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Local visitor at the India Gaming Show South 2018, Bengaluru / India. Photo by Xenia Zeiler, 20 January 2018.

Geemu On! A Preliminary Study Of Indie And Doujin Game Development In Japan

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Abstract

This paper is a brief summary of a preliminary exploration of certain aspects of independent video game development in Japan. Initial interviews were conducted with researchers and indie game developers over a two-week period in Tokyo. Independent game developers from Kamakura were also interviewed as part of the research. Initial fieldwork was geared primarily toward *doujin* level game development and distribution. My key research question focused upon the religious and spiritual dimensions of *doujin* games. However, after conducting interviews it became clear that developers did not consider the Western frame or classification of religion and spirituality in their development but rather incorporated aspects of tradition, culture and values within their work.

Keywords: gameenvironments, Japan, Video Game Design, Asia, Doujin

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Historic Overview

Japan is home to the some of the largest console and game production companies in the world. Along with Nintendo, Sony, Square Enix, and Capcom, there are a myriad of companies producing Triple-A games that are sold globally. This billion-dollar video game industry began in the early 1970s, based upon a number of key global and local developments. It was through the Japanese electronic and toy corporations that arcade games, home gaming consoles, then personal computers were introduced and supported within the nation (Picard 2013, 1). Unlike other Asian countries within this study, the Japanese culture embraced and supported these initiatives. By the late 1970s, home gaming consoles produced by Nintendo, Epoch

the *doujin* system was not for profit or financial success. The main reasons for a high level of independent development was “the purpose of production, the diversity in genres, the autonomy of development activities, the flexibility of production process, the short production periods, the relationship between developers and players, and the uncompleted game software debugging” (Hichibie and Tanaka 2016, 44-45). In interviews with indie game developers, Shules identified many of these same issues and highlights the blurring boundary lines between indie and doujin (Shules n.d.).

My interviews also found that many *doujin* game developers created games simply for the joy of playing them. “We do it for fun. It’s a game! Have fun and play!” It seemed that this fun of gaming was what brought them into the indie/doujin development scene, with many of the interviewees identifying games that they played when they were younger that created the desire in them to start designing their own games and working in small circles with likeminded people. Often it was not just playing games that motivated them to become indie game designers, but it was one game they experienced that changed how they viewed games and created the desire in them to try and replicate what they had experienced. These games included games designed by Shindenken (Kanagawa Denshi Gijutsu Kenkyuujo) like *ARGATHA*; Games designed by EZAKI (Studio DNA); Hamazaki Factory; Hekiraku-ya; and OGSD Storyteller Circle.



Figure 1. Example for a doujin game.

Boku ha shinsekai no Kami ni naru

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IX9PMM2SkqU>

Agartha <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRD7dJYQKUA>

Qualia <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peNatUJ8Xdw>

Games designed by Ezaki <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jS059XV1Is>

For my research focus I was drawn toward *doujin* gaming because they

“unabashedly do not efface themselves of their apparent Japaneseness – cultural odor, in the terminology of Koichi Iwabuchi – unlike indie games, which often do scrub themselves of their cultural odor in order to be viable products in a global marketplace” (Vogel 2017, 34).

included in the games were not as serious as in the *real* tradition. It also seemed that ZUN (and other doujin game developers) are tolerant of all of the religious traditions within Japan and often bring them into the game so that they co-exist with each other within the gamescape.

Conclusion

Many of the *doujin* and indie developers interviewed recognized that there are problems with gaming. In many cases, the gameenvironment becomes addictive and can create a number of social problems. However, by developing games it also provided meaning to their lives and allowed them to have fun, to play, and to meet likeminded people. This is what mattered to all of the developers interviewed - it wasn't about money or even fame; it was about fun. The indie/doujin game environment also creates a unique space where a form of hybridity between ancient traditions and modernity can occur. This allows for flexibility and cultural experimentation in a playful, not so serious manner, presenting new cultural models and developing old traditions in new ways. This seems to be possible in different forms of game development because it is a game and can be viewed that way despite its significant cultural impact.

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