# Arcade Underground:

# The Popularity of Japanese Video Games in America, 2003-2013

By

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## ABSTRACT

This project centered around one historical endeavor: expanding understanding of Japanese video games' permeation into American culture. Its thesis is that Japanese video games served as cultural transmitters in U.S. between 2003 and 2013, evident in localization trends and the esports scene. This was proven via examination of video games, news articles, online esports databases, ROM websites, and academic literature on Japanese and American gaming. Chapter I argued that the *Dynasty Warriors* series' popularity was rooted in its humorous localization trends. Chapter II argued that the Evolution Championship Series facilitated the entrenchment of Japanese fighting games in American esports. Chapter III argued that the American fan translations of *Fire Emblem* games constituted uniquely American localizations that facilitated popularization while maintaining an authentic level of Japanese cultural odor. This project's central significance is highlighting alternative avenues for understanding the entrenchment of Japanese video games in American pop culture.

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# Introduction

## I. Introduction

As video games moved from neon-lit bars and arcades to backlit smartphones and jumbotrons, historians naturally noticed video games as another avenue of American and Japanese pop culture diffusion. By 2018, American video game revenue reached $4.43 billion, which not only dwarfed global film industry but was even four times higher than Hollywood's total revenue for that year.[1] In 2023, total U.S. consumer spending on video games reached $57.2 billion, with the American video game industry contributed roughly $66 billion to the U.S. GDP.[2] Professional esports events, such as the Evolution Championship Series (often abbreviated as Evo) or Electronic Sports League (ESL), have increasingly occupied the same spaces as traditional sports. The internet has continually expanded access to video games, through both official and unofficial means. Despite this industrial growth of video games in the United States, the historical study of video games in American has many avenues of research and analysis left unexplored. Even as professional esports has gained more mainstream attention, much of American gaming culture has yet to be unearthed from its underground dwellings.[3] The purpose of this thesis was the unearthing of elements of this culture, specifically the influence of Japanese video games on American gaming culture between 2003 and 2013.[4] Specifically, this

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[1] Matt Alt, *Pure Invention: How Japan Made the Modern World* (Crown Publishing Group, 2021), 293.
[2] "Purchasing and Spending Trends," Essential Facts About the U.S. Video Game Industry, Entertainment Software Association (ESA), accessed March 27, 2025, https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Essential-Facts-2024-FINAL.pdf.
[3] T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: Esports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (The MIT Press, 2012), 108.
[4] For full disclosure, this was the period in which I grew up, very often with Nintendo controllers in hand. Innumerable hours of my childhood were spent playing video games, including many of those discussed herein. Furthermore, as esports progressively professionalized, I became a fan of competitive *Tekken*, which was often featured at the Evolution Championship series as a main event. In short, I am very much a recipient of the cultural influence I discuss throughout these three chapters. Though consciousness of this bias can limit its expression here, it cannot completely remove it. Regardless of the anecdotal evidence I may possess, I endeavored to minimize such

was conducted through three distinct modes: the analysis of the institutional localization trends of the *Dynasty Warriors* series; the analysis of the growth of the Evo tournament series; and the analysis of independent localization trends of the *Fire Emblem* series. The composite claim of these three analytical avenues, and this thesis in general, was that Japanese video games facilitated the transfusion of Japanese pop culture in the United States between 2003 and 2013.

The primary scholarly contribution of this thesis was expanding the modes of analyzing Japanese cultural odor in video games. In essence, cultural odor is the degree to which a given object conveys the thematic and/or aesthetic characteristics of its native culture. Each of the following chapters drew upon this phenomenon, with each chapter containing a distinct method for measuring cultural odor across various areas of American gaming culture. Chapter I will highlight the English versions of *Dynasty Warriors* series as an odiferous chimera of Chinese historical narratives characters and Japanese video game aesthetics, localized for an American audience. Chapter II will examine the Evolution Championship Series's cosmopolitan acculturation of Japanese pop culture by emphasizing its inherent combination of cultural odors as an American video game tournament series that almost exclusively featured Japanese video games. Chapter III will explore the unique ability of fan translators to simultaneously maintain a more authentic level of Japanese cultural odor while also presenting a uniquely American translation in the independent localization of the *Fire Emblem* series. Essentially, these collective assertion of these chapters is that Japanese video games not only maintained popularity in the 2000s but also created new avenues for Americans to perceive and experience Japanese pop culture.

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and focus on the collective experience of American gamers. I leave the judgement of my success in this endeavor to my peers.

## II. Historiography

Despite the relative nascence of the field of video game history, scholars have nonetheless established multiple modes for analyzing the cultural impact of video games on the U.S. This nascence was tied to the relatively recent arrival of Japanese video games, with the massive commercial success of games like *Pac-Man*, *Street Fighter*, and *Pokémon* first gaining the attention of journalists in the 1990s. While historians did not immediately respond to this trend, journalists throughout the 1990s recognized and catalogued this meteoric arrival of Japanese video games to the U.S.[5] As reports of the explosive popularity of Japanese video games, American academics became more aware and interested in this wave of pop culture transfusion. This interest was compounded by the growing academic literature of the presence of manga and anime in the U.S., which provided much of the theoretical and methodological modes for the historical analysis of Japanese video games.

As the first decade of the twenty-first century unfolded, scholars of Game Studies and Asian studies led the charge. Texts such as Roland Kelt's *Japanamerica* or Mark West's *The Japanification of Children's Pop Culture* forged this spearhead. Considering this decade saw the reemergence, and subsequent explosion, of the American video game industry (VGI), American academics' study of video games was further validated by this commercial boom. The simultaneous emergence of the internet not only expanded access to Japanese pop culture but invited further deconstruction of centralized cultural diffusion (i.e., globalization) as traditional information and publication barriers eroded.[6] Furthermore, scholars began considering video games as cultural artifacts, as well as representations of history, and continued this discourse into

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[5] John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (John Hopkins University Press, 2019), 14.
[6] Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, May 1, 2002, https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/11/japans-gross-national-cool/.

the 2010s.[7] As such, the 2000s marked the period in which the growth of Japanese video games cultural presence in the U.S. fittingly coincided with greater scholarly attention to that very cultural presence.

The most relevant historiographical theme produced in this period was cultural odor. This concept was first coined by Japanese historian Koichi Iwabuchi in 2002, specifically in *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*; here, Iwabuchi analyzed the localization practices of Japanese television programs globally (and in Taiwan in particular) to better understand how these programs gained international acceptance.[8] In doing so, Iwabuchi argued that the root of Japan's successful globalization laid in the global exportation of Japanese pop culture.[9] Specifically, the worldwide acceptance for Japanese products, including consumer electronics, animation, manga, and video games, was directly tied to their inherent cultural odor.[10] In this way, companies such as Sony or Nintendo conveyed Japan's cultural odor globally in a similar manner to how McDonald's conveyed American cultural odor globally.[11] While subsequent academic studies of Japanese video games cultural impact on the U.S. were topically distinct from Iwabuchi, his idea that perceived Japaneseness facilitated the success of Japanese cultural products globally remained relevant. This thesis was no exception to this dynamic, with each chapter establishing a new mode of analysis based on Iwabuchi's concept of cultural odor.

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[7] Wills, *Gamer Nation*, 15.
[8] Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2002), 21.
[9] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 20.
[10] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 23.
[11] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 27-8.

Over the course of the 2010s, as the American video game industry continued to balloon into the behemoth it remains today, even greater scholarly attention to Japanese video games in the context of American pop culture germinated. The 2010s saw the development of the global VGI, allowing Americans access to Japanese video games that was comparable to the deluge of manga and anime that preceded it. This influence would become so widespread and lucrative that the Japanese state itself launched the Cool Japan Fund in 2013 to harness the spread of Japanese pop culture as a soft power play.[12] Fittingly, American academics responded to these trends with greater discussion of video games, including those of Japanese origin, in the context of American cultural history.[13] Despite this, the study of the historical roots of Japanese pop culture's global, including to the U.S., was still nascent.[14] This relatively recent emergence was facilitated by interdisciplinary cooperation, with professional historians of this subject engaging with fields such as art history, Game studies, and Asian studies.[15] John Wills's *Gamer Nation*, Consalvo's *Atari to Zelda*, and Rachel Hutchinson's *Japanese Culture through Video Games* demonstrated this trend as well expanding the range of academic discussion on American video game culture. These and other scholars' works on the subject represented the bulk of the secondary literature cited in this thesis.

The most relevant historiographical theme of this period was cosmopolitanism. In this historiographical context, cosmopolitanism is the concept of cultural diffusion as a negotiated process between the game's publishers and the various local/international localization firms involved.[16] This concept was first introduced by Mia Consalvo in 2016, specifically in *Atari to*

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[12] "Company Overview," About Cool Japan Fund, Cool Japan Fund, accessed October 13, 2025, https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/about/company.html.
[13] Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture*, 15.
[14] William Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization* (Columbia University Press, 2010), "Introduction".
[15] Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, "Introduction".
[16] Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Video Games in Global Contexts* (The MIT Press, 2016), 103.

*Zelda: Japan's Video Games in Global Contexts*; here, Consalvo analyzed the localization practices of Japanese video games to better understand the cross-cultural interests and impacts in localization.[17] Therein, Consalvo argued that cosmopolitanism was a preferable methodological alternative to globalization, or the one-sided cultural diffusion from one region to another, prevalent throughout recent decades in analyzing the nature of American cultural imperialism.[18] In essence, cultural odor was not a determined, and then dictated, value; rather, cultural odor was negotiated between publishers and localizers in order to maximize the cultural appeal of a given product for a given cultural context.[19] For example, this phenomenon was evident throughout the localization of Japanese video game series, such as when institutional localization of *Dynasty Warriors* maintained the distinctly Chinese names of certain items (e.g., dim sum) and all of the characters while also translating weapons or armor into their more recognizable English names. This decentralized form of cultural diffusion was even more evident in the discussion of independent localization, wherein fans assumed the roles of translators and publishers in digitally distributing Japanese-exclusive *Fire Emblem* games in the U.S.

While still only in the first half of the 2020s, scholars continue to dissect and analyze the spread of Japan's global presence, as facilitated via video games. Matt Alt's *Pure Invention* and Timothy Craig's *Cool Japan* are just two examples of how this trend in American academia has continued to develop. Historians such as Lu Zhouxiang, particularly through their monograph *A History of Competitive Gaming*, demonstrated how the field of video game history was expanding beyond cultural analysis to reflect the commercial and professional expansion of esports globally. Even before the midpoint of the decade, historians have been both building off

[17] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 7.
[18] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 103.
[19] Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 103.

previous scholarship as well as expanding points of analysis. While the field still largely exists in unexplored territory, this continued growth conveyed how historians continue to expand understanding of Japanese video games in the context of American pop culture.

## III. Sources

As the historiographical survey above conveyed, this thesis grew from a developing secondary source pool. Historical monographs, such as Zhouxiang's *A History of Competitive Gaming*, Hutchinson's *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, or Taylor's *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, made up the bulk of the cited secondary sources. While the exact subject matter varied, most of these historical texts focused on the history of Japanese video games across multiple temporal and geographical contexts. In addition, a handful of book chapters, often derived from edited monographs containing a variety of authors, constituted the second largest type of secondary sources cited here. As such, these were often employed in lieu of book-length discussions of more specific topics, such as Mia Consalvo's "Unintended Travel: ROM Hackers and Fan Translations of Japanese Video Games" or Lynn Spigal's "Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11." Finally, a pair of academic articles were used for additional reference points: Fickle et al.'s "Asian/American Gaming" and Nyitray's "Game on to Game after." These secondary sources, while enlightening, represented the minority of cited sources.

