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JAPANESE POP CULTURES IN EUROPE TODAY:
ECONOMIC CHALLENGES, MEDIATED
NOTIONS, FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

MUTUAL IMAGES

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MUTUAL IMAGES
A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

AUORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

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JAPANESE POP CULTURES IN EUROPE TODAY:
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EDITED BY
MARCO PELLITTERI

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A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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Brokers of “Japaneseness”: Bringing table-top J-RPGs to the “West”

Björn-Ole KAMM | Kyōto University, Japan

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Abstract

Japanese-language table-top role-playing games (TRPG) stayed mostly under the radar of gamers and scholars in Europe and the US until 2008, when a first English translation of such a game was released. TRPGs made by Japanese game designers had been overshadowed by their digital cousins, computer RPGs such as Final Fantasy, and Japan has subsequently been imagined as a digital game heaven. Instead of engaging a computer interface, however, TRPG players come together and narrate a shared adventure or story. Using character avatars and following often complex rules, their game world and the plot line of their play exist mostly in their imagination.

One of the first English translations of a commercial Japanese game was Tenra Banshō Zero (Inoue, Kitkowski) in 2014, chosen for its “Japaneseness,” that is, a plethora of elements, such as samurai, Shintō priests, and creatures from Japanese folklore. Using Tenra’s English translation as a key example, this paper traces how “cultural brokerage” in the case of this game does not simply translate between cultures (e.g., a supposed to be authentic Japanese one and a vaguely “Western” one) but necessarily assembles and constitutes them as single coherent wholes. By tracking the translation process, this paper seeks to show that the “Japaneseness” of Tenra was its selling point but also nothing it simply carried with it: The “Japaneseness” of this game needed to be created first by telling a putative audience what “authentic” Japan looks like.

KEYWORDS

Cultural brokerage; Japaneseness; *Nihonjiron*; J-RPG; TRPG; Table-top role-playing games; Mediation; Translation.

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Translating Japanese-language Table-top RPGs

Japanese-language table-top role-playing games (TRPG) ¹ stayed mostly under the radar of gamers and scholars in Europe and the US until 2008, when Maid RPG (Kamiya 2004; Cluney, Kamiya 2008) was

¹ The Japanese term *tēburu-tōku RPG* (table-talk RPG), coined by game designer Kondō Kōshi in the 1980s, is an attempt to make a distinction between digital and non-digital games (Kondō 1987).

released as the first English translation of such a game. TRPGs made by Japanese game designers had been overshadowed by their digital cousins, computer and console RPGs such as *Final Fantasy* (Sakaguchi 1987), and Japan has subsequently been imagined as a digital game heaven. Instead of engaging with a computer interface, TRPG players come together, sit at a table and narrate a shared adventure or story, using character avatars, with the help of dice and – in most cases – complex rules (cf. Montola 2003). The game world and the plot-line of their play exists mostly in their imagination, supported in some cases by elaborate character sheets, drawings, maps, and figurines.

Maid RPG is an amateur-made game (so-called *dōjin-gēmu*)² and remains a PDF-only release in the English version. The first major English translation of a commercial Japanese-language game was *Tenra Banshō Zero* (Inoue 1996; Kitkowski, Inoue 2014), chosen for its “Japaneseness,” that is, a plethora of supposedly authentic Japanese elements such as samurai, Shinto priests, and creatures from folklore set in a world inspired by the *sengoku jidai* (Warring States Period, ca. 1467–1603 C.E.). However, it was not faithfully translated. “Unfaithful” is not meant in any morally negative sense but refers to the many adjustments necessary to deliver *Tenra* to an audience that both is perceived and perceives itself as different from the “original” Japanese one. Such adjustments include not only notes and clarifications of “Japan” but also explanations vis-à-vis

² *Dōjin* stands for “like-minded people,” referring to a group of fans or a community of interest. In Japan, these groups often produce their own work, be it derivatives of commercial media they favour or original manga, novels, and software, to sell or share them at conventions. *Dōjinshi*, self-published zines, receive the most attention and are usually incorrectly translated as fan-fiction or fanzine, which obscures that not only amateurs but also professionals create these works (cf. Mizoguchi 2003).

“Western” values.³ Using *Tenra’s* English translation as a key example, this paper traces how cultural brokerage in the case of this game does not simply translate between cultures but necessarily also produces them as a semiotic-material reality. It makes “the West” — by stripping away elements, adding information — and similarly also “Japan,” by assembling selected elements into a single coherent whole.⁴ By closely tracking the endeavours of *Tenra’s* translator-cum-cultural broker to bring J-RPGs to the West, this paper illustrates this argument and shows that the “Japaneseness” of this game was its selling point and that this Japaneseness was not simply there but was created through telling the audience what “authentic” Japan looks like.

A Primer and Brief History of Role-Playing

The often retold origin story of role-playing games usually links these games to war-gaming in 19th century Prussia (‘Kriegsspiele,’ cf. Peterson 2012; Appelcline 2013; but also, Morton 2007; Tresca 2010), which had antecedents in ancient India (chaturāṅga, known as chess in Europe). Crossing not only boundaries of today’s nation-states but also those of literary genres and theatrical practices, RPGs as they are known today gained a distinct form in the US in the 1970s by mixing elements from war and diplomacy games, science- or pulp-fiction and, last but not least, Tolkien’s novel *Lord of the Rings* (1954). Nowadays, the most

³ Japan, the West, and terms such as original, authentic and traditional appear in inverted commas at first mention. This awkward rendition seeks to highlight that throughout this paper these words do not refer to some socio-political or geographical entity out there, but to the image of or discourse about such entities. Similarly, ascriptions of “original” or “tradition” are understood as ex post facto judgments that place value on such qualities regardless of when a so-called tradition was invented, for example.

⁴ The phrases “to make” and “to assemble” are borrowed from Latour (2005) and Law (2009) to highlight the performativity of realities: they are done in practices, such as translation, and do not precede our actions.

popular variant of this broad category of games is multiplayer online games (e.g. *World of Warcraft*; Pardo *et al.* 2004) that rely on mechanics refined by Japanese programmers (cf. *Final Fantasy*). Live-action enactments (so-called larps)⁵ promoted in Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe have also gained traction elsewhere.

The very first so-called fantasy role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D, 1st Edition 1974) was jointly created and later promoted by Gary Gygax, a high school dropout, insurance agent and shoe repairman, and Dave Arneson, who had studied history at the University of Minnesota. Most RPG historians and designers accredit D&D for the establishment of core elements and mechanics shared by many games that followed in its footsteps (cf. Edwards 2002; Hitchens, Drachen 2009; Tresca 2010; Peterson 2012; Appelcline 2013). Players create and portray characters distinct from their own selves (e.g. not Jim the sales clerk but Rognar the fighter). These characters have physical and mental traits (such as intelligence and dexterity), usually quantified in levels of capability. They are further differentiated by occupation or profession, such as fighter, wizard or cleric, usually called character classes. There is an additional distinction between those players who portray just one character and the referee (e.g. the dungeon master, game master, or storyteller) who controls the setting and the supporting cast. In the course of a game, the players explore, fight, talk, and gain rewards, such as gold and experience. The latter is collected in a currency of points,

⁵ Live-Action Roleplay used to be abbreviated as LARP. Recently, however, “larp” (lowercase, as a noun; e.g. “a larp” for an event) and “larping” (the activity) are now widely used in English-language discussions of the practice (Fatland 2005, 12; Holter, Fatland, Tømte 2009, 5). Digital RPGs link directly to D&D. Contrastingly, even though larp shares elements with this “ancestor,” such a singular line of development is contested (Fatland 2014). In Japanese, *raibu RPG* (live RPG) is sometimes used interchangeably with the term LARP in the Latin alphabet (cf. Hinasaki 2013).

and one needs a certain amount of experience points (XP) to "level up," to grow from a simple fighter to Rognar the Invincible — which would take many game sessions and probably also many out-of-game years for Jim's character to do. All this is accomplished by verbal tellings, by dialog between the players and the referee, and — this is a legacy from war-gaming — with the help of dice and with optional props such as figurines and maps. The dice are used to determine the result of actions when the outcome is unclear, introducing probability into the game. Thus, if a character wants to climb a wall, then his player needs to succeed at the appropriate dice roll, the outcome of which is usually modified according to the character's traits (a strong character receives a bonus on climbing, for example). If the roll does not succeed or fails, the character either does not climb over the wall or might even fall off it.⁶

D&D soon inspired computer games, such as *Wizardry* (Greenberg, Woodhead 1981), and a broad range of similar games, some of which ventured beyond the sword & sorcery genre. For example, *Call of Cthulhu* (CoC, Petersen, Willis 1981) appropriated the horror tales of H.P. Lovecraft (1928), while *Vampire: The Masquerade* (VTM, Rein·Hagen 1991) took its inspiration from gothic punk and vampire romance novels (e.g., *Interview with the Vampire*, Rice 1976). In particular, CoC and VTM shifted the focus of the games from fighting and heroic adventures to storytelling and imaginary but nevertheless extraordinary experiences. RPGs do not only differ in terms of content and genre — there are over 600 table-top systems and settings

⁶ In many games, there is a difference between not succeeding and failing or "botching." If the dice roll is below the set target number necessary to climb the wall, the character just does not make it and may try again. If the dice shows a "1" on the other hand (or another respective number designated in the game rules), this is called a "botch" or "critical failure," which often has additional negative consequences, such as falling off the wall in this example.

worldwide that encompass fantasy, science-fiction, horror, adventure, espionage, (alternative) history, satire, superheroes, and steampunk, including numerous adaptations of literature and film (name a popular TV show, comic or manga series, and it will probably have a TRPG version). Not all games feature humans or humanoids as player characters — in *Plüsch, Power & Plunder* (Sandfuchs *et al.* 1991) one plays the role of toys of every imaginable kind, while one becomes home appliances in *Isamashī chibi no suihanki TRPG* (Brave Little Rice-cooker TRPG, Koaradamari 2012). Role-playing games are often differentiated by their mechanics on a spectrum between realist simulation and narrativist playability (Edwards 1999; Bøckman 2003; Boss 2008). Settings, themes and rules may reciprocally encourage certain play styles (Jara 2013, 43) but the agency lies with the players.⁷ Regardless of labels for genre or style, how game designers describe their creations, how elaborate or simple their rule systems might be, these do not necessarily determine actual styles of play at the game table — in each and every system one may encounter “roll-players” who favour competition and clear achievement tiers as well as “role-players” who prefer storytelling and in-character enactments.⁸ Game designers know this and thus often include phrases such as: “But the rules are only intended to help your imagination. The most important things are your inspiration and your intention to have fun” (Kitazawa, GroupSNE 2008, 9; translated by the author).

⁷ The high-level, almost limitless agency distinguishes TRPGs from their digital cousins.

⁸ Incidentally, the Japanese TRPG magazine *Rōru & Rōru* (Role & Roll, Arclight Publishing) hints at both play styles with its title and markets itself as a caterer to both, role-players and (the often derogatorily used label of) roll-players.

When fantasy role-playing first saw the light of day in the 1970s, Japanese model and toy shops were also selling war-gaming equipment, and some shop owners ordered copies of D&D without knowing what it was. Yasuda Hitoshi, a fiction writer and game designer, together with novelists- and game designers-to-be Kiyomatsu Miyuki and Mizuno Ryō were among the first to encounter the English-language D&D in American science fiction fanzines and in the aforementioned model shops during their student days at Kyōto and Ritsumeikan University (Yasuda. GroupSNE 1989; Mizuno 1997). Intrigued by this new kind of game, Yasuda and his colleagues not only started to play but also to spread the word and create one of Japan’s first TRPG game studios. News about games like D&D mostly spread via war-gaming and computer game magazines, for example, in *TACTICS* (Takanashi 1982). Yasuda and his colleagues later incorporated their university circle as “GroupSNE” and sought to teach others about these games. They published their playing as a serialised “replays,” which were novelisations of game session transcripts, in the computer game magazine *Comtiq*. The first issue of this serial, entitled *Rōdosu tōsenki* (Record of Lodoss War), was released in September 1986 (Yasuda and GroupSNE, 1986).⁹ *Record of Lodoss War* would not only become a multimedia franchise successful in Japan and abroad as anime and manga but also the basis for *Sword World RPG* (Mizuno. GroupSNE 1989), Japan’s “gold standard” TRPG throughout the 1990s.

⁹ Replays today represent the most economically successful part of Japan’s TRPG market, as members of GroupSNE, Bōken and other game studios have emphasised in conversations (cf. also sale ranks on amazon.co.jp, for example). Judging from self-introductions on online forums, the number of replay readers far exceeds that of TRPG players. As novelised, verbatim transcriptions of player conversations and game events, they go beyond the brief “example of play” found in English or German rulebooks. Along with the commercially produced light novel replays and those by amateurs, sites such as niconico increasingly feature replays in video form.

Despite a small boom in the early 1990s which saw the release of many popular media franchise adaptations of Japanese TRPGs and vice-versa, TRPGs remain a niche market. Japanese translations of big-name US games, such as new editions of D&D or CoC, continue to be released only a few years after their initial release in English. Indigenous games, however, make up most of this niche. In particular, *dōjin-gēmu*, such as *Maid RPG* and the *Little Rice-Cooker RPG*, flourish and are sold at the tri-annual “Game Market”, a convention for analog gaming and the bi-annual “Comic Market” (*komike*), Japan’s largest convention for amateur-produced manga, anime, and games. Not unlike the indie genre in the US, many of these games explore not only new mechanics or design ideas, but also over-the-top themes or parodies of other media. *Maid RPG*, for example, takes cues from the figure of the French maid that is prominent in anime and related fan practices. Similar to *Paranoia* (Costikyan *et al.* 1985), in which player characters are at the mercy of a capricious computer, the maid players have to fulfil tasks for a non-player “Master” character, gain rewards, and assist as well as backstab each other during the game. As a light-hearted but still self-reflexive game parodying current (occasionally sexist) anime tropes, *Maid RPG* appeals to fans of respective anime and manga products and goods from Japan.

While most non-gamers in Japan associate the term “RPG” solely with computer games, TRPGs also remain in the shadow of manga and anime from a consumer standpoint outside Japan. Despite the popularity of the *Record of Lodoss War* franchise in Europe and the US, for example, only a very limited few knew that the stories had their origins in D&D sessions played in the 1980s. This changed in the late 2000s, when

“cultural brokers” took the stage to diffuse the hitherto obscure knowledge about non-digital role-playing in Japan.

Studying “Cultural Brokers”

Between the summer of 2009 and the winter of 2014, I conducted fieldwork on sites related to TRPGs in Japan, Europe, and the US to trace the flows and dynamics of role-playing games across national borders. I followed a cyber-ethnographic approach, which distances itself from studies of the “virtual” by not limiting itself to Internet communication alone. Borrowing from thinkers such as Donna Haraway (1991), a cyber-ethnographic approach understands the cyberspatial life-worlds of humans as “entangled” realms of technology and the social: Mediated by computers¹⁰ but also fundamentally linked to allegedly “real” sites. From this perspective, the ethnography of online groups is not limited to investigations online, but means “the ethnography of online and related off-line situations, the ethnography of humans and non-human actors in these related fields” (Teli, Pisanu, Hakken 2007). This perspective corresponds to a semiotic-material image of humanity as “cyborgs” (Law 1991; Law, Hassard 1999; Latour 2005), that is, as networks of human and non-human parts (the “identity” and “performance” of researchers, for example, are linked to books, presentation notes, or voice recorders without which they could not play their role). Consequently, such investigations are not limited to one location – in this case, the Internet – but should follow the human and non-human participants to different places, on- and offline. This

¹⁰ The term “computer” also includes smartphones.

approach is similar to and also based on current developments in trans-local anthropology (Hannerz 2003; Rescher 2010; Brosius 2012).

In the course of my fieldwork online and offline, I dealt not only with technologies of (inter-) connection, that is, different types of non-human mediators such as *kanji* encodings or verification protocols of social-networking sites (Kamm 2013), but also encountered a number of entangled human actors who stood out in the sense that they made themselves — or were made — into nodes of translation, that is, into “cultural brokers.” The term cultural brokers increasingly gains currency in transculturally inclined histories of interconnected “cultures,” of which a recent prominent example is the studies collected in an edited volume that includes this term in its title: *Cultural Brokers at Mediterranean Courts in the Middle Ages* by Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert, and Jenny Rahel Oesterle (2013b). The editors display a sceptical attitude towards absolute definitions but their conceptualisation of “cultural brokerage” offer a few ideas that nonetheless resonate with my encounters. There is a range of potentially applicable terms: translator, mediator, and opinion leader, for example. But the economic connotations of “brokerage” correspond to how Japanese-language TRPGs are handled by the human mediators I encountered, because their mode of enterprise focuses on transforming what is widely considered a hobby into a source of income.

Broadly speaking, “cultural brokerage” refers to the mediation between environments or spheres, such as the transfer of knowledge, which can be either deliberately (“manifest”) or involuntarily (“latent”) (Höh, Jaspert and Oesterle, 2013b, p. 9). As the brokers I encountered are translators in the most common sense of the term (mediators between languages), their activities of can be categorised as “manifest:”

Their inter-, cross- or trans-cultural brokerage are intentional acts and the main function in this instance. There are other cases where brokerage appears as a “latent” function; for example, unintentional brokers such as deported slaves (cf. Höh, Jaspert and Oesterle 2013a, 23). A manifest brokers acts as a spokesperson, such as an expert, an insider or a political representative, who speaks on behalf of “silent” entities (such as a group of other humans or games, in this case) and simplifies the networks of these others. Simply put, Japanese-language TRPGs (and often their designers and players) appear in need of such a spokesperson because they cannot speak for themselves to non-Japanese-speakers. This spokesperson displaces these other entities and their goals and ideas to fit his or her representation — such a series of transformations may be called translation (Callon 1986, 214). Translation here does not simply refer to the displacement of one natural language into another but to characterising representations, establishing identities, and defining and controlling network elements. Representation in this sense is always understood as translation in order to “undermine the very idea that there might be such a thing as fidelity” (Law 2006, 48). Many different bits and pieces — such as a plethora of game mechanics, settings, player attitudes, artworks, and so on — are translated into a single group: Japanese role-playing games.

Studying cultural brokerage means tracing how elements are transformed and assembled, how mediators make the dichotomy between the entities they claim to transport, how they keep connections stable. What makes such a spokesperson, cultural broker? What are the requirements, what are the challenges? What is transferred, and what is excluded?

This paper traces one case of cultural brokerage: the translation of the TRPG *Tenra Banshō Zero* into English and the entangled creation of a whole group of (silent) entities, ranging from Japanese role-playing games to Japanese players and Japanese culture.

From Japan to “the West”: Andy Kitkowski and F.E.A.R.

Andy Kitkowski appears as the prime example of very active and deliberate brokers of “cultural” knowledge. Kitkowski is known as Andy K on RPG.net, the world’s largest English-language platform for non-digital role-playing (where he continuously promoted Japanese TRPGs and talked about his translation projects since 2002), and as the creator of j-rpg.com, a website geared for those specifically interested in Japanese TRPGs. The latter was set up to cater to a specific audience: gamers who spoke a little Japanese and were interested in or already owned Japanese-language TRPGs. The website was designed as a workgroup to some degree, a facilitator of fan translations. In 2011 it offered a rough first English translation of *Ryūtama* (Okada 2007), a low-magic fantasy game, along with a sale of a limited number of copies of the Japanese game imported by Kitkowski to the US (Kitkowski 2011). Kitkowski did not remain not alone on his site but asked others with Japanese language proficiency and access to Japanese games to join him. Posts included brief presentations and reviews of J-RPGs, a term Kitkowski used in the style of J-Pop or J-Culture (see Richter, Berndt 2008) — for example, *Night Wizard!* (a contemporary fantasy game also adapted into an anime; Kikuchi 2007), *Tokyo NOVA* (a dystopian super-power science-fiction; Suzufuki 2003), and *Shinobigami* (ninja fantasy; Kawashima 2009).

Kitkowski and his colleagues also discussed practical issues, such as how to buy J-RPGs when not in Japan, how to study Japanese, how to go to the Japan Game Convention (JGC), and which text recognition software works best with *kanji* and *kana*. The site is also one major outlet besides RPG.net where he made announcements about the progress of his first major project, the translation of *Terra Banshō* (which took over eight years to finish; Kitkowski 2015, i). Members of j-rpg.com also went to US gaming conventions, such as GenCon, and European trade shows, such as SPIEL in Germany, to offer demo sessions of games they translated, such as *Maid RPG* or *Terra*, alongside professional convention participants (Cluney 2008), such as Kondō Kōshi and his game studio Bōken, which demonstrated *Meikyū Kingdom* (a dungeon management RPG; Kawashima, Kondō 2010).

Born in the US in 1975 and raised mostly in Sparta, New Jersey, Kitkowski majored in sociology and philosophy, and minored in Japanese in college. Between 1995 and 1996, he lived in Japan for the first time as an exchange student at Sophia University where he joined "Science Fantastica," the university's science fiction club which also played TRPGs.¹¹ Here he encountered games like *Sword World* and *Tokyo NOVA* but "didn't really have the language skills at the time to play them," he said. After graduating from his college in the US, he went straight back to Japan. Between 1997 and 2000, Kitkowski first worked as teacher at local elementary and middle schools in Gunma, then as consultant for the government and businesses like Fuji Heavy Industries (Subaru). When he returned to the US in 2000 with his Japanese wife, he

¹¹ The following account is based on personal e-mail exchanges and conversations from 2010, 2012, and 2015.

“rebooted” his career and did a number of low-level temporary jobs as a system engineer working for Duke University Hospital, Time Warner, and Cisco Systems. For the English-language comic release of *Bastard!!* (Hagiwara 1988), a dystopian fantasy manga, he was asked by Viz Media, the translation’s publisher in 2002, to write some comments on Japanese fantasy role-playing. He reported in one of our interviews, that this was a decisive moment for him because this convinced him that J-RPGs might find an audience in the US. He started his own licensed translation project of *Tenra* in 2004.

Previously, he had made simple translations of *Sword World* to be used within his circle of friends. *Tenra* was different in some important ways: First, he had to obtain the license to do a translation. Email correspondence was apparently not enough, so he ended up calling the original game studio, FarEast Amusement Research (F.E.A.R.), from the US. The studio’s president, Nakajima Jun’ichirō, expressed interest in the project but a face-to-face encounter with the president and the original designer, Inoue Jun’ichi, in a Tōkyō café six months later was crucial for the next steps (Kitkowski, Inoue 2014, 34). The studio was very supportive; Kitkowski says: “It was perceived as an honor, because in Japan getting your work published in English is a very high honor worthy of resume boosts, etc. It was a great two-way relationship.” This is a common trope in discussing Japan’s foreign relations, where we also find comments on how Japanese value recognition from abroad (which usually means Europe or the US), or how changes within Japan are linked to attention or pressure from the outside. Prominent examples are the ratification of the equal opportunity act after women’s rights organisations spoke at the UN against discrimination in the Japanese

labour market (cf. Parkinson, 1989) or the turn to manga and “Cool Japan” by government agencies after Japanese popular media began to receive worldwide attention and recognition (cf. McGray 2002; Abel 2011).

Initially, Kitkowski picked *Tenra* for his translation because of its appeal to him as a gamer, its many “cool” characters and its “Hyper Japan as Written by Japanese effect” (Kitkowski, Inoue 2014, 34). Thus, Japaneseness played a major role in Kitkowski’s choice: “I particularly wanted to translate *Tenra* because it was clearly the most ‘Japanese’ RPG in terms of art, focus, setting, and rules.” His meaning here is twofold. For one, it is a “practical” summarising of game mechanics as Japanese, which were introduced in the 1990s, combined with artwork and modes of storytelling which follow conventions that developed in manga writing. F.E.A.R. had been at the forefront, according to Kitkowski (cf. Kitkowski 2015, 12, 18), when it came to revitalising the TRPG market in the 1990s with Japanese settings, and producing fast-paced, dramatic games that could be played in spaces where time was a rare commodity, for example in community centres.

F.E.A.R. – which had developed out of a *dōjin* circle, like so many other game studios – introduced ideas and mechanics for scenes to its games. This cut the play experience into smaller chunks, and encouraged meta-gaming.¹² Such mechanics produce a clearly structured narrative instead of an endless series of events without a distinct end, common for many TRPG campaigns before *Tenra*. According to Kitkowski, *Tenra* and subsequent titles focus “on the anime/manga/console gaming generation: With simple rules, a story-focus, etc. They made gaming into an experience

¹² Meta-gaming refers to decisions that are based on dramatic effect or narrative plausibility instead of sticking to character knowledge or motivation.

that could not be duplicated on a console. And that was a huge change from the past, which was basically nothing more than translating Western RPGs, or creating classic ‘very rules intense’ Japanese games.”



Fig. 1. “Shinobi” from *Tenra Banshō Zero: Tales of Heaven and Earth Edition* (Kitkowski. Inoue 2014, 22–23).

The artwork of F.E.A.R. games (see fig. 1) and also those of competitors underscores his point and links Japanese TRPG to the broader sphere of stylistic elements globally referred to as manga and promoted by the Japanese government as Japanese. Many illustrators also produce common story-manga in addition to creating images for TRPG books. Inoue Jun’ichi is one of them. Many US games, such as D&D, favour artwork that is closer to neoclassicism and sometimes photo-realism (see fig. 2). When talking to “old school” gamers at the international game

trade-show SPIEL in Essen, they suggested to Kondō from *Bōken*, for example, that he should avoid the manga-style artwork of his games when attempting to enter the German TRPG market. Furthermore, Japanese game designers explain the desired dramatic pacing by referencing scenes from well-known anime. Again, Western TRPGs of the first hour and their successors, such as D&D or *Rolemaster* (Fenlon, Charlton 1982), aim less at narrativism and more at realism, resulting in often extremely complicated rules that take into account each and every possible situation or circumstance. The game mechanics of current Japanese TRPGs also often borrow from console games, such as *Zelda* (Miyamoto, Tezuka 1986) which was widely popular in Japan and use far less complex rules in order to immediately capture their audience. This paratextual mixture of rules, setting and artwork (cf. Jara 2013) is what Kitkowski calls the Japaneseness of *Terra* that he found appealing and subsequently highlighted as *the* core difference of J-RPGs.



Fig. 2. Shiba Tsukimi, *Legend of the 5 Rings* “Celestial Edition” (2009)

Kickstarting a Sword & Sorcery *Jidaigeki*: *Tenra Banshō Zero*

The world of *Tenra* adds another layer to the mix, and this is the second entangled meaning of Japanese. Its game world is a planet populated by *daimyō* (feudal rulers), samurai, pseudo-Buddhist monks, Shinto priests and *geisha*-like artisans, but also hosts sorcery, creatures from Japanese folklore (*oni*, *tengu*) and magic-fuelled technology such as mecha and cyborgs popular from sci-fi anime. Set in a world analogue to the Warring States (*senjū*) era of Japan (ca. 1467 – 1603 C.E.), the game appears like a sword & sorcery *jidaigeki* (period piece, e.g., in the form of a TV show). *Jidaigeki*, however, have been problematized as a specific form of *nihonjin-ron* (theories of the Japanese):¹³ a nostalgia for and reaffirmation of supposedly traditional Japanese ways and values.

[They depict] a ‘pure’ Japan, untainted by the ‘barbarism’ of the ‘red-haired devils’ of the West. People wear kimonos and clothing with Japanese family crests. They have Japanese hairstyles. They eat Japanese food and drink Japanese *sake* or *shōchū*.¹⁴ They live in Japanese-style wooden houses, sleep in Japanese bedding laid out on *tatami* straw matting, and bathe in Japanese baths. They visit Japanese temples and speak a language that is pure and uncontaminated by foreign words (Moeran 2010, 154–155)

The advent of *jidaigeki* coincides with post-war challenges to the *nihonjin-ron* idea of a homogenous society in the form of migrant labourers and Japanese-speaking foreigners. The genre appears as “re-processing” history, and so as a “‘structured a feeling’ of Japaneseness at the very juncture of its undermining,” offering lost Confucian-values and ideals embodied by mythic heroes (Standish 2011, 434).

¹³ Authors associated with *nihonjin-ron* are often criticised for their self-orientalising search for uniqueness (cf. Dale 1986; Befu 1987).

¹⁴ Usually translated as rice wine and distilled liqueur, respectively.

There are a few US made RPGs borrowing *sengoku* or Edo Period images intermingled with fantasy and folklore, such as *Legend of the Five Rings* (L5R, Wick, 1997; Wick and Horbart, 2010), a fantasy RPG taking its name from Miyamoto Musashi’s *Gorin no sho* (Book of Five Rings, mid-17th century) and set in the fictional nation of Rokugan, a feudal pseudo-Japan with elements from other East Asian folklore. What differentiates this game from *Tenra* is “authenticity”:

I think that the setup of the game [*Legend of the Five Rings*] is great, but the language (place names and group names in particular) are often culturally ungrounded childish nonsense words; and lack of Shinto/Buddhism influence are, from both a context and an aesthetic standpoint, a rather inexcusable oversight. Still, it’s got a good setup in terms of ‘interesting, there are things for the players to do’, etc.

Tenra is more authentic than L5R, but I’m not as ostentatious to label it ‘better’. It has no real ‘deep setting’ compared to L5R. It also has a VERY ‘everything is for the sake of the characters and the story’ rules set with Fates, Damage, etc. However, L5R is very traditional in the way it deals with skills, stats, damage (death spiral), etc. (Kitkowski, email conversation 2010).

The concern over Japaneseness also plays out on role-playing related forums, for example, on RPG.net, where a participant sought clarification on which parts of L5R are “truly Japanese” and which are not (Smarttman 2014).

Kitkowski’s nose for authenticity — however nostalgic a reconstruction this concept may refer to — and its appeal to non-Japanese players was proven correct when he launched a Kickstarter campaign with his newly founded game translation firm Kotodama Heavy Industries in 2012 to fund the production of the English version of *Tenra*. Kickstarter is a US based so-called crowdfunding platform on which projects present their aims and ideas and interested “backers” can pledge a certain amount of money in order to fund the project. Over a given period of time, the project has to meet its funding goal or it receives

nothing. If it is successfully funded, backers receive tangible rewards or other forms of compensation. In the case of *Tenra* and, depending on which pledge tier a backer chose, they would receive hardcover copies, PDFs and other merchandise, and would be named in the acknowledgement section of the final product. Also, established commercial studios, such as Onyx Path Publishing, use Kickstarter to gauge the interest in a given product and to make sure that it will find enough buyers (the backers) before they invest in a game project that does not meet with audience approval. *Tenra's* pledge goal had been 9,000 US dollars, which was achieved within *hours*. When the Kickstarter campaign ended in September 2012, 1,704 backers had pledged 129,640 US dollars¹⁵ — more than fourteen times the original pledge goal and not so far off from what Onyx Path, with its established brands, receives — which made *Tenra* into the highest-funded TRPG project at the time and speaks for Kitkowski's promotional skills. The Kickstarter campaign for the English version of *Ryūtama* (Okada 2007) a year later equally exceeded expectations with 2,056 backers and \$97,960 pledged.¹⁶ When *Ryūtama* was published in 2015, *Tenra* had already become a “Gold Bestseller” on DriveThruStuff,¹⁷ a global leader in role-playing PDF and print-on-demand (POD) sales. Those who did not back the Kickstarter campaign have to purchase the game through DriveThru, while the backers received their copies before the public release.

¹⁵ See: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/diamondsutra/Tenra-bansho-zero-an-art-and-culture-rich-rpg-from> (accessed 2016/06/24).

¹⁶ See: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/diamondsutra/ryuutama-natural-fantasy-role-playing-game?ref=users> (accessed 2016/06/24).

¹⁷ See: <http://rpg.drivethrustuff.com/product/111713/Tenra-Bansho-Zero-Heaven-and-Earth-Edition?term=Tenra> (accessed 2016/06/24).

Right on the heels of the public release followed very positive reviews, even from people who expressed a dislike for anime:

Tenra Banshō Zero is the most exciting new release for me since Apocalypse World. [...] Confession: I am a long-standing anime hater. That said, I'm totally into the crazy-wasabi-coleslaw setting of TBZ. It's a sprawling, melodramatic empowerment fantasy that really gets my players jazzed up. I'm grateful and relieved that I didn't have to grind through seasons of Samurai Champloo or something (B. 2013).

Thus, *Tenra* seems to have hit the mark by offering game mechanics that set it apart from the English-language mainstream *and* by flowing into an interest in an exotic image of Japan (ninja, samurai etc.) that also fuels manga sales abroad — drawing into question the argument that Japanese popular media are so successful due to their “odourless-ness,” or “stateless-ness” (*mukokuseki*), or lack of a Japanese “smell” (Iwabuchi 2002; see also Berndt 2007).

***Tenra* and “Western” Values**

However, Kitkowski also received criticism which displaced the translation of *Tenra* from the realms of fantasy into the sphere of “cultures” clashing. Under the title “RPGs and cultural context: a conversation with Kitkowski Kitkowski about *Tenra*” on the blog *Gaming as Woman*, game designer and illustrator Anna “wundergeek” Kreider (2013), who also provided a campaign setting for the English version, discusses the cover art of the original 1997 Japanese edition, reproduced for the translation, in light of possible reactions to it in the West. The central figure on the cover is a semi-bionic female ninja in a “male,” active pose (fig. 3). Kreider is rather disconcerted by this image, as she suggests while writing about the game in general: “*Tenra* isn't a Western game

written for Western audiences. It's been translated and adapted for Western audiences, true, but it was initially created for Japanese gamers and anime fans. As such the cultural issues and context surrounding this game are different than what Western audiences are used to dealing with." She poses this question to Kitkowski in an email interview: "But by Western standards, the cover art is pretty damn [sic!] extreme. That's a LOT of crotch right on the cover. So, could you comment on the cultural differences at work there? Because it seems like that 'I don't want to get seen reading this in public' is a very Western reaction."

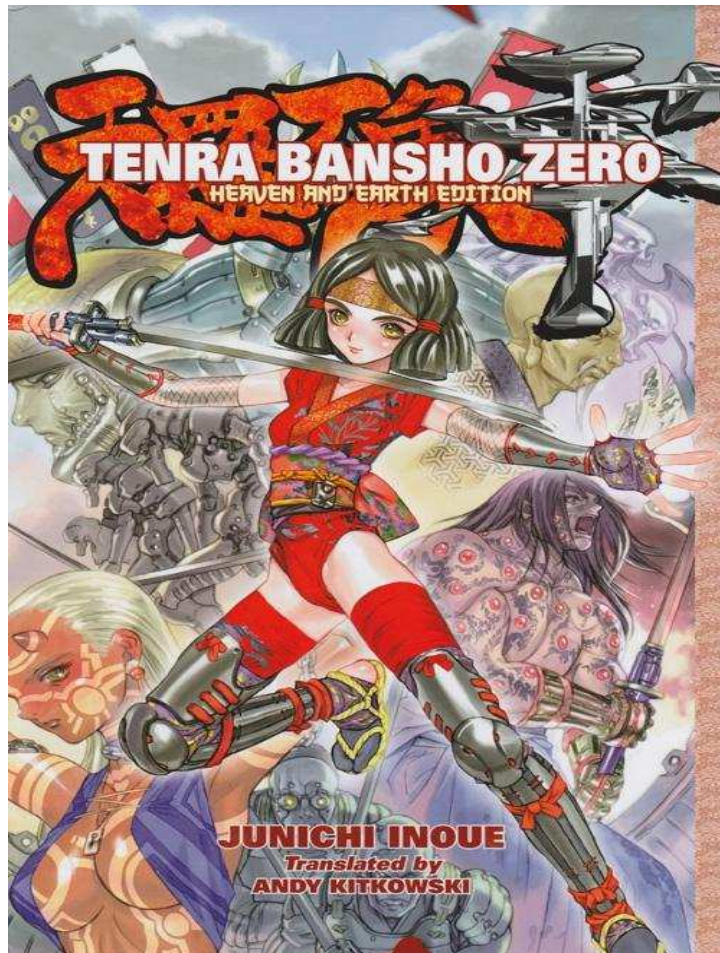


Fig. 3. Cover of *Tenra Banshō Zero* (Kitkowski, Inoue 2014).

Kitkowski first explains cultural differences concerning nudity in the West versus Japan and the rest of Asia, where one might encounter a “non-sexual nudity and casualness that can be strange (and frightening!) to foreigners.” Who is meant by “foreigners” appears obscure if one does not consider the blog’s target audience, which is predominantly Anglo-Saxon and often critical of seemingly overt sexuality. Kitkowski adds that Japanese culture would also be characterised by modesty and shame (cf. Ruth Benedict’s well-known way of brokerage, 1946), which is why buyers could receive paper sleeves for their purchases in bookstores to conceal the nature of their purchases.

However, regardless of supposedly Japanese morals in any general sense, in *Tenra*’s particular case, the cover and other artwork was, in Kitkowski’s view, due to Inoue Jun’ichi’s *otaku*-hood: The original designer of the game had a history of producing pornographic dolls — with which he earned tremendous success but also criticism — and was merely not aware of how others might react to his illustrations, according to Kitkowski. Being married today “returned him in part to a real world with real people [so that] now his art lacks most of the ‘gooeyness’ of the past.” In order to rescue Japan from being seen as a strange, nudist, crotch-fetishizing “other,” Kitkowski deflects criticism to the *otaku* stereotype of a reclusive, asocial media enthusiast.¹⁸ He follows what I call “the disclaiming mode” to highlight what is good and what is deviant: He deflects negative images onto an “other” only to

¹⁸ Especially in the English-language discourse the naturalisation of *otaku* as a single but global social group of “fans” proceeds and conflates the different, political and often negative uses of the term in Japanese with the positive self-descriptor of non-Japanese fans of manga and anime. A purely negative view as well as the current “triumphant narrative” about the mainstreaming of *otaku* equally overlook the tensions and contradictions inherent in this debated term (for a detailed discussion, see Galbraith, Kam, Kamm 2015).

strengthen the connection between the negative image and the practices and people it is applied to (cf. Kamm, 2015). Still, Inoue himself attributes the shift in focus of his art and work to his now being part of a family, without condemning his previous work or denying his *otaku*-hood (cf. Yajima 2013b, 2013a).¹⁹

Kreider's blog post goes on to question why female manga artists also create nude scenes of their adolescent characters or write porn-manga, which Kitkowski again explains with a general casualness towards nudity. The discussion of this blog post and the general arguments of cultural difference resemble similar several thousand posts long debates on RPG.net, when *Maid RPG* was translated (see hyphz 2008) and also after *Tenra's* release (Thrax 2013).

In the instance of their translation and border crossing, these games become node points for (re-) establishing boundaries: the West versus Japan, normal people versus "crotch-fetishizing *otaku*," sexually moral women and Asian women without such moral compasses, females who do not or should not like to create porn and males who do. These boundary creations do not reaffirm the static nature of established and rigid conceptualisations of culture and also continue in a dynamic fashion to become themselves loci for other boundaries: A reader of this blog post took exception to how the West and Japan were represented as monolithic entities in the statements (Yin 2014). Similar voices against "cultural islandism" can also be heard on the RPG.net forums.

As a translator in the most common sense of the term, a mediator between languages, Andy Kitkowski's activities highlight his "manifest"

¹⁹ He chose to keep his rather *otaku*-ish self-image in his bestselling manga *Yue to nihongo* (Yue and Japanese) about his Chinese wife's struggles with learning Japanese, for example, because he felt that it better matched the kind of statements he would like to express (Inoue 2013; Yajima 2013b).

brokerage: He has actively enrolled many other actors to build a network that resulted in the translation of *Tenra*, beginning with non-human actors such as Japanese textbooks, OCR-software, and telephones, but also including humans in the form of a fan base — mainly known to him through their RPG.net accounts — which would back his project on Kickstarter. Kitkowski was not a faithful translator of the Japanese language, though again, “unfaithfulness” or “infidelity” are not meant in any morally negative sense here, but refer to the work and changes that go hand-in-hand with any translation (cf. Law 2006) and in particular, to the many adjustments necessary to sell *Tenra* to an audience that is perceived and perceives itself as different from the “original” Japanese one, as Kreider’s questions attest:

This game deserved more than a slap translation into English and then a kick to the presses: It needed to be more than looked at, it needed to be *played*. And to be played, it needed *more*: More history, more information, more cultural notes, more everything in order for people who didn’t grow up in Japan watching weerkly [sic!] samurai dramas and reading ninja manga to be able to understand the game enough to play. So, as I was translating the book, I started adding this “More” myself (Kitkowski, Inoue 2014, 34; emphasis original).

He changed what he transported (‘broker as media,’ Höh, Jaspert and Oesterle 2013a) and added those notes and explanations as a “nifty culture point” on the “quintessential” TRPG experience in Japan: singing in a karaoke box (Kitkowski, Inoue 2014, 100, Game Rules). Issuing *Director’s Notes* with more explanations of cultural concepts and the game’s background (Kitkowski 2015),²⁰ he also addressing the fear that he may have diluted the authenticity of the original with his

²⁰ In these *Director’s Notes*, Kitkowski himself addresses the issue of knowledge diffusion himself, e.g. concerning Buddhism (ibid, 4).

amendments (Spike 2015).²¹ The interview with Anna Kreider gives the impression that he not only added but also omitted elements, for example illustrations that might be offensive for an imagined Western audience, such as the cover. The potentially offending images he supposedly omitted but just did not include, however, were never part of the core rule book itself but came with supplements, from which he only incorporated some rules and bits of information.

These additions and explanations point to the economic dimension of cultural brokerage: Without the backing of nearly two thousand interested gamers, his project would have failed. It took him almost eight years to enrol enough participants to reach this point. The economics involved go beyond money: Kitkowski was already well known among RPG.net users and with *Terra* only gained in fame, enabling him to continue his project of promoting J-RPGs²² and create a space for Japanese game designers to gain recognition. The label J-RPG alone, however, attests to how “cultural brokerage” does not simply translate between cultures but *speaks* for them and thus necessarily produces them as a reality. It makes the West — by adding information — and similarly also Japan. The Japaneseness of *Terra* is its selling point, but has to be made first through assembling an authentic Japan: a traditionally modern world where *samurai* battle *oni* and giant robots alike. The dynamic process of mediation here rests on the necessary

²¹ The additions amount to approx. 1.5 pages in total and are mostly limited to sidebars (Kitkowski 2015).

²² For example, via podcasts on the “Asian Popular Culture” platform Geeky & Genki, <http://www.geekyandgenki.com> (accessed 2016/06/24).

production of static, nostalgic images, which paradoxically underscores the messiness of such endeavours.²³

Stabilising Images

How does Kitkowski sustain his network of silent entities and their representation? First and foremost, he does so through the support of shortcomings in language educators and also via the help of the Internet: he has access to recourses neither his audience nor those he translates have.

His main ground of dissemination and promotion consists of only a very limited number of Japanese participants: Between 2008 and 2014, only one poster on RPG.net self-identified as a Japanese. In the past, there had been active Japanese users on English-language platforms, for example during a dispute about the fictional Japan of the science-fiction cyberpunk game *Shadowrun* (Charrette, Hume and Dowd, 1989). Japanese gamers were dissatisfied with the image of a weak Japanese state in a supplemental setting book created by GroupSNE (Egawa, GroupSNE 1996). They created their own setting, in which Japan was an aggressive imperial dictator state — which they found more fitting to the overall dystopian background of the game — and distributed their ideas via the pre-Internet USENET group `rec.games.frp.cyber` (Nishio 1996, 1997). Since then, the number of active Japanese users of English-language sites seems to have waned. During my fieldwork, I conducted over twenty episodic interviews with gamers from the Kantō, Chūbu and Kansai areas of Japan and spoke to dozens of other players and game

²³ Interestingly and adding to the mess, when asked, the original designer, Inoue, posits that players should not be concerned about playing “authentic” Japanese (Kitkowski 2015, 10-11).

designers who by and large said that they visit some English websites but would mostly use Japanese-language sites. The Japanese-language Web has grown to such a degree, also including TRPGs, that they see no necessity for engaging with websites in other languages. Many also admitted (or rather assumed) that their language proficiency would not be sufficient to post on forums, thus they remain silent.

Similarly, TRPG-related sites and groups, for example on the Japanese Facebook-like portal *mixi.jp*, seem to attract only very few self-proclaimed non-Japanese. As has been discussed elsewhere (Kamm 2013), one reason for this limited participation comes in the guise of non-human mediators. To register with *mixi.jp* and create a profile page, one is asked for a *keitai* mail address, an address only assigned by Japanese telecommunication companies such as DoCoMo or Softbank, and linked to a Japanese mobile phone. After registration, a verification link is sent to the mobile or recently also to smartphones. On English-language forums, I encountered a number of players who were interested in Japanese games, some of whom also claimed Japanese language skills — so limited knowledge of Japanese could not be the reason for their non-participation. This is where the aforementioned verification script turns from simple intermediary as part of the registration process to an active mediator that blocks anyone from joining *mixi* who does not reside in Japan and who has no Japanese mobile phone contract. Because prepaid phones are not equipped with browser functionality, a contract phone is necessary to register and for that one needs a *zairyū-kādo*, a residency card gained only with a long-term visa. Thus, despite the Internet's assumed capability to connect anyone with everyone, a few lines of code can become a powerful

mediator that stops flows of communication and creates boundaries, not due to xenophobic “us versus them” mentalities but due to privacy concerns: the script was implemented as an anti-spam measure.

However, mediators often bring other mediators into existence, in this case brokers such as Kitkowski who are able to overcome the obstacle presented by the verification script: His residency in Japan has given him access to Japanese language sites and games, and he has also obtained the language proficiency to translate for all those who cannot come to Japan or speak the language. By doing so, he overcomes the obstacles of non-human mediators (languages, scripts) and their boundaries to act as spokesperson for the silent entities, players and original games alike.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Kitkowski is only one of many cultural brokers I encountered who overcome different obstacles and create different networks. Kondō Kōshi and Bōken, for example, continuously bring Japanese-language games to the attention of European and American audiences via international trade shows, such as the SPIEL in Germany, but have difficulties in overcoming major points of passages and centres of calculation, such as customs duties. Kitkowski emerges as one of the most successful cultural brokers, making use of as many materials and connectors as possible, ranging from forums and conventions to crowd funding and podcasts. By crossing boundaries, however, modes of brokerage also rely on and rebuild borders, such as the Japaneseness and the J-RPGs they seek to translate.

The second main characteristic of these modes besides the use of other mediators is that something is at stake when they mediate. All cultural brokers I encountered at least seek to promote something they like and maybe profit from it, even if that only means that they can play more games of a kind they prefer. For some the stakes are higher, seeking a profession that does not only sustain them but gives something back, that produces joy. So, they aim not only at creating a reality in which Japanese games can find a place in the English language market, but in which they can make a place for themselves. This active “reality making” or “world building” by enrolling RPGs as a resource entangles their brokerage with modes of enterprise. Brokers such as Kitkowski focus thereby on bridging language barriers and distributing information to which they have access. Other actors of enterprise play with other cultures, such as the culture of a hobby and the culture of a business. F.E.A.R. have made themselves into the game studio some players — especially those who rely on information filtered by Kitkowski — attribute with “rescuing” the Japanese TRPG market from the recession of the 1990s. For them, all income and prestige are at stake should they fail to enrol the necessary mediators and recourses.

Lastly, the brokers I encountered engender each other so that they often come in “packs;” that is, actors operating from one specific node within the network or from one point of departure, for example J-RPGs, sooner or later cross paths. In this regard, they mediate also between themselves, offering help to trace other actors. This is an on-going, dynamic process, and so a conclusion on how the Japaneseness of Japanese TRPG plays out would silence the many entangled entities.

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