

異文化間における日本ゲームの受容: 日・独プレイヤーの体験比較

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Game Reception Across Cultural Boundaries

A comparative Analysis of German and Japanese Player Experience

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Abstract

Digital games are an integral part of global entertainment culture. New forms of digital distribution and the spread to different platforms have contributed towards a high and growing number of frequent users and correspondingly high market revenues. The games market has become global and the Japanese games industry has played a pivotal role in this development, by contributing towards the global popularization of games. However, game consumption and production are still situated within local cultural contexts and differ across regions. While games, produced by Japanese developers are available across the world, their reception in other regions can vary greatly from their reception in Japan. This paper examines whether such differences are evident on the micro-level of player-game interaction. It presents selected results from a qualitative analysis of German and Japanese online user reviews and recorded play sessions with nine German and eleven Japanese players, interacting with Japanese games. First results show differences in the way certain aspects of a game are evaluated, but also showcase fundamental similarities in the way the selected games were received.

緒言

デジタルゲームは、グローバルなエンターテインメント文化で、不可欠な要素である。新しい形式のデジタル配信とさまざまなプラットフォームへの拡散により、頻繁に利用するユーザー数が大きく増加し、それに応じて市場規模も増加している。ゲーム市場はグローバルとなり、日本のゲーム業界はゲームのグローバルな普及に貢献することにより、この発展において極めて重要な役割を果たしてきた。

しかし、ゲームの利用と制作は、依然として地域に根ざした文化的な背景の中にあり、地域性がある。日本の開発者が制作したゲームは世界中で利用が可能だが、日本以外でのゲームの受容性は、日本とは大きく異なる。

本稿では、地域間の受容性の差が、オンラインゲームでの相互作用において、マクロレベルで明確かどうかを調べた。ドイツと日本のオンラインユーザーレビューの定性分析から選択した結果と 9 名のドイツ人と 11 名の日本人プレイヤーが日本のゲームをオンラインでプレイセッションした記録を示す。最初の結果は、ゲームの特定の側面が評価される方法の違いを示したが、選択したゲームが受け取られた方法の基本的な類似点も示した。

1. Introduction

In 2018, digital games, i.e. games mediated by digital devices, have generated more than 137 billion US-Dollars in revenues (Newzoo 2018). Games have become an integral part of global entertainment culture, with more than 2.9 billion frequent users worldwide as of 2019 (Statista 2019). The global success of digital games is closely linked to the Japanese games industry, which proved vital in (re-)invigorating the North American games market, after the crash in 1983 (Dillon 2016, Wolf 2008, Wolf 2012), with the launch of the Nintendo Entertainment System.

However, in recent years global market shares have dropped as competition intensified and player preferences developed differently across regions. Such differences are empirically evident in differences in game charts and appear most salient between Western and East Asian countries (cf. Game Refinery 2018, Uchiki and Xu 2018). The perceived “decline” of Japanese games in the global market has been attributed to potential cultural barriers within the contents of Japanese games (Byford 2014, Richey 2014), i.e. their “Japaneseness” (cf. Consalvo 2016). This supposed “Japaneseness” is hard to define, but arguably encompasses aesthetic, narrative and ludic (i.e. “gameplay”) elements (Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López 2015, Schules 2015).

Directing attention towards the micro-level of player-game interaction, this paper presents some selected results of a research project, focused on answering the question of whether the experience and evaluation of playing a (Japanese) game differs between German and Japanese players. The paper concretely reports on the results of a comparative qualitative analysis of 420 German and Japanese online user reviews on 18 Japanese games and on the first results of a series of recorded play sessions with nine German and eleven Japanese participants, utilizing think-aloud protocol. The project contributes towards a better understanding of how Japanese games are received outside of Japan. It also highlights differences and similarities in the way German and Japanese players interact with digital games and the cultures resulting from this interaction.

2. Method

The main research question guiding this paper is the following: What kind of differences (and similarities) are there in how German and Japanese players experience and evaluate Japanese games? To answer this question, a first step lies in the clear definition of the terminology used in this question. “Japanese games” refers here to games, produced by a Japanese developer and by largely Japanese staff, as indicated in the game’s credits. For the purpose of this study, “German and Japanese players” are defined as game users with German or Japanese as their native language. The last remaining concepts to define are then “experience and evaluation”.

Digital games are interactive media, “to the degree, that it is tautology to use the expression ‘interactive games’” (Mäyrä 2008:6). One way to conceptually frame the quality of player

game-interaction lies in the concept of player experience (PX). According to Wiemeyer, Nacke, Moser et al. (2016:246):

[PX] denotes the individual and personal experience of playing games. Player experience describes the qualities of the player-game interactions and is typically investigated during and after the interaction with games.

The analysis of PX is however fraught with epistemological difficulties, as it heavily relies on different forms of self-reports. In their examination of how games are experienced, researchers therefore rely on reports and evaluations by players, that is, they are limited by data on the game as reported (Howell and Stevens 2019). In practice, data on the experience of games is therefore arguably most easily accessible in players' evaluations of games. This has for example led to increased interest in online user reviews as a source of data for research on games (e.g. Zagal and Tomuro 2013).

This paper draws on two sources of data complimenting each other. User reviews, which are surprisingly content rich, easily accessible and available in high quantity (cf. Koehler, Arnold, Greenhalgh et al. 2017), but written after the actual experience of playing a game, and think-aloud protocols, resulting from more than 200 hours of recorded play sessions with German and Japanese players, with data being taken during play, but limited in the number of participants and by the high expenses of time and effort.

For this paper, 420 (210 German and 210 Japanese) user reviews, collected from the German and Japanese Amazon Stores and written in concern to 18 Japanese games (see Table 1) were analyzed through an inductive coding analysis, following a Grounded Theory Approach (Strübing 2014). Furthermore, nine German and eleven Japanese players, aged between 18 and 30 years, were recorded in a series of play sessions, using think-aloud protocol (Van Someren, Barnard and Sandberg 1994). Participants were asked to play four theoretically selected Japanese games (see Table 1) for 2.5 hours each (i.e. 10 hours total per players). During play, they were instructed to constantly voice their thoughts on the game they played. The participants' utterances and the gameplay footage were recorded, leading to a total of more than 200 hours of data. At the moment of writing, this data is still in the process of being transcribed. Below, selected results of the analysis of user reviews and from the think-aloud protocols are presented.

3. Results and Discussion

The user reviews were analyzed following an inductive Grounded Theory approach (Strübing 2014). Text segments in the user reviews, were coded (i.e. labeled) bases on their content. In a first step, open coding, that is coding close to the text, generating codes of high granularity was used. These were then sorted into categories (axial coding) based on the constant comparison of the meaning represented by the codes. Coding is continued, until the categories are saturated, meaning that the inclusion of new data does no longer warrant changes in the code system (Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2018).

The cycle of open and axial coding resulted in a system with the following top-level thematic categories:

- Meta/Context
- Gameplay/Rules/Mechanics
- Story/Narrative
- Audio/Visual
- Technology

Additionally, the sentiment markers Positive and Negative were used, to signify the context in which other codes were used. Each of the thematic categories contains various sub-categories, which in turn contain codes and sub-codes. This code system allows for the comparison of German and Japanese user reviews on varying levels of granularity.

The results show several differences in the German and Japanese reviews. First, the evaluation of games appears markedly more negative in the Japanese reviews, signified by a significantly higher frequency of Negative markers. Second, negative markers frequently intersect with text segments, that were also coded with codes belonging to the category Story/Narrative. This indicates a more negative reception of the games' narrative and story elements by Japanese users. Third, Japanese reviewers appear more critical in concern to other elements of a game, if they negatively evaluate its story, while German players are more focused appear more focused on gameplay elements. Fourth, the "Japaneseness" of the selected games is discussed and negotiated within the German reviews, but also, to a lesser degree, within the Japanese reviews. German players frame "Japanese" elements within a game either as positive, because of their perceived uniqueness and "differences to Western games", or as negative, because by seeing "Japaneseness" as a barrier for immersion, for example because a game's art style. Japanese reviewers mostly contrast Japanese and Western games and discuss their differences. One comparatively widespread opinion is that Japanese games are now technologically inferior to big-budget Western productions.

A last core difference lies in the specific frames of reference, German and Japanese players use to describe games. They frequently compare games to other games or media, but the concrete object of comparison differs greatly. While both, German and Japanese players, compare the selected games to other Japanese games, which games are used in this comparison differs greatly, hinting at the existence of different game canons. German players frequently compare the selected games to Western games and franchises, which is far less common for the Japanese players. At the same time, both groups compare games to other media contents, for example Japanese players liken some of the games to light novels or manga, while German reviewers have compared them to Western franchises and dramas, such as Star Trek.

The results from the think-aloud protocols supplement the analysis of user reviews. By selecting German participants with different levels of experience in Japan (i.e. from players with no experience to German players living in Japan), it becomes possible to observe some of the influences that changes in the cultural context of a player can have on their reception of a game. While transcription and analysis of the play sessions is not yet complete, the first results show, that differences in the experience and evaluation of the selected games are largely dependent of the following factors. First, the concrete type of player in concern to his usual preferences and prior experiences with games. Second, their exposure and experience with Japanese cultural products, such as Anime and Manga. Third, values and norms.

For example, “hardcore” (Kapalo, Dewar, Rupp et al. 2015) players of role-playing games show many similarities in their experience and evaluation of a game’s mechanics and gameplay elements across culture. However, differences are apparent in their preferences towards a game’s artistic style, with German players often favoring a more realistic design, while Japanese players favor designs close to anime. German participants that regularly watch anime are however less likely to perceive the art style of the selected games as negative. As such, more than (national) culture, it is concrete game and media preferences, that shape the patterns of similarities and differences across the observed groups. However, one salient difference that was observed between German and Japanese players was in concern to the depiction of female characters in the selected games. While all German participants noted for example the revealing attire of the character Velvet in the game *Tales of Berseria* (Bandai Namco Studios 2017), albeit not necessarily as a problem, none of the Japanese participants even mentioned this.

4. Conclusion

This paper briefly presented selected finding of a study aimed at examining differences in the experience of German and Japanese players, interacting with Japanese digital games. Based on an inductive analysis of 420 user reviews and think-aloud protocols of more than 200 hours of recorded play sessions with German and Japanese players, differences and similarities become evident. In the examined user reviews, a tendency for Japanese players to be more critical on the narrative elements of a game were observed. There are also indications, that a negative evaluation of narrative elements influences the evaluation of other game elements. On the other hand, German players appeared more focused on gameplay elements.

As also hinted at in the think-aloud protocols, differences between German and Japanese players are evident, but often appear to be the result of different media environments. German players and Japanese players use different frames of reference (i.e. different scales) to measure and compare the games they play. Story elements, praised in German reviews as “innovative” or “unique” are arguably less “unique” if compared with other Japanese media contents, less accessible in the West, such as light novels. The concrete media environment in which German and Japanese players are situated is arguably one of the deciding factors

for the overall evaluation of games. This is also substantiated by German participants of the play sessions, that frequently consume Japanese media contents, such as anime or manga, being less critical and overall, less cognizant of culturally specific game content. While current research has focused on cross-cultural comparisons on the national/regional level (Brückner, Sato, Kurabayashi et al. 2019, Lee and Wohn 2012, Santoso, Schrepp, Hinderks et al. 2017, Zagal and Tomuro 2013), the results of this project suggest the necessity to more closely focus on the cross-cultural analyses of players within their respective media contexts and environments.

Table 1 Overview of games selected for this study, with highlighted games used for the recorded play sessions.

Title and Platform	Abbrev.	Published (JP)	Published (DE)	Developer	Publisher
Devil May Cry 5 (PS4)	DMC5	2019	2019	Capcom	Capcom
Dragon Quest XI (PS4)	DQ11	2017	2018	Square Enix	Square Enix
Dragons Dogma: Dark Arisen (PS4)	DD	2017	2017	Capcom	Capcom
Final Fantasy XV (PS4)	FF15	2016	2016	Square Enix	Square Enix
Judgement (PS4)	JUD	2018	2019	Ryu Ga Gotoku Studios	Sega
Kingdom Hearts III (PS4)	KH3	2019	2019	Square Enix Business Division 3	Square Enix
Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom (PS4)	NK2	2018	2018	Level-5	Level-5 (JP) / Bandai Namco Entertainment (DE)
Nier: Automata (PS4)	NA	2017	2017	Platinum Games	Square Enix
Octopath Traveller (Switch)	OCT	2018	2018	Square Enix Business Division 11/Aquire	Square Enix
Persona 5 (PS4)	P5	2016	2017	P-Studio	Atlus (JP) / Deep Silver (DE)
Resident Evil 7: Biohazard (PS4)	RE7	2017	2017	Capcom	Capcom
Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (PS4)	Sek	2019	2019	From Software	From Software (JP) / Activision (DE)
Shining Resonance Refrain (PS4)	SRR	2018	2018	O-Two	Sega
Tales of Berseria (PS4)	ToB	2016	2017	Bandai Namco Studios	Bandai Namco Entertainment
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel (PS3/PS4)	ToCS1	2013/2018	2016/2019	Nihon Falcom	Nihon Falcom (JP) / NIS America, Marvelous Europe (DE)
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel II (PS3/PS4)	ToCS2	2014/2018	2016/2019	Nihon Falcom	Nihon Falcom (JP) / NIS America (DE)
The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Switch)	ZBotW	2017	2017	Nintendo EPD	Nintendo
Yakuza 0 (PS4)	YAK	2015	2017	Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio	Sega

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