected by a framework that regards Japaneseness and its variable expressions in a globalized, cosmopolitan industry as an integral part of game developers' practices. In chapter seven, Consalvo explores how such developers use multiple senses of Japaneseness to inform their design processes, noting in particular how they use one sense “to refer to design elements that possess an almost ephemeral quality of Japaneseness. This quality holds together multiple beliefs where Japaneseness can be an invocation of the positively valued, weird, wacky, and beautiful, elements of a game as well as of the perhaps alienating, remote, or irreducibly foreign components that Western developers cannot imitate or emulate” [Consalvo 2016, 184]. Here again the author points out how Japaneseness, variably invoked as desirable or

undesirable, measurable or ineffable, may be a key component in understanding how Japanese video games have influenced the global gaming industry at large.

Reaching the concluding chapter, I find myself struggling to reorient Consalvo's wide-ranging analysis – all the way from individual game players to individual games, localization teams, development companies, and finally the industry at large – within the initial (specific) context that sought to consider the relationships between globalization, notions of Japaneseness, and the video game industry. In considering the many foci the book explores, several questions come into view: is *Atari to Zelda* primarily a study of Japanese video game developers, their rhetorics, and their practices? Is it a study of how those companies have affected the nature of the global video game industry? Is it a study of their games, and how they are consumed in a global context? Or is it a study of Japanese exceptionalism, expressed through a cultural product that has become undeniably globalized in its mobility? The best answer to this question is perhaps that it is all of the above. Indeed, in the penultimate chapter of the book, Consalvo summarizes what feels to me to be the most that can be stated: a recognition that “Japanese videogames have influenced Western game developers in a multitude of ways and in doing so have contributed in key ways to a global culture” [Consalvo 2016, 208]. This assertion opens up new opportunities for Japanese digital humanities, positioning the traditional study of Japan, its culture, and the globalization of its products within a reinvented digital understanding of cosmopolitanism that is made mobile by video games and related media.

In the same way that an attempt to reduce a study of Japaneseness down to observable characteristics would imply that Japanese video games can be characterized in singular, unidimensional terms, Consalvo contends that her research makes clear that it is no longer useful to speak of “the video game industry” as though it were a singular, monolithic, homogeneous entity [Consalvo 2016, 210–213]. Instead, it is better to speak of many industries proliferating in parallel, and in consequence, of the impact of Japanese video games on the practices of specific subindustries of the global market. In the discussion of many Japanese game developers – Square Enix, Capcom, Level-5, Nintendo, and beyond – Consalvo describes several expressions of this differentiation, including the increased permeability and gradual erasure of distinctions between the borders of national and global marketplace, stratification between handheld versus console games, relationships between industry localization efforts and fan translators and ROM hackers, and the rapid emergence of indie game studios, each inflected with the complexity of defining Japaneseness. I found the concluding chapter to be the most useful of them all, for it answered most concretely a lingering feeling of uncertainty that emerged in chapter one. But perhaps Consalvo's work is successful for precisely this reason, contributing to Japanese and game studies alike a plethora of new questions to explore: at the same time that it is impossible to precisely define the ways that Japanese video games have influenced the global game industry, Consalvo's imprecision demonstrates that as the industry continues to evolve, so too will the ways in which we understand its influence.

Works Cited

Consalvo 2016 Consalvo, Mia. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA (2016).