In fact, due to the scarcity of scholarly work on video games and gaming culture, this thesis primarily drew on primary sources. These primary sources, largely accessible digitally, formed the basis for the examination of the three avenues of Japanese video games' popularity within American culture. Video game sales have rightfully used as a metric for understanding the cultural presence of Japanese video games in the U.S. However, this was but one of many ways

of understanding Japanese cultural permeation into the U.S., with the primary sources used here presented as additional metrics. Naturally, video games were the largest subgroup of primary sources referenced here. They included entries of the *Dynasty Warriors* and *Fire Emblem series*, as well as many of those featured at the Evo tournament series between 2003 and 2013. These were followed by gaming news articles and webpages, including *Kotaku*, *Game Informer*, and *Giant Bomb*, that not only reflected the vibrant journalistic environment on American gaming but the increasingly digital presence of gaming journalism over the past two decades. In searching for data on now-defunct American esports events and organizations, archived webpages, including the official site for the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) and removed pages from ROMHacking.net, were an invaluable resource. Esports statistical databases formed the basis of the primary research behind Chapter II, particularly in estimating the sizes of audiences and player pools of Evo. Functional ROM hacking, translation, and distribution sites were frequently utilized throughout Chapter III, which reflected the size and scope of the ROM hacking community in the U.S. through both the volume of sites as well as the depth of their game catalogues. Lastly, personal correspondence (conducted via email) with various Evo event and venue staff members was conducted to fill in the gaps in the historical record on the tournament, to varying degrees of success. Considered in concert, these primary sources not only conveyed the growing presence of video games within American digital space but also the dire need for professional historians to catalogue and archive digital sources.

## IV. Methods

Overall, these sources were applied in analyzing the various ways in which Japanese video games permeated and populated the minds of American gamers. Specifically, these were applied across three separate methodologies, with each chapter housing one. Of all these chapters, Chapter I drew most heavily from the primary source base, with most of the analysis focused on the cinematic content of the *Dynasty Warriors* series. Chapter II and Chapter III were much more balanced between primary and secondary sources. Chapter II was close to an even split, with the data on Evo player participation and audience engagement, as pooled from various online databases, largely balanced by the modes of character and narrative analysis established in the relevant secondary sources. Chapter III more favored primary sources, with the analysis of the *Fire Emblem* series' independent localization trends drawing heavily on ROM webpages and the games themselves, supplemented by the scarce secondary literature on ROM hacking and distribution. Ultimately, these chapters and their distinct methodologies reflected their composite goal of expanding the methodological range in the analysis of Japanese video games' impact on American gaming culture.

The methodological focus of Chapter I was the analysis of localization content and quality of *Dynasty Warriors* cutscenes from games released between 2003 and 2013. Specifically, this entailed study of the animation, lip-syncing, and voice acting qualities of the main series of Dynasty Warriors games (i.e. excluding the *Empires* and *Xtreme Legends* spin-off series). Once appraised, the quality of these cutscenes, juxtaposed with the news literature on *Dynasty Warriors* American popularity, were used to argue that the series lost popularity, at least in part, due to the declining cultural odor, and overall entertainment value, of these various cutscenes. Secondarily, Chapter I analyzed the characters and narrative motifs of the *Dynasty*

*Warriors* series to identify prevalent parallels and appeals in other Japanese cultural products and American pop culture in general.

The methodological focus for Chapter II was the estimation of audience attendance and player participation for the Evolution Championship Series main events between 2003 and 2013. In lieu of official records of these figures, on both the organizers and venues' sides, these estimations were relied on to quantitatively establish the popularity of Evo during this duration. These estimations were gathered from various digital databases of esports player and event statistics, such as Liquipedia and Esports Earnings. In addition to this, a handful of exemplars from the various game series consistently featured at Evo were analyzed for their appeals and significance to American audiences. These series were *Street Fighter*, *Tekken*, *Super Smash Bros.*, and *SoulCalibur*. Along with the various character and narrative motifs contained within these various series, the persistence of these games was used as a metric for gauging the persistent popularity of Japanese video games, and particularly those of the fighting game genre, in the U.S.

The methodological focus of Chapter III was the analysis of *Fire Emblem* series' narrative and characters cultural appeals and significance to American gamers. This was largely conducted via applying existing secondary literature on American cultural appeals found in Japanese anime and video games. In addition to this demonstration, this chapter also analyzed the frequency of American independent localizations of Japanese-exclusive *Fire Emblem* games (i.e., those only available in Japan and in Japanese). This was done via examination of various English ROM hacking, translation, distribution, and community engagement websites. Specifically, the release timing and completeness of these fan translations were compared to the

official localizations of *Fire Emblem* games released between 2003 and 2013 to gain a more complete image of the series overall American popularity.

## V. Scope

Conceptually, the scope of this thesis was largely confined to expanding the modes of analyzing cultural presence of Japanese video games in the U.S. already established in the relevant secondary literature. In essence, these three chapters validate the existing literature by expanding instances of their theoretical application in various video game series and competitions. Temporally, the scope of 2003 through 2013 reflected the period in which Japanese video games supposedly experienced a dip in popularity. This narrative was evident in both popular and academic presses. Gaming journalists and developers continue to discuss this decline in news articles and interviews, wherein they mark the 2000s as a decade of decline of Japanese video game sales.[20] This narrative was likewise reinforced in academic texts, often citing declining global sales of Japanese video games as the primary point of evidence.[21] This thesis endeavored to refute this historical narrative, and its commercial basis, by providing alternative avenues of popularity for Japanese video games, outside the quantitative analysis of sales figures.

This misleading historical narrative was largely attributed to the growth of the American VGI, catapulted by the success of first-person shooter (FPS) series such as *Call of Duty* or *Halo* and their American publishers. Considering 2003 saw an American invasion of Iraq, along with the swell of patriotic rhetoric espoused throughout popular culture, this position was not without

[20] Esra Krabbe, "Final Fantasy and Castlevania Creators Discuss the Rise, Decline and Revival of Japanese Video Games," *IGN*, March 13, 2023, https://www.ign.com/articles/final-fantasy-castlevania-creators-discuss-rise-decline-revival-of-japanese-video-games.
[21] Consalvo, Atari to Zelda, 122.

merit. Considering Japanese publishers' general aversion to FPS gaming and lack of American-centric characters and narratives, this position seemed intuitive. However, as scholars have noticed, the 2000s saw another wave of American cultural fascination with Japanese cultural, particularly in anime and manga such as *Naruto*, *Bleach,* and *One Piece*.[22] Furthermore, 2003 marked a record high for the global video game industry, with global video game hardware and software sales totaling $23 billion.[23] This growth was largely centralized as well, with the global presence of Japanese video games compounding with the explosion of the American to produce revenue on par with the global film industry.[24] Despite this surge, Japanese video game development and publication studios reported commercial losses throughout the late 2000s.[25] In fact, this trend was opposite to the simultaneous growth of other Japanese cultural products. This discrepancy alone warranted further historical study, justifying further examination of how other Japanese cultural products thrived while video games wilted.

Thus, since the early 2000s was largely seen as the end of the ascent of the Japanese VGI globally, 2003 was chosen as an appropriate start date for demonstrating how Japanese video games, in fact, maintained American popularity. For Chapter I, 2003 marked the release of *Dynasty Warriors 4*, which not only demonstrated the continuation of a then-niche Japanese video game but was also prevalent as a game that significantly expanded the series playable character roster and narrative scope. For Chapter II, 2003 marked the first inclusion of non-Capcom games at Evo's main events (i.e., Namco's *Tekken Tag Tournament* and *SoulCalibur*)

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[22] Roland Kelts, *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 6.
[23] Lu Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming* (Routledge, 2022), 161.
[24] Joe Wezorek, "Japanese Dominance of the Video-Game Industry and the Future of Interactive Media," in *The Japanification of Children's Popular Culture: From Godzilla to Miyazaki*, ed. by Mark West (Scarecrow Press, 2009), 90-1.
[25]Christian Nutt, "Considering Japan...," *Game Developer*, October 8, 2012, https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/considering-japan-.

that displayed the growth and professionalization of the American fighting game community (FGC) as more Japanese games became accepted at the highest levels of play. For Chapter III, 2003 marked the release of the first *Fire Emblem* game (*Fire Emblem: The Blazing Blade*) officially localized for the U.S., which in turn exposed Japanese publishers' willingness to introduce series to U.S.

Similarly, 2013 was chosen as the end point of this thesis's temporal scope to better understand the trajectory of Japanese video games popularity in the U.S. By 2013, American industries and consumers had largely recovered from the Great Recession and witnessed the rise of the American VGI. However, this year also coincided with a popularity plateau in American FPS games, seen with *Call of Duty: Ghosts* generating $1 billion in the first twenty-four hours of its release while being commonly criticized for its lack of innovation and relatively low popularity when compared to other gaming franchises.[26] This coincided with the entrenchment of anime and Japanese video games within American pop culture, even as major Japanese publishers fragment into smaller studios in response to declining global game sales.[27] The stagnation of one of the most iconic American video game series, tandem with the increasing familiarity of Japanese cultural products, formed the basis for selecting 2013 as this endpoint.

This was, of course, also informed by transformations in the various game series analyzed throughout these three chapters. For Chapter I, 2013 marked the initially anticipated but ultimately disappointing release of *Dynasty Warriors 8*, highlighting how the series increasingly undetectable localization coincided with its overall decline. For Chapter II, 2013 marked Nintendo's failed attempt to block the inclusion of *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* from Evo 2013's

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[26] Luke Karmali, "Call of Duty: Ghosts Sells $1 Billion Into Retail in 24 Hours," *IGN*, November 6, 2013, https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/11/06/call-of-duty-ghosts-sells-1-billion-into-retail-in-24-hours.
[27] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 149-51.

main event. This blunder by one of the world's largest and most popular video game publishers demonstrated not only international popularity and fandom of the Evolution Championship Series but also the cultural influence of Japanese video games in American competitive gaming culture. For Chapter III, 2013 marked the North American release of *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, which had the greatest commercial success of any game in the series at that point. Overall, this temporal scope reflected the overall scope of Japanese video games in the 2000s. Specifically, 2003 and 2013 showcased the three distinct, yet connected, ways in which Japanese video games aided the diffusion of Japanese pop culture in the U.S.

The primary contribution of this thesis was demonstrating at least three ways in which Japanese video games facilitated Japanese cultural transference to America. Video game sales remain an invaluable metric in quantitatively measuring the popularity of any given game, game series, or genre overall. However, this metric alone also remains insufficient to definitively declare the historical popularity of Japanese video games in the U.S. Chapter I will highlight how institutional localization practices can not only change the content of a game but even a game's overall cultural odor. Chapter II will demonstrate how esports competitions can not only facilitate a game's popularity (as both a video game and as a spectator sport) but also disseminate the collective cultural odor of the games which they feature. Chapter III will explore how independent localizers can bypass institutional barriers to not only spread a game's cultural odor but also uniquely maintain an authentic level of said game's original cultural odor. The intended effect of these three avenues of analysis would not only expand on the nascent historical literature but also lay the groundwork for future studies, based on these methodologies. Ultimately, this thesis was intended to provide academics with more lens and methods to measure the transfusion of Japanese pop culture in the United States, through video games.

