Toward a Gameic World

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Whaley, B. (2023). *Toward a Gameic World.* Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

A fascinating insight into the nature of national trauma and anxiety-based phenomena within a series of four specific games (three of which I've played myself), *Toward a Gameic World* explores a fresh and distinctly Japanese interpretation of narratology and ludology, specifically exploring Hiroki Azuma's 'gameic' framework (2007) – meshing the ludology of games with a local context that spreads as far as literature, amongst other forms of media. As such, I find this goes beyond the traditional ludonarrative interpretations I have seen (Frasca, 2003; Nitsche, 2008) and experiments within video game-based analysis, already cementing it as something academically novel and relevant. In addition, the games chosen are highly rated and have sold many copies, thus being central to the video game zeitgeist in which not all games survive the test of time in terms of relevancy.

As for how Whaley's text contributes to this debate, this takes place over a series of stratified chapters, each one covering a key aspect of this 'gameic' framework, or more specifically, a type of engagement with societal anxieties. After the introduction introduces the basic theory for this textual exploration, the first chapter, '*Limited Engagement*', discusses the *Disaster Report* (known in Europe as *SOS: The Final Escape*) series of games and their relationship with Japan's history and anxieties around earthquake disasters through their pseudo-realistic gameplay and narratives, citing in particular the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and how this affected release cycles of the series and public consciousness around this type of media. The second chapter, '*Distanced Engagement*', takes the reader through a brief explanation of the Japanese birth rate 'crisis', and how the government's obsession with the issue is reflected in anime, manga, and other forms of Japanese media, and focuses primarily on the ATLUS video game *Catherine*, and how its marriage and relationship-based plot grapples with these anxieties (and how this is contrasted against the puzzle-horror-dating-sim gameplay). The third chapter, '*External Engagement*', centres nuclear weaponry and the USA as a historical and national fear dating back to the Second World War, which renowned game designer Hideo Kojima explores in his period piece *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, part of a wider series that draws on this nuclear spectre, as well as exploring the horrors of war through integrated gameplay and narrative decisions that show unique and compelling game design. The fourth main chapter, '*Connective Engagement*', explores a much more social anxiety and moral panic that shows itself often in Japanese media – in this case, the concept of the *hikikomori* (a loose translation would be shut-in), which deals with partial to total social withdrawal, classically associated with young men and teenagers. This idea is discussed in regard to the Nintendo DS game *The World Ends With You*, which battles the concept not only in its narrative, but also in unique social gameplay mechanics that would become common throughout the DS and later 3DS eras of handheld gaming, incentivising socialisation as an additive to traditional structures of play. As for the conclusion, Whaley brings these four titles together in a welding of this 'gameic' framework to what we might consider 'high art' or 'culture', which remains, at least outside

Japan, a hot topic (Berger, 2002) in regard to video games' role compared to the lofty heights of literature and theatre, or more recently cinema and television.

Ultimately, although anyone who plays a substantial amount of Japanese video games will be quite familiar with the concepts and anxieties discussed within this book, I believe it's of a very high value to those who are *not* familiar with video games – specifically, the readers that Whaley refers to towards the end of the text, which may not yet see the true value and depth of video games in a sociological, historical or, indeed, 'gameic' context, seeing the art form as childish, or without any academic value of note. Of course, there are other concepts that emerge in Japanese media and video games that could be added to the text, although I admit that could hinder the flow of the text and perhaps make it overlong – for instance, governmental corruption (as discussed with the recent assassination of Shinzo Abe), as well as the slowly growing awareness and criticism of nationalism and ethnocentrism in a post-Imperial Japan are some topics that can be readily and deeply connected to video games (*Shin Megami Tensei IV*, for one).

Overall, as an academic who works very often with Japanese media and video games, I can give this a solid recommendation for anyone interested in the fields of Japanese or Media Studies, the work overall being very well referenced, and with sufficiently detailed notes that explain any concepts the reader may be unfamiliar with that pertain to specifics of Japanese culture or games in general, and screenshots help illustrate the points made in a visual context as well, which works well given the media involved.

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