# Chapter I:

# A True Localization of the Three Kingdoms:

# The Popularization of *Dynasty Warriors* in the United States

## I: Introduction

The promise of simulated, fantastical violence has long been the siren song of the American gamer. Popular game series such as *Call of Duty* and *Halo* often painted this promise with machine guns and plasma grenades against hordes of enemy soldiers. This form of recreation was not confined to first-person shooters, however, as even games from outside the United States offered hours of bombastic gameplay. One such game series was *Dynasty Warriors*, a franchise that has enjoyed shares of both acclaim and criticism in American gaming culture. While many American gamers have enjoyed the straightforward gameplay, distinct historical setting, and larger-than-life character roster of the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise, many still have criticized its simplistic combat when compared to other action games. This critique hardly discouraged the series' development, evidenced by *Dynasty Warriors 6* project manager Ken Matsumoto stating that "Comparing us to Halo...is stupid. Games are often criticized on what they're not rather than what they are."[28] It is true the *Dynasty Warriors* was distinct from the *Halo* series, and this fact enabled the former series to carve out a unique niche in the American gaming landscape. While "stupid" is non-explanatory, Matsumoto's outspoken frustration here spoke to the fact that emulating the successes of the American gaming industry

[28] Ken Matsumoto, "Defending Dynasty Warriors", interview by Edge Staff, *Edge Magazine*, February 12, 2008, Transcript, https://web.archive.org/web/20130403105716/http://www.edge-online.com/features/interview-defending-dynasty-warriors/.

was not the same as success in the American gaming industry. *Dynasty Warriors* was not a success despite its distinctions from other game series—it was a success because of them.

Regardless of American gamers and reviewers' critiques, the *Dynasty Warriors* series has retained international appeal throughout the past two decades. The bulk of the series was published by Koei throughout the 2000s. After Koei merged with fellow Japanese video game publisher Tecmo in 2009, the publisher shifted focus in the 2010s to licensed titles based on characters and settings from other popular entertainment franchises, such as *The Legend of Zelda* or *One Piece*. The latest entry in the series, *Dynasty Warriors: Origins* (2025), was a somewhat ironically named reboot of the series that had already sold 21 million copies internationally by the end of March 2025.[29] Despite this welcoming reception globally, the series' staple Chinese historical narrative, setting, and characters have been most successful amongst Chinese gamers. *Dynasty Warriors: Origins* producer Tomohiko Sho even cited the fanbase being primarily Chinese in claiming that the series was yet to be a success in the West.[30] However, this analysis is incomplete. Regardless of the success of the series in the West relative to that in China, the series has clearly undergone a tremendous global resurgence. Even if Koei Tecmo America does not disclose any U.S. sales figures for any of their series, including *Dynasty Warriors*, the continued and evolving effort in the series American localization implied the publisher at least saw the West as safe for further investment.[31] Even if *Dynasty Warriors* series' exact U.S. sales

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[29] Amber Vještica, "*Dynasty Warriors* Series Still Can't Be Considered a Success in the West, According to Producer", *Automaton Media*, May 30, 2025, https://automaton-media.com/en/news/dynasty-warriors-series-still-cant-be-considered-a-success-in-the-west-according-to-producer/.
[30] Michael Brandon Ingram, "Dynasty Warriors Producer Doesn't Think Series is Successful in the West", *GameRant*, May 30, 2025, https://gamerant.com/dynasty-warriors-producer-not-successful-west/.
[31] Koei Tecmo Customer Support, Email to the Author, May 27, 2025.

remain a mystery, growing international sales and localization standards are evident of a trend of cultural transfusion that makes further academic studies of the series even more necessary.

In fulfillment of this necessity, this chapter asserted that the root of the series' American popularity was not in the quality of its gameplay or graphics, but in its localization. As observed by historian William Tsutsui, localization of Japanese cultural products abroad has tremendously aided the spread of Japanese pop culture globally; even with heavy censorship, as was the case with *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, the localizations of such nonetheless enabled global audiences to engage with, and perhaps enjoy, them.[32] Furthermore, as the series' localizations gradually improved and removed the more humorous, whimsical aspects of its dialogue, it lost its most endearing quality. One outlet that tracked this decline in popularity was in the gaming magazine *Game Informer*. Not only was this among the most popular American gaming magazines but was even the fifth largest magazine in the U.S. in 2010.[33] *Game Informer* released its own retrospective review of the *Dynasty Warriors* series that same year, lauding *Dynasty Warriors 5* and the three other series released in 2005 as the peak of the series.[34] Only a year later, *Game Informer* criticized *Dynasty Warriors 7* for failing to make any significant changes or innovations to the decade-spanning series.[35] By the time *Game Informer* released its review of

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[32] William Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, "4. Lost in Translation? Adapting Japanese Popular Culture for Global Audiences", https://find.mtsu.edu/vufind/Record/in00006441591?sid=11129921#description.

[33] Kyle Orland, "Game Informer Circulation Up One-Third in 2010, Now 5th Largest Mag in U.S.," *Game Developer*, February 6, 2011, last accessed September 9, 2025, https://www.gamedeveloper.com/game-platforms/game-informer-circulation-up-one-third-in-2010-now-5th-largest-mag-in-u-s-#:~:text=Newly%20released%20data%20from%20the%20Audit%20Bureau,2010%20to%20just%20over%205%20million%20copies.

[34] Ben Reeves, "A Vast Empire: The Dynasty Warriors Dynasty," *Game Informer*, October 6, 2010, last accessed September 9, 2025, https://gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2010/10/06/a-legacy-of-clone-the-dynasty-warriors-dynasty.aspx.

[35] Ben Reeves, "Dynasty Warriors 7 Review," *Game Informer*, April 19, 2011, last accessed September 9, 2025, https://gameinformer.com/games/dynasty_warriors_7/b/ps3/archive/2011/04/19/koei-masters-ctrl-c-delivers-another-dynasty-warriors.aspx.

*Dynasty Warriors 8* in 2013, the previous laudatory tone had faded to laments of the series "uninspired...tedious" turn.[36] While the rather static gameplay played a conspicuous role in this, this timetable also aligned with more dedicated localization practices. This change removed the goofy dubbing and animations that defined the early American localizations in favor of a more serious, and generic, tone. Essentially, once the series became well-known in the U.S., it lost one of the very qualities that enabled it to become well-known in the first place. These changes in localization presented the *Dynasty Warriors* less as a unique Japanese game and more like any other American game.

Ultimately, the increase in localization efforts led to a decrease in cultural odor, and thus overall appeal, to American fans. Previously historians, from Iwabuchi to Consalvo, have attributed the successful cultural transfusion of Japanese video games into the U.S. to these games perceived Japanese cultural odor. This chapter will further validate these claims by demonstrating how the gradual removal of this cultural odor in the localization process can dampen the cultural appeal of a game series. While the maintenance of cultural odor has been a decentralized negotiation between American and Japanese firms, this negotiation does not necessarily produce a more appealing product. Using the *Dynasty Warriors* games released in the 2000s as examples, this chapter will expand the methodological range of the field by examining the gradual removal of cultural odor from the series' cutscenes.

[36] Kyle Hilliard, "Dynasty Warriors 8 Review," *Game Informer*, July 16, 2013, last accessed September 9, 2025, https://gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2010/10/06/a-legacy-of-clone-the-dynasty-warriors-dynasty.aspx.

## II: Historiographical Background

Scholars studying the cultural influence of Japanese pop culture have often discussed how much cultural odor influenced the popularity of a given Japanese cultural product. These scholars, starting with Koichi Iwabuchi, attributed the global spread of Japanese pop culture (at least in part) to the cultural odor carried by Japan's consumer electronics, film, and video games. While the amount of credit given to cultural odor varied across analyses, it was commonly understood as a series of values and motifs whose expression was negotiated by Japanese publishers and localization firms. Historians, such as William Tsutsui, have recognized that localizations, whether handled internally by Japanese publishers or by outside localization firms, significantly facilitated the spread of Japanese pop culture globally.[37] Other scholars, such as Mia Consalvo, have recognized the localization process as a series of negotiations between the presentation of Japanese and American values, with publishers and localizers representing each side of the negotiations.[38] In essence, localization has come to represent a form of negotiated acculturation, with corporate interests actively reshaping a given cultural product's identity to better appeal to a particular culture and audience.

This chapter will expand upon these analytical paradigms by explaining how this negotiation can inadvertently damage a video game series' (e.g., the *Dynasty Warriors* series) cultural appeal. Specifically, this chapter will demonstrate how the increased localization efforts applied to the *Dynasty Warriors* series during the 2000s contributed to the series decline in American popularity during that decade. In trying to capitalize on the series growing, if somewhat niche, presence in American gaming culture, Koei Tecmo ultimately damaged this IP

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[37] William Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, "4. Lost in Translation? Adapting Japanese Popular Culture for Global Audiences".
[38]Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 220.

by lessening its distinctly foreign cultural odor. This demonstration will validate previous scholarly assertions for cultural odor's role in facilitating the popularity of cultural products as well as establish another analytical approach to gauging a Japanese game series' American popularity.

## III: *Dynasty Warriors* Primer

*Dynasty Warriors* is a hack-and-slash action game series set in the Three Kingdoms period of Chinese history, based on the classical text *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Furthermore, this game series is considered the father of the Musou subgenre of action video games. While sharing the focus on combat and upgrading combat abilities with other hack-and-slash game series like *Devil May Cry*, online games forum *Giant Bomb* defined Musou games as: "A series of large-scale beat 'em ups with the common thread being the ability to play from multiple sides, killing hundreds in a single battle, and various light RPG elements. *Dynasty Warriors* and *Samurai Warriors* are the most prevalent of the series, with dozens of expansions and sequels between them.".[39] While still known as such in the United States, it is also commonly known as the "Warriors" genre, as listed on the online gaming magazine *Kotaku*.[40] Unlike the dubbing quality that varies throughout the series, the core gameplay model has remained the same since *Dynasty Warriors 2*. This continuation itself has been another source of criticism for the series amongst American fans. This critique was consistent enough to illicit a response from the project manager of *Dynasty Warriors 6*, Ken Matsumoto. In an interview with *Edge* magazine, Matsumoto argued that the value of each game's contribution rested in the subtle differences between each entry; then criticized American gamers for not being able to

[39] "Musou", *Giant Bomb*, last accessed July 2, 2025, https://www.giantbomb.com/musou/3025-704/.
[40] Levi Winslow, "'Warriors' Games Rule, and That's a Hill I'll Totally Die On", *Kotaku*, August 31, 2023, https://kotaku.com/dynasty-samurai-warriors-musou-games-autism-family-bond-1850789397.

recognize such subtleties.[41] While these subtleties were addressing the narrative and character variations across the series, from distinct character story endings to varying ability to reshape the narrative based on player choices, this counter did not deny a largely unchanged gameplay template. Despite these critiques, Koei Tecmo continued to localize games for the United States, and with a fair share of defenders. One such defense, coming again from *Kotaku* via anime/video game journalist Richard Eisenbeis, was that the Musou genre has indeed been versatile with its various settings and spin-off titles, from Three Kingdoms China to Warring States Japan to giant robots sword-fighting in space.[42] While Eisenbeis here was more so addressing the popularity of the Musou genre overall, it still spoke to the fact that gameplay was not the central draw of the series, regardless of its longevity/stagnation (depending on player perspective). This chapter, itself, argues that the root for the continuation of *Dynasty Warriors* series in American gaming culture is rooted not in the gameplay itself, but in how cutscenes were localized for the American marketplace.

## IV: Localization Primer

Localization, in the context of video games, is the process of adapting a video game for a distinct linguistic, geographical, and/or cultural context. This process has hardly been unique to video games, however, as anime and manga was likewise dubbed and distributed throughout the U.S. via localization. The core of localization is cultural negotiation, with localizers walking the tight rope between authentically representing the source material and adapting such material to a distinct cultural context (e.g., from Japan to the U.S.). Cultural icons such as food, idioms, and even character names are routinely changed in this process, sometimes to humorous results. One

[41] Matsumoto, "Defending Dynasty Warriors".
[42] Richard Eisenbeis, "Defending the Game People Hate", *Kotaku*, March 13, 2012, https://kotaku.com/defending-the-game-people-hate-5891755.

example of this came from the massively popular *Pokémon* television series. The character Brock prepared *onigiri*, a triangular or round rice ball with a salted or pickled filling, wrapped in seaweed. However, in one English dubbed version by 4Kids Entertainment, an American licensing firm infamous for its heavily censored and often inaccurate dubbing of Japanese cartoons, went on to become a meme amongst American fans.[43] In the episode "Primeape Goes Bananas", Brock calls these rice balls jelly donuts, even though *onigiri* neither resemble jelly donuts nor share common culinary characteristics, aside from both having a filling.[44] While considered a poor localization, this instance demonstrated how localizers often attempted to adapt foreign cultural icons to those more familiar to the targeted American audience (i.e., kids). Furthermore, this localization showed how even poor adaptations can add entertainment value, turning a relatively unknown cultural allusion into a lasting point of humor within fanbases. In this same vein, low quality Japanese video game localizations had the same potential to add humor, and thus further enjoyment, for American audiences.

This analysis specifically focuses on the way that the Japanese-produced and published *Dynasty Warriors* series was adapted for an American audience. This included an assessment of this American localization, relative to its ability to gain and maintain the attention of an American fanbase. Even more specifically, this analysis focused on how cutscenes and dialogue across a section of the mainline series (*Dynasty Warriors 4-8*) were localized and ultimately appealed to American gamers. This process of translating a game's most dramatic and dialogue-heavy moments into a new language/cultural lens while also maintaining authenticity to the

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[43] "Brock's Jelly Donuts," Know Your Meme, last updated 2018, last accessed September 10, 2025, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/brocks-jelly-doughnuts.

[44] Satyam, "pokemon jelly filled donut dub and sub comparison," from Pokemon series, Episode 25: Primeape Goes Bananas, uploaded September 4, 2017, last accessed September 10, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3KNAtmHov0.

original version has been understandably difficult. Even if the publisher has an internal English localization consultant or team, as the selected *Dynasty Warriors* games had, that only addresses the labor aspect. First and foremost for a for-profit company: localization is expensive. Not only does the localization team need to be paid to adapt the script, but English-speaking voice actors must also be then hired to perform that adapted script. Even once the localized version is complete, there are the costs of shipping, marketing, and customer service to a country halfway across the world. These are a lot of costs to gamble on a single game's success, though success at home or elsewhere (e.g., China) can diminish the perceived risk of localization. Despite these costs and the inherent risk associated with them, English localization that maintains the original tone and experience of the Japanese versions have proven successful in America. Ever since the end of WWII, Japanese popular culture has been present in the American zeitgeist, whether through *Godzilla* or Kurosawa films, *Astro Boy* or *Sailor Moon*, *Pokémon* or *Final Fantasy*. If anything, an unwillingness to undertake these costs ultimately hinders a Japanese game's international appeal, considering the plethora of Japanese media that Americans increasingly crave and consume.[45]

As this trend implies, the benefits to localizing a Japanese game to an American audience outweigh the costs. The most obvious benefit is that localization exposes a game to a new market, with recognizability accruing with the game/game series' continued presence within said market. This dynamic did not diminish during the 2000s, and declining game sales was insufficient to debunk the cultural entrenchment of Japanese pop culture. In fact, historians have argued that the 2000s represented a wave of "Japanophilia", with anime and manga replacing studio films as leading Japanese cultural products and spearheading another explosion of

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[45] Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 195.

American fascination with Japanese popular culture.[46] While Japanese video games were excluded from this list, they nonetheless benefitted from this rising tide of cultural fascination.

Despite this prerogative to maintain authenticity, localizers provide a distinct game meant to appeal to a distinct audience. In fact, even when these localizations were imperfect, many American gamers often found them endearing. Such imperfections can include mistranslating Japanese into English, English audio not syncing with mouth animations made for Japanese audio, casual diction in serious dialogue (or vice versa), to other minor but entertaining glitches. Like the American localizations of late-twentieth century Hong Kong action films, in which mistakes or awkward choices in dubbing English audio over the original dialogue were commonplace, these localization mistakes add layers of humor and irony absent in the original version. In effect, such localizations create a distinct form of cultural odor that both betrays the foreignness of the cultural product while also adding cultural elements absent in the original product.  One infamous example that has become a meme over the past decades comes from *Zero Wing* (1989) opening cinematic, in which one sinister-looking character proudly claims, "All of your base are belong to us!". While not apparent in this Japanese version, such localization errors conveyed the transnational nature of the game, and thus a paradoxically Japanese and American cultural odor. Historians have noticed this trend as well, with William Tsutsui acknowledging that American dubbing was notoriously and intentionally poor.[47] This was done not only as a pragmatic measure—as less time spent on translation was less money spent—but also for entertainment value. American voice actors in these localization projects were often encouraged to add humor to the dialogue and improvise when able. In short,

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[46] Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 6.

[47] William Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization,* "4. Lost in Translation? Adapting Japanese Popular Culture for Global Audiences".

localization of Japanese video games series not only exposed Americans to these series and Japanese popular culture but also led to Americans experiencing a unique version of the game they could more readily accept into the landscape of American gaming.

## V: Dynasty Warriors, as a Game Series

### a. General Series Background

The gameplay, narrative, and characters of *Dynasty Warriors* have been the essential elements behind the series' cultural transfusion into the United States. While the general gameplay format has remained relatively unchanged, the ways in which gameplay reshaped the narrative trajectory of a single playthrough constituted one of the many major changes within the series.[48] As such, while the narrative source material has not expanded, the precise outcome of player choices has had a varying effect on the narrative of individual playthroughs across the selected titles. These titles include *Dynasty Warriors 4*, *Dynasty Warriors 5*, *Dynasty Warriors 6*, *Dynasty Warriors 7*, and *Dynasty Warriors 8*. These titles constitute the primary entries of the series between 2003 and 2013. The series also featured secondary entries focused on narratives and gameplay modes distinct from the primary entries, such as the *Xtreme Legends* or *Empires* subseries. While understanding these games and their reception (as both individual games and game subseries) are essential to understand the full cultural impact of the *Dynasty Warriors* IP in the U.S., this study exclusively examined the primary entries for their primary role in the series. These two subseries were thus left to be critically examined in future academic studies.

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[48] For the sake of this study, a single playthrough constituted the completion of a single character's Musou mode (or Story mode, as named in *Dynasty Warriors 7* and *8*). Musou mode/Story mode itself was the series' version of a story mode or campaign mode, all of which are names for a narrative-focused gameplay mode. The number of characters available in Musou/Story mode vary across the games, but the emphasis on the games' stories within the Musou mode remained constant.

The main entries in this series were squarely rooted in the hack-and-slash genre of video games. This aptly named subgenre of action games has historically emphasized combat, typically within a single-player format, delivered through a simple button layout/combo system that incentivize constant player inputs (sometimes known as “button-mashing”) against waves of enemies. These are often contained within a series of chambers set on a relatively linear path, as in popular Japanese game series such as *Devil May Cry* or *Bayonetta*. Defeated enemies drop items that reward, heal, and/or boost the player's character throughout the level, with higher level enemies typically dropping higher level items. Levels are completed once all the enemies have been defeated, typically including a “boss” enemy at the end. Omega Force, the team within Koei Tecmo that specifically develops Warriors games, largely adhered to this format across the *Dynasty Warriors* series. These games focused on single-player gameplay, with some co-op game modes available and largely relegated outside the main narrative mode.[49] As such, the emphasis of gameplay has largely been on a single player character, assisted but not reliant on allied non-player characters (NPCs, as commonly abbreviated), against waves of thousands of generic enemies and handfuls of named characters that either draw from a limited pool of character models or even their own unique character model. These generic NPCs were largely distinguished by color, with each color corresponding to a particular faction (e.g., Shu forces as green, Wu forces as red, Wei forces as blue). Each level, dependent on the narrative context, featured one of these named characters as a commander, or a final boss that is often required to be defeated to complete the level. Likewise, among the player character’s allied characters for a given level include their own commander, whose defeat (i.e., depleting the unit’s health bar completely) can trigger a game over for the player. This game over is more commonly achieved

[49] Co-op play is the term often used for two-player gameplay in which the two players play on the same team and towards the same goal. This can be relegated to local/in-person co-op (often called “couch co-op") or online.

by the player character's own defeat, though there are instances in which the player character is also the commander. As the series progressed, Omega Force naturally enhanced both the generic and named characters' designs and graphics as development hardware/software allowed for such. Furthermore, graphic technology advanced to allow for more units to be visible on the screen at a given time, allowing growing swaths of enemies to take up the screen as the series progressed. In turn, this allowed the player character to decimate whole armies in a more grandiose, and efficient, manner. As such, characters and factions became more distinct with time, from both their aesthetic distinction from the faceless hordes of enemies and their martial distinction by decimating such hordes. This simple yet chaotic gameplay model remained relatively constant throughout the series, alongside the narrative within such simulated violence took place.

The *Dynasty Warriors* main series games were narrative games. That is, the game's story took a central role in gameplay, often embodied in a single game mode. This was known as "Musou Mode" between *Dynasty Warriors 4* and *Dynasty Warriors 6*, becoming the more generic "Story Mode" in *Dynasty Warriors 7* and *Dynasty Warriors 8*. While less unique, this name aligned more closely with other American/localized games that often classified the main narrative gameplay mode as Story Mode (or as in the case of first-person shooters, Campaign Mode). Musou/Story modes in the series possessed varying degrees of historical accuracy, though a general focus on recreating the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* narrative was commonplace. Within these story levels, players were given varying degrees of agency that ultimately affected the outcome of the battle, outside of the obvious victory/defeat. These usually came in the form of bonus objectives, in which saving a particular unit or capturing a specific base would allow for a bonus reward within the level (allied reinforcements, enemy morale drop, etc.) While modes such as Free Mode provided concurrent/post-narrative gameplay options,

including co-op play and replaying story levels with more characters than allowed in Musou/Story mode, levels and characters' availability for play within such modes were often locked behind milestones and level completions within Musou/Story mode. In fact, some titles even kept certain story levels locked until certain player choices were made mid-level. For example, Shu general Guan Yu canonically died at the battle of Fan Castle, in both the source material and in many of the *Dynasty Warriors* games. However, in *Dynasty Warriors 8*, if the player was able to keep Pang Tong and Xu Shu alive by the start of Shu's Fan Castle, the level would then be altered to change the course of the battle and ultimately save Guan Yu's life.[50] The other series entries in this study, however, largely locked the player behind a series of linear storylines. Even then, these storylines were often distinct between the various titles. *Dynasty Warriors 4*, *Dynasty Warriors 7,* and *Dynasty Warriors 8* centered Musou/Story mode around the factions (Wei, Wu, Shu, Other, and Jin in *8*), in which the multiple characters could be selected from a faction's roster for a single mission. Conversely, *Dynasty Warriors 5* and *Dynasty Warriors 6* placed more emphasis on a single character for each Musou mode playthrough, with the player selecting a single character for the entire story mode and with unique events/outcomes based on that particular character. Despite the fundamentally different narrative approaches here, the general timeline and setting of the Three Kingdoms period remained the same throughout the franchise.

This was fitting, as the general timeline and setting of the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise were among its integral components. The Three Kingdoms period was a tumultuous time in Chinese history, in which the dissolution of the Han Dynasty precipitated into a period of

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[50] Atsushi Miyauchi, *Dynasty Warriors 8*, "Chapter 9: Battle of Fan Castle", Koei Tecmo Holdings Co., Ltd., PlayStation 3/Microsoft Xbox 360, July 16, 2013.

warlords vying for military supremacy, the formation of the Three Kingdoms (Wei, Wu, and Shu), and the eventual ascendancy of the Jin Dynasty in 265 CE, which fully reunited China under new imperial dynasty by 280 CE.[51] While the established timeline of the Three Kingdoms period has been 220 to 265 CE, the games rarely cover the full period but rather focus on the developmental stages of the Three Kingdoms. In fact, the games often start with the Yellow Turban Rebellion as many factions/characters' first level. Rather than focusing on the grand strategies and battles that take place after most of the principal characters' deaths, the series focused largely on these same principal characters conquering the disunified frontier and restoring order in the wake of the fallen Han dynasty. This concept of taming a wild, hostile frontier was known in American gaming cultural as well. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the American gaming landscape was inundated with games featuring gun-toting cowboys in the lawless, but tamable, American Old West. Japanese video games such as Taito's *Gun Fight* or Nintendo's *Wild Gunman* embodied this trend that enabled players to inhabit the mythologized role of the cowboy/gunslinger for themselves. As American gaming historian John Wills laid out in *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture*, these and other similar games reinforced the narrative of the West as a noble battleground in honorable settlers must face hordes of nameless, faceless gunslingers and Native Americans.[52] Considering the monumental success of Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption* franchise and its sardonic satire of American cultural notions of a noble West, particularly among adult gamers, this narrative motif continues to be deeply ingrained in American gaming culture, even as it is satirized and critiqued.[53] While the *Romance*

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[51]Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China, Second Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 86-7.
[52] John Wills, *Gamer Nation*, 62.
[53] Abhijay Singh Rawat, "Red Dead Redemption Was a Glowing Success Because Its Target Audience Was 'Aging Gamers', Not Youngsters", *Fandomwire*, April 23, 2025, https://fandomwire.com/red-dead-redemption-was-a-glowing-success-because-its-target-audience-was-aging-gamers-not-youngsters/.

*of the Three Kingdoms* source material provided a distinct setting, this conceptual overlap between the Western genre of American video games and *Dynasty Warriors* reinforced the cultural appeal of both to American gamers. In this way, cultural overlap facilitated cultural transfusion.

The colorful, eclectic cast was another integral part of the series. While the exact size of playable characters has varied across titles and game modes (e.g., characters not available in Musou/Story mode), the ability to simulate being a single-person army through a multitude of characters has remained consistent. While some characters were consistently reappearing, such as Zhou Yu or Cao Cao, the series often added/removed characters between individual entries.[54] Some characters, such as Yu Jin and Fa Zheng, would go from minor NPCs to playable characters over the course of the franchise. Despite such fluctuations, *Dynasty Warriors 6* was the only main series game to not only remove previously available characters but to even reduce the total roster from a previous main series game.[55] Thus, with one outlier aside, the series generally expanded its character roster and offered more playable perspectives from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* epic. These playable characters were often further subdivided by their historical allegiance to one of the major factions of the series. Of these, those characters without a historical (or at least consistent) allegiance to one of the Three Kingdoms, or later the Jin Dynasty with the release of *Dynasty Warriors 7*, were relegated to the “Other” category. This is not to say such characters were minor to the plot, as this included both the series’ recurring level bosses and antagonists, from the bombastic sorcerer Zhang Jiao to the treacherous warrior

[54] Tomohiko Sho, Dynasty Warriors 6, Koei Co., Ltd., Sony PlayStation 2, Sony PlayStation 3, Sony PlayStation Portable, Microsoft Xbox 360, Microsoft Windows, February 19, 2008.
[55] Tomohiko Sho, Dynasty Warriors 6, Koei Co., Ltd., Sony PlayStation 2, Sony PlayStation 3, Sony PlayStation Portable, Microsoft Xbox 360, Microsoft Windows, February 19, 2008.

Lu Bu. In fact, due to the historical nature of the narrative itself, many of the characters get brief moments on center stage throughout the narrative, while also fading into the background or even obscurity over the course of the game. For example, Zhang Jiao and his rebellion against the Han Dynasty (i.e., the Yellow Turban Rebellion) often dominated the early game narrative, but was consistently sidelined thereafter in game narratives, outside of entries that featured story modes for ”Other” characters, such as his role in Lu Bu's Musou mode in *Dynasty Warriors 6,* or even Zhang Jiao himself, as in *Dynasty Warriors 5*. The battle of Chi Bi has not only been a central narrative point throughout the entire series, with Huang Gai's fire attack against Cao Cao's navy consistently being a major cutscene despite Huang Gai's relatively minor role throughout the rest of the games' stories. While acting as a protagonist if the player played as Wu or Shu in that level, Wei players would have seen Huang Gai as an antagonist here that ultimately stopped Wei's meteoric growth until then. In many of Lu Bu's Musou/Story playthroughs, the player inhabited the role of a pugnacious protagonist that sought to make an antagonist of any challengers.[56] As such, a player's particular allegiance to one of the factions during a given playthrough largely determined which characters served as protagonists and antagonists for that given playthrough.

Despite this and other examples of fluid character centrality, the game series certainly had a pair of unofficial main characters evident even outside gameplay. Zhao Yun, the virtuous and stalwart cavalry commander of Liu Bei, has been consistently featured with spear and shining armor on box art as a central figure, as in *Dynasty Warriors 5* (see Fig. 1). In the most

[56] In Lu Bu's *Dynasty Warriors 6* Musou Mode, final levels focus on battling almost the entire cast as they see Lu Bu as an existential threat to all, leading to characters that would otherwise be enemies in the narrative (e.g., Dong Zhou and Yuan Shao, Liu Bei and Cao Cao) to form an alliance. Thus, Lu Bu's level progression here demonstrated how Dynasty Warriors characters can inhabit the role of player protagonist and narrative antagonist, simultaneously.

recent entries, in fact, Zhao Yun was the lone figure representing the main series games, as in *Dynasty Warriors 6*, *Dynasty Warriors 7*, and *Dynasty Warriors 8* (see Fig. 1-4).

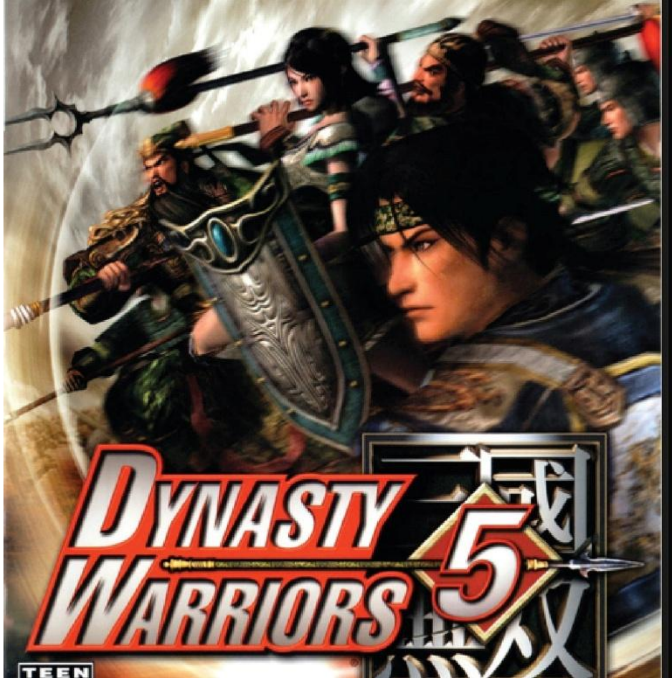

Fig. 1[57]

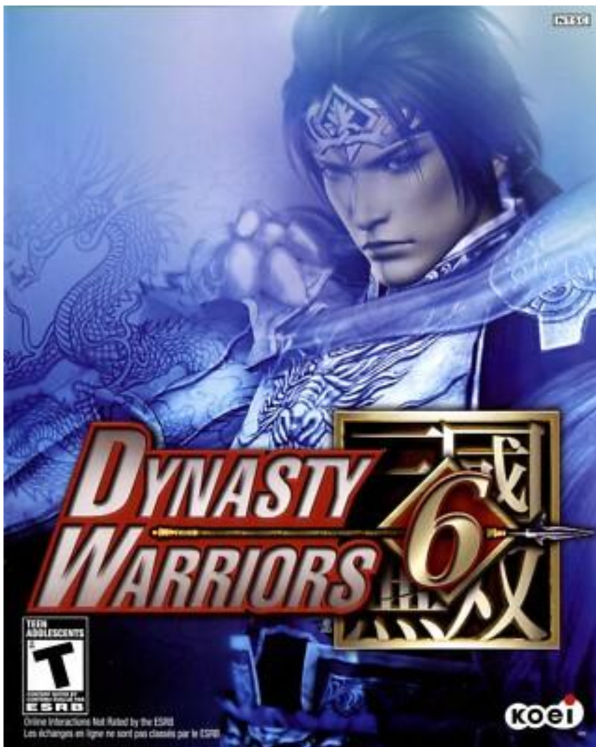

Fig. 2[58]

[57]Fig. 1, "Dynasty Warriors 5," box art, by Omega Force, published by Koei Co., Ltd, Burlingame, CA, March 29, 2005, https://koei.fandom.com/wiki/Dynasty_Warriors_5.

[58] Fig. 2, "Dynasty Warriors 6", box art, by Omega Force, published by Koei Co., Ltd., Burlingame, CA, February 19, 2008, https://koei.fandom.com/wiki/Dynasty_Warriors_6.

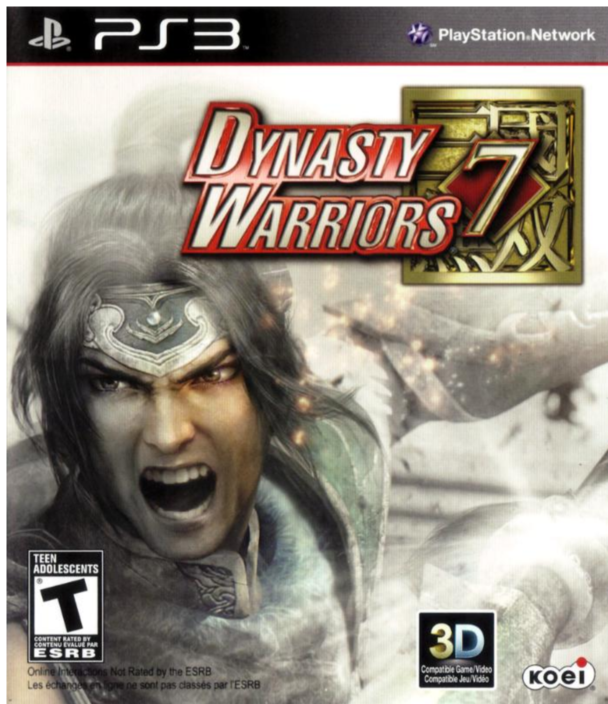

Fig. 3[59]

[59] Fig. 3, “Dynasty Warriors 7”, box art, by Omega Force, published by Koei Tecmo Co., Ltd., Burlingame, CA, March 29, 2011, https://koei.fandom.com/wiki/Dynasty_Warriors_7.

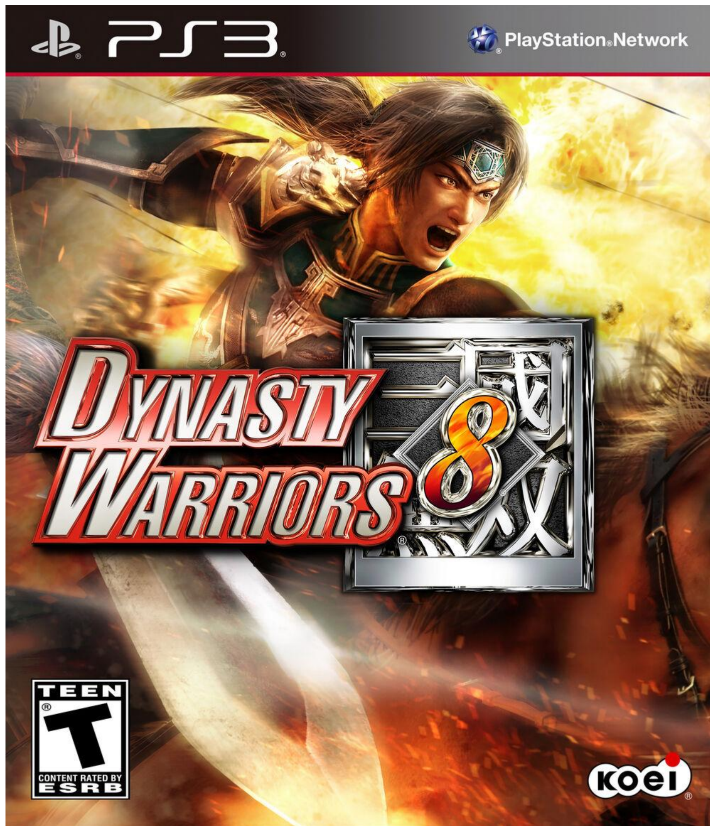


Fig. 4[60]

Along with this obvious favoritism in presentation, Zhao Yun's character has essentially been that of a white knight. Generally, Zhao Yun was portrayed as loyal and pure-hearted, drawn to service under Liu Bei not for ambition or reward but for the benevolence and purity of purpose that defines Liu Bei's character arc. Specifically, Zhao Yun was a principal character in Liu Bei's rescue at the Battle of Chang Ban throughout the series, even rescuing Liu Bei's infant son who was left behind mid-retreat, across the series. Furthermore, with Zhang Fei and Guan

[60] Fig. 4, "Dynasty Warriors 8", box art, by Omega Force, published by Koei Tecmo Co., Ltd., Burlingame, CA, March 28, 2013, https://koei.fandom.com/wiki/Dynasty_Warriors_8.

Yu's death sending Liu Bei into a rage against Wu, Zhao Yun (along with Zhuge Liang) was featured as a voice of reason, urging Liu Bei to be cautious and restrained in his response.[61] Between this role as box art poster boy and moral advisor to a character known in the series for a strict adherence to morality and benevolence, Zhao Yun was a fitting choice of pseudo-series protagonist for a grand military epic.

This kind of chivalric character fits naturally into a pseudo-series protagonist role almost as well as its inverse. This was the character Lu Bu, oft clad in black armor and acting as a soft gameplay barrier and optional boss character for players across the series' various entries. Whereas Zhao Yun was a white knight, ever-riding their noble steed into battle, Lu Bu simply scours battlefields for challenging combat atop his large, sometimes demonic-looking horse, regardless of who he might betray in such pursuit. While dying relatively early in the series' narrative (before the Three Kingdoms even emerged as such), Lu Bu was a defining presence throughout early game levels as an NPC meant to be avoided until higher levels. This can be most immediately seen on various box art featuring Lu Bu as the central, if not sole, figure, similar to Zhao Yun (see figures 5 and 6).

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[61] Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 7 – Shu Story – All Cutscenes", from *Dynasty Warriors 7*, released March 29, 2011, uploaded by Project Raw, YouTube, May 22, 2018, last accessed July 17, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGOU49yzK4s&t=3672s.

Fig. 5[62]

[62] Fig. 5, “Dynasty Warriors 3”, box art, by Omega Force, published by Koei Co., Ltd., Burlingame, CA, November 26, 2001, https://koei.fandom.com/wiki/Dynasty_Warriors_3.

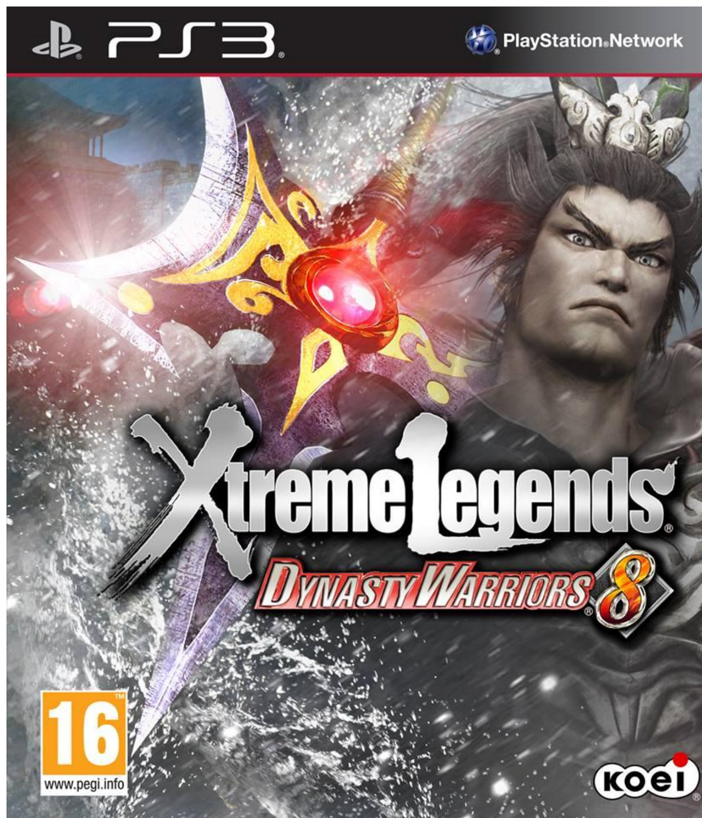


Fig. 6[63]

This trend, while less frequent, paralleled Zhao Yun's own role as a box art mascot, reinforcing his parallel role to *Dynasty Warriors* pseudo-protagonist. This parallel was best demonstrated in the opening cutscene to *Dynasty Warriors 6*, in which both Zhao Yun and Lu Bu conducted superhuman feats and clashed together. Therein, while Zhao Yun fittingly takes the bulk of focus (as a protagonist), Lu Bu appears suddenly to thwart Zhao Yun's advance as an

[63] Fig. 6, "Dynasty Warriors 8: Xtreme Legends", box art, by Omega Force, published by Koei Tecmo Co., Ltd., Burlingame, CA, March 25, 2014, https://koei.fandom.com/wiki/Dynasty_Warriors_8:_Xtreme_Legends.

equal yet opposite force.[64] Whenever Lu Bu appeared on the battlefield, it was traditionally signaled with a cutscene demonstrating this warrior's daunting martial prowess and radiating menace. The best example of this dread-laden entrance was in *Dynasty Warriors 6*, in which Lu Bu seemingly falls from the sky astride the massive horse Red Hare, displacing foot soldiers into the air, and ends with a slow zoom on Lu Bu's silent stare.[65] This and such cutscenes, featuring the obligatory random NPC shouting in horror, "its Lu Bu!", these cutscenes were often followed by major named NPCs urging the player to avoid Lu Bu at all costs. In this way, Lu Bu often appeared as an optional boss, either at a much higher level than the player's character is (or at least expected to be) or otherwise doing higher damage and taking more damage than other NPCs in the given level. This not only inherently placed Lu Bu as a notable antagonist in any single main series game in which he appeared, but across the whole series as a recurring optional boss. This role as a pseudo-antagonist was reinforced throughout the narrative, with Lu Bu as being a warlord who ultimately betrayed every lord he served under, from the tyrannical Dong Zhou to the compassionate Liu Bei. In a setting which loyal, principled characters such as Zhao Yun were respected, Lu Bu stood as a constant foil that both rejected the heroic nature of *Dynasty Warriors* while simultaneously exemplifying the grand presentation that has helped maintain the series' recognizability.

Despite the constancy of many of these game functions and characters implied, a decades-spanning series like *Dynasty Warriors* flagship series naturally underwent several thematic and design changes. The most obvious change was the increasing graphic quality over

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[64] Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 6 all cutscenes – for the PlayStation 2", from *Dynasty Warriors 6*, released February 19, 2008, uploaded by Pantsi's Random Video Games, YouTube, July 16, 2023, 0:00-1:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuyHXjx-4aU&t=1s.
[65] Omega Force, "I...it's...It's LU BU!", from *Dynasty Warriors 6*, released February 19, 2008, uploaded by noX, YouTube, February 9, 2011, last accessed July 18, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0y6sYQiIp0.

the course of the series, with both software and hardware advances in video game technology allowed greater design details, from the levels' maps and settings to the characters that inhabited them. In essence, such technological developments enabled Omega Force to lean further into the stylized, unique characters designs for which the series has been known. While certainly adding more variety across entries, *Dynasty Warriors* developers still maintained core elements of each character's designs to maintain recognizability. Referring back to Fig. 1-4 above, one can see how Zhao Yun's changed slightly between entries, though not to the point of confusion or declining recognition. Similar to the relatively consistent gameplay model, these changing character designs reflected Omega Force's goal of releasing new games that innovated on previous entries without fully losing their grounding in the franchise. This development objective was likewise evident in the changes between the narrative model across each entry. At times, games like *Dynasty Warriors 5* focused on a Musou mode that emphasized historical accuracy over the player's ability to reshape the story based on their own actions. At other times, such as *Dynasty Warriors 8* and its various "what if" storylines, player choice has a fundamental impact on the narrative by potentially enabling access to new levels that impactfully change the narrative outcome. This limited narrative syncopation was mirrored in the various character designs that changed across each title. While the base characters remained the same, each character's design often changed, at least slightly. Series staple characters were often least impacted by these changes. For example, Zhao Yun's design stayed true to his white knight motif; Lu Bu's antennae-like feather headdress remained an iconic part of his design throughout the series; the boisterous Zhang Jiao has always had distinct hair, saffron robes, and magical staff in hand. Even in *Dynasty Warriors 6*, in which main series character designs were relatively stylized compared to previous entries, this often fell into the camp of showing more a character's

hair (e.g., Sun Jian, Ma Chao, or Guan Yu) or simply changing their primary weapon (e.g., Sun Ce, Zhou Yu, or Zhang Liao). In essence, while changing character designs had been present throughout *Dynasty Warriors*, such were used more to freshen up familiar designs rather than complete design overhauls. These narrative and character design fluctuations, however, constituted relatively minor, even expected, changes within the series.

### b. Major Changes in *Dynasty Warriors* Series

The most significant changes across the *Dynasty Warriors* games were directly tied to Koei/Koei Tecmo's localization practices. Specifically, the tone and performance of scripted cutscenes, along with the voice-acting that underpinned such, dramatically changed between *Dynasty Warriors 4* and *Dynasty Warriors 8*. The most immediately apparent expression of such changes was in the graphical and dubbing quality of cutscenes. In the fourth game, the total duration of its cutscenes, collectively, was roughly an hour long.[66] The same was true for the next entry, *Dynasty Warriors 5*, with its total cutscene length slightly under an hour long.[67] However, *Dynasty Warriors 6* was a turning point in Omega Force's use of cutscenes. That is, the total cutscene length for this entry was as large as the previous two entries cutscene length combined, at almost two hours long.[68] *Dynasty Warriors 7* marked the zenith of this trend, as not only were there so many cutscenes that YouTube uploaders often subdivided cutscenes videos by

[66] Omega Force, "All Dynasty Warriors 4 Cutscenes," from *Dynasty Warriors 4*, released March 25, 2003, uploaded by PseyechoSamurai, YouTube, April 4, 2020, last accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV6MZ-VT6Ko.
[67] Omega Force, "DYNASTY WARRIORS 5 MOVIE: All cutscenes", from *Dynasty Warriors 5*, released April 1, 2005, uploaded by Jay Plays Archive, YouTube, April 1, 2022, last accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELv3L0Uy11E&t=2810s.
[68] Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 6 all cutscenes – for the PlayStation 2," www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuyHXjx-4aU&t=1s.

faction, but such videos totaled to almost five hours of cutscenes.[69] While *Dynasty Warriors 8*'s total cutscene length descended to roughly three and a half hours, this still dwarfed the early entries in the list and ultimately affirmed the series' move towards a more cinematic gameplay experience.[70]

This shift in design focus was likewise apparent in the quality of lip-syncing across these selected entries. Specifically, desynchronization of characters' animated mouth movements (designed for Japanese language voice acting) and their English dubbed voice lines was commonplace early in the franchise's history. An example of this was Cao Cao's "Hero of Chaos" cutscene in *Dynasty Warriors 4* that, while focused on establishing this central character via dialogue, had multiple mouth flap desynchronizations that ultimately detracted from the scene's serious tone.[71] Furthering this trend of the early entries' dubbing minimizing their serious tone was evident in how certain characters' names were pronounced. For example, Cao Cao's name (correctly pronounced as "Saow Saow") was pronounced as "Cow Cow" in the main series' English localizations until *Dynasty Warriors 6*. However, as the series developed, such localization errors became much less frequent, or at least noticeable. Trends like dynamic camera movement and angles that kept mouth flaps out of frame, greater use of action within cutscenes, and greater quality English dubbing all contributed to this shift. This increase in dubbing quality

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[69] Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 7 Cutscenes," from *Dynasty Warriors 7*, released March 29, 2011, uploaded by Project Raw, YouTube, April 6, 2018 through June 15, 2018, last accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9u10q24F-g&list=PLuEWNtfbIL-jSDEDsbUHcG7P7KkPfoOBS&index=1.
[70] Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 8 (English) All Events (Historical and Hypothetical) Cutscenes HD," from Dynasty Warriors 8, released July 16, 2013, uploaded by Tealhollow1 Clips, YouTube, August 5, 2013, last accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGk0Dgimoi0.
[71] Omega Force, "All Dynasty Warriors 4 Cutscenes," 2:09-3:11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV6MZ-VT6Ko.

was, at least partially, tied to the gradually greater use of English voice actors in the localization process (see Table 1).[72]

Table 1.

| Game Title | Total Credited Voice Actors | Total Credited Voice Actors w/ Multiple Roles |
|---|---|---|
| *Dynasty Warriors 4* | 26 | 12 |
| *Dynasty Warriors 5* | 48 | 13 |
| *Dynasty Warriors 6* | 43 | 9 |
| *Dynasty Warriors 7* | 65 | 9 |
| *Dynasty Warriors 8* | 83 | 12 |

The number of English-speaking voice actors used in the main series games tripled over the course of a decade, which itself was evident of greater focus on English localization. While the number of English-speaking voice actors performing multiple roles remained relatively constant, this can be explained by certain voice actors retaining roles established early in the

[72] The figures provided below were not derived directly from end-game credits of these video games, but rather from a cross-examination of multiple online databases, including GameFAQs, IMDb, and Behind the Voice Actors. In lieu of direct access to the video games themselves, along with videos of these credit sequences being either non-existent or undetected in internet search results, these were the most objective sources available in this study. Whether or not this lack of internet presence is tied to either uploaders' disinterest, fans/viewers' disinterest, or both, direct access to these games would be necessary to further (or detract) the objectivity of the findings presented here in future research/studies.

series. In essence, the more iconic the voice performance early in the series, the more likely such actors would return to reprise their roles. The best example of this was the case of American voice actor Beau Billingslea, whose consistent performance as the characters Dian Wei and Cao Ren (with Dian Wei known for their particularly raspy voice) transcended the main series by reprising these roles in other franchises within Koei/Koei Tecmo's repertoire, such as *Warriors Orochi* or *Dynasty Warriors Strikeforce*.[73] This trend, along with the aforementioned major changes, ultimately laid the groundwork for another major change that not only reflected greater global interest in the series but further changed the entire tone of the series itself.

Specifically, between *Dynasty Warriors 4* and *Dynasty Warriors 8*, the games shifted from a more cartoonish tone and noticeably foreign presentation to become more serious and less noticeably localized, most evident through the various entries' various cutscenes. Outside certain characters whose cartoonish-ness was central to their identity, such as Meng Huo or Zhang Jiao, most of the characters (playable and otherwise) conformed to this shift towards melodrama. This shift towards the serious was gradually reinforced throughout the series entries selected here, as increasing English localization efforts made the desynced mouth flaps and silly voice acting less commonplace in later entries. This included even the resolute and very serious Zhao Yun in *Dynasty Warriors 4*, particularly in the cutscene, "War and Sacrifice". While this title lent an air of seriousness, this was ultimately undercut by the moment in which Zhao Yun, charging an enemy line on horseback, sees a child soldier and, instead of running them through as with the previous enemies in the scene, unceremoniously and abruptly bashes the child in the face with

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[73] "Beau Billingslea," Voice Actors, Behind the Voice Actors, last accessed July 23, 2025, https://www.behindthevoiceactors.com/Beau-Billingslea/.

the butt of his spear.[74] While intended as a serious scene, this element of humor (intentional or otherwise) highlighted the overall tone of *Dynasty Warriors 4*. This trend was naturally even more apparent with the sillier characters, as evident in the scene "Way of Peace", in which Zhang Jiao sought to reassure his followers of his divine power not only by correctly prophesying the approach of enemy forces but also creating a ball of light that transforms into a tornado, all the while standing with arms outstretched overlooking a cliff.[75] Alongside this was Zhang Jiao's typical sermon-like tone and the humorously stilted voice acting of the onlookers in the cutscene, these traits highlighted the silliness both in the game itself as well as that added by the English dubbing. This pattern of serious scenes subverted by humor continued into the following entry, *Dynasty Warriors 5*. For example, one cutscene featuring Guan Yu and Zhang Fei celebrating a recent Shu victory, a seemingly celebratory but serious scene. However, Crispin Freeman's voice performance as Guan Yu was discordantly rough, responding to Zhang Fei's jubilant pronouncement of the nearing total victory of Shu with a growling, labored intensity that both contradicted the tone of the scene while simultaneously adding a comedic element to the cutscene.[76] Furthermore, Zhang Jiao reprised their role as the incarnation of the game's tone, delivering a silly soliloquy, with voice actor Doug Stone's delivery, reminiscent of a Charismatic preacher, along with the over-the-top character animations made before English localization.[77] This combination of Japanese aesthetics, Chinese character and setting, and American dialogue demonstrated how localization can produce a composite cultural odor unique to the localized

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[74] Omega Force, "All Dynasty Warriors 4 Cutscenes," 11:32-12:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV6MZ-VT6Ko.
[75] Omega Force, "All Dynasty Warriors 4 Cutscenes," 16:07-17:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV6MZ-VT6Ko.
[76] Omega Force, "DYNASTY WARRIORS 5 MOVIE: All cutscenes", 37:04-37:38, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELv3L0Uy11E&t=2s.
[77] Omega Force, "DYNASTY WARRIORS 5 MOVIE: All cutscenes", 22:44-23:27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELv3L0Uy11E&t=2s.

game version. Considering the tendency for English voice actors to be instructed to add humor and improvisations to when dubbing Japanese-language cultural products, such injection of humor was an example of not only how localized video games functioned as a negotiation between the product itself and English localizers, but how such dubbing could provide cultural appeal (e.g., humor) not necessarily evident in the original game.

Regardless of the level of this appeal, *Dynasty Warriors 6* would mark a turning point in the series. Character designs demonstrably deviated from previous entries. Characters' armor, weapons, and overall design became much more stylized, showing greater similarity to concurrent anime and video games than the established character designs within the series. The game's opening cinematic (referenced earlier in discussing the dichotomy between Lu Bu and Zhao Yun) demonstrated not only these distinct character designs but how such grandiosity permeated the game's cinematics as well. With the game's English dubbing and mouth flap synchronization having improved to the point of becoming barely noticeable, the series cartoonish mood remained but lost a previously apparent element of localization. Ultimately, this served to make the game less distinct than other games within the American marketplace by removing an element of the game's cultural odor. Whereas such over-the-top had before been the result of English voice actors' deliberate performance, *Dynasty Warriors 6* shifted its core from the game's audio and to its visuals. Over-the-top action sequences, such as Huang Gai's surprise fire attack on Cao Cao's fleet at Chi Bi, replaced dialogue-focused cutscenes as the norm.[78] This shift was less due to any outcry against the characteristically, and intentionally, humorous dialogue than software and hardware developments (including the release of then next-

[78]Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 6 all cutscenes – for the PlayStation 2," 1:23:30-1:24:32, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuyHXjx-4aU&t=1s.

generation consoles, the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360) that enabled Omega Force to put more time and detail into dynamic and graphically impressive cutscenes.

*Dynasty Warriors 7* furthered this trend of emphasizing visuals over audio. Furthermore, Omega Force evolved this trend by injecting cutscenes with a significantly more dramatic tone. Utilizing techniques commonplace in film and television, such as dramatic lighting and close-up angles, these games marked the series' turn from cartoonish to melodramatic. Whereas the previous entry showcased the graphical progress of the series, *Dynasty Warriors 7* likewise showcased the narrative progress of the series. This, of course, was less of a repudiation of previous entries' cutscenes than an embrace of the new, technical capabilities of the development studio itself. One of the better examples of this was the cutscene that depicted Liu Bei's reaction to the tandem deaths of his sworn brothers, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. Not only was the video quality on par with what might expect from a concurrent anime, but it also exuded a similar level of drama reminiscent of a Hollywood tearjerker. Liu Bei's trembles and shocked face upon hearing the news of both brothers' deaths back-to-back, the dour expressions and pleads of restraint from Zhuge Liang and Zhao Yun, the muffled tears of Sun Shang Xiang, to Liu Bei's scream of anguish, paired with a dramatic zoom out, perfectly encapsulated this tone shift within the series.[79] Another example of this dramatic divergence was in the cutscene depicting Cao Cao's nightmare following his defeat at the battle of Chi Bi. In this sequence, Cao Cao relived not only this defeat but previous losses as well, including Dian Wei's fatally violent self-sacrifice that ultimately saved Cao Cao's life earlier in the game.[80] This scene significantly humanized

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[79] Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 7 - Shu Story – All Cutscenes," from *Dynasty Warriors 7*, released March 29, 2011, uploaded by Project Raw, YouTube, May 22, 2018, last accessed July 24, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGOU49yzK4s&list=PLuEWNtfbIL-jSDEDsbUHcG7P7KkPfoOBS&index=3.
[80] Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 7 – Wei Story – All Cutscenes," from *Dynasty Warriors 8*, released July 16, 2013, uploaded by Project Raw, YouTube, April 6, 2018, last accessed July 24, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjCZItu4ASI&list=PLuEWNtfbIL-jSDEDsbUHcG7P7KkPfoOBS&index=3.

Cao Cao, previously presented throughout the series as a cold, ambitious conqueror, through a narrative cutscene that highlighted the series' move towards a more dramatic and serious narrative presentation.

Omega Force further evolved this trend in *Dynasty Warriors 8* by more deeply intertwining such dramatic cutscenes within gameplay. Specifically, Omega Force rooted these cutscenes more firmly in the action that defined the majority of gameplay by incorporating more action sequences within the cutscenes and making much more cutscenes transition seamlessly into gameplay. Whereas previous entries featured cutscenes before, during, and immediately after completing a level, these were often either immediately followed by a blank screen, a preparation screen that allowed the player to customize their character's weapons and items, or simply back to a level selection screen. For example, the cutscene in which Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei struggle to fight series' pseudo-antagonist Lu Bu until Zhao Yun joins the fray and rallies his three allies here transitioned back into the gameplay with a simple change of camera perspective that made the cutscene feel less like an interruption than a set-up for a boss fight.[81] The fact that this cutscene also presented Zhao Yun as jumping in front of his allies to face Lu Bu and giving a brief but rallying speech, with Lu Bu as unfazed by this arrival as when easily defending against the sworn brothers' attacks, further reinforced the parallel between Zhao Yun and Lu Bu as pseudo-principal characters. Even with this turn towards integrating action within cinematic moments, Omega Force even took its dramatic content to a realm beyond the intense, but grounded, tone of the previous main series entry. Specifically, Guan Yu's death scene at the end of the Wei Story Mode historical route featured not only Guan Yu dying while

[81] Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 8 (English) All Events (Historical and Hypothetical) Cutscenes HD", 5:03-6:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGk0Dgimoi0&t=13s.

still standing (a common motif across *Dynasty Warriors* games) but even depicting a pillar of light shooting skyward from his body and into the sky while characters look on in shocked reverence.[82] While the franchise had mystical or spiritual elements punctuating each game, especially with characters such as Zhuge Liang or Zhang Jiao, incorporation of such ethereal themes into the story of one of the more metaphysically grounded characters was certainly an evolution. As such, *Dynasty Warriors 8* was a combination of *Dynasty Warriors 4* and *5*'s over-the-top presentation with *Dynasty Warriors 6* and *7*'s more dramatic, serious tone.

## VI: Localization as Acculturation

The first goal of localization is to make a game more accessible to a new audience. Usually, in the American gaming context, this is focused on translating the game into English. In this process, either independent or internal localizers directly translate the game's dialogue and narrative from the original version. While this difficulty varies across game titles, games with more text to translate are inherently more susceptible to translation issues, especially when considering the notoriously lax American localizers. While this is most commonly attributed to narrative-driven and dialogue-laden Japanese Role-Playing Games (JRPGs, as commonly called in the West), such errors are not limited to this genre in particular.[83] Relative to a genre that typically emphasizes gameplay over narrative, the *Dynasty Warriors* series itself increasingly featured dramatic scenes and dialogue, along with growing character rosters and branching paths that add even more text for localizers to translate. Beyond the text, English localizers and voice actors must also then adapt the translated dialogue for the pre-made animations and cutscenes. As to be explored later in this text, this adds another layer of potential error as localizers and

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[82] Omega Force, "Dynasty Warriors 8 (English) All Events (Historical and Hypothetical) Cutscenes HD", 2:27:41-2:28:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGk0Dgimoi0&t=13s.
[83] Rachel Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games* (Routledge, 2019), 114.

voice actors must now sync up English dialogue to animation designed and paced for Japanese. However, the matching of English dialogue to Japanese mouth animations can be as much as source of entertainment, similar to the sometimes humorous dubbing seen in other localized media.

Aside from translating the text itself, localizers also negotiate what elements of foreign cultures to keep in the American versions of video games. This can span the width of Japanese culture, changing everything from names of foods to names of characters to make them more recognizable to American audiences. In the case of *Dynasty Warriors*, a Japanese game series based on a seminal period of Chinese history, localizers are tasked with making a distinctly East Asian game more familiar to American audiences. However, localizers possess even more wiggle room in adaptation, as the American fascination with Japanese popular culture has grown over the past half-century and thus made Japanese culture more recognizable. Historian Koichi Iwabuchi recognized this trend when analyzing the positive reception towards localized Japanese television in Taiwan. In *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Iwabuchi asserted that it was the very fact that these shows were apparently Japanese, or possessing a distinctly Japanese "cultural odor", that helped make them more accepted within Taiwanese popular culture.[84] Essentially, cultural odor pertains to the ways in which a particular product is positively, though often stereotypically, associated with the culture of its country of origin; while almost any product could potentially convey a connection to a particular culture, Iwabuchi pointed out consumer electronics, manga, animation, and video games as the leading carriers of Japanese cultural odor globally.[85] As such, the *Dynasty*

[84] Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 23.
[85] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 27.

*Warriors* series' inherent appeal of immersion in a mythologized, dramatic period in Chinese history exuded a cultural odor not only distinct from other hack-and-slash games but also in a category of cultural products already deeply associated with Japan.

Even while maintaining this level of immersion, localizers are pressured to maintain the general experience associated with the game. This is done not only for the sake of accurate translation, but even more importantly to make a product that consumers recognize on store shelves and in gameplay. This does not mean, however, that an accurate translation of the game has been a low priority for localization teams. In fact, one of localizers' central concerns has been translating dialogue and cutscenes as accurately to the source material as possible. Despite this translative limit set by publishers, there has still been a conscious effort to remove as much cultural odor as possible within that limit. Furthermore, more hardcore Western fans of Japanese games have often been at odds with such removal, with the desire for the most identical experience to the original game often trumping any cultural unfamiliarity within this subset of fans.[86] Thus, localizers are incentivized, especially as fanbases grow and acquire new hardcore subgroups, to maintain enough of the original cultural objects and/or allusions to, at the very least, keep the games recognizable to their original form. For example, one of the items found throughout the *Dynasty Warriors* series, Dim Sum, a plate of dumplings that (in the games' context) heals the player character from any damage suffered by that point in gameplay. Americans may very well be familiar with dumplings, even if not in that exact form, and thus localizers could easily translate them as "dumplings" in the English version. The decision not to do this was informed not only by the longevity of the item within the series (thus turning a translation of a minor item into a major change) but also by the fact that Dim Sum was less

[86] Mia Consalvo, *Atari to* Zelda, 129.

familiar. More precisely, the alien name of the item was congruent with the somewhat alien setting of the series, relative to Western audiences. Likely more noticeable than this was keeping the characters names in the order they would appear in Chinese or Japanese (surname first, followed by given name). Though the Western name order would not make the characters of *Dynasty Warriors* more recognizable, especially in the case of minor/generic characters, maintaining the name order not only satisfies fans' calls for authentic localizations but also inherently reinforced the uniqueness of the characters (again, relative to Western naming conventions) that fit with the overall cultural odor of the series.

While such an odor might not appear aromatic to all, the fact that such an odor was detectable was significant. That is, the exposure of a relatively lesser-known cultural marker such as Dim Sum belies the international connections and infrastructure that has grown to facilitate such exposure. As William Tsutsui argued, globalization is a decentralized cooperation between various firms, of various nationalities, that produce cultural products based on one but influenced by all.[87] Considering these localizations of the *Dynasty Warriors* games were based on a Japanese game series, based on a Chinese classical epic, and still translated for an English-speaking audience, they have embodied this sense of decentralized cultural dissemination. This was but one example, however. Even outside of video games, Japan has seen its popular culture explode on the global scene in recent decades. While the impact has varied between regions and countries, Iwabuchi observed that localizations of Japanese popular culture take advantage of the historical trend of globalization and closer transnational ties.[88] While Iwabuchi here was basing his claim on the analysis of, primarily, Japanese television, many of the same infrastructure and

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[87] Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, "Conclusion".
[88] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 202.

international ties required for global dissemination (publishing, licensing, localizing, dubbing, etc.) have also been required for video games themselves.[89] Furthermore, Iwabuchi observed that Japan's shift towards exporting popular culture, beginning in the 1990s, not only commercially benefitted the publishers directly, but was also the root of successful Japanese globalization overall.[90] In the specific case of the United States, Japanese games receive the lion's share of localization. Even while considering the value of Japanese cultural odor, American localizers frequently adapted character names, dialogue, and even graphics to better suit the American marketplace, as they saw it.[91] While Koei Tecmo has used an internal localization team and thus more insulated from such trends, this trend demonstrated the active role localizers take in shaping the English versions of Japanese video games published in the United States. As such, video game localizations inherently initiate (or extend) acculturation, with the localizers themselves acting as direct agents of decentralized globalization in producing simultaneously unfamiliar and familiar cultural products.

It was this very agency, in fact, that enabled the longevity of the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise within American gaming culture. For one, Koei Tecmo's localization team leaned into the trope of poor American dubbing of Japanese video games. While very likely breaking immersion, *Dynasty Warriors 3*, *Dynasty Warriors 4*, and *Dynasty Warriors 5* frequently featured both desynchronized mouth animations (i.e., mouth animations not lining up with English dubbing) and silly, over-the-top voice acting that played into the established trend of exaggerating/improvising voice lines for comedic effect. While somewhat jarring in a game with

[89] Sean Foley, personal communication, July 3, 2025.
[90] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 20.
[91] Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization,* "4. Lost in Translation? Adapting Japanese Popular Culture for Global Audiences".

a serious tone and setting, the *Dynasty Warriors* boasted neither, with the melodramatic mood of *Dynasty Warriors 7* as a series outlier. In games built around bombastic action, outlandish characters, and epic narratives, cartoonish voice acting and silly animation synchronizations were less of a bug than a feature. This phenomenon has not been unique to this particular series, either. Historian Rachel Hutchinson pointed out a similar appeal to the outlandish and alien in their book *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, specifically in their section on the quirky Japanese game series *Katamari*. In this section, Hutchinson used the series entry *Katamari Damacy* as a case study in how Japanese video games presented Japanese culture to both local and international audiences.[92] Specifically, Hutchinson highlighted how the unique, otherworldly setting, characters, and narrative of *Katamari* not only helped identify the game as quintessentially Japanese in cultural odor, but that mix of quirks and cultural recognition facilitated the series, and Japanese games in general, popularity globally.[93] While the aesthetics are certainly distinct, with *Dynasty Warriors* being much more grounded than the series based on an alien prince turning rolling a ball around to collect enough mass to make new planets (whether from sushi rolls or skyscrapers), the appeals have been similar. While *Dynasty Warriors* lacks *Katamari*'s bright colors and soundtrack, they have shared similar rosters of quirky characters and distinct cultural objects that enhance the cultural odor of the games.[94] Furthermore, while both have received mixed critical reception, both also have maintained consistent enough popularity within American gaming to financially justify continued American localizations.[95] Once again, the very things that distinguished these and other Japanese game series from typical American games have enhanced their popularity. With localization's role in

[92] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 22.
[93] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 30.
[94] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 22.
[95] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 23.

this trend understood, what precisely was localized over the course of the five entries selected for this study required further analysis.

## VII: *Dynasty Warriors* in American Gaming Culture

Regardless of the national origin and narrative/ludic trajectory of the *Dynasty Warriors* series, its continued presence in American gaming culture enabled its persistence as a piece of American culture. Localizers considered American cultural values and motifs when adapting a Japanese game for American gamers. American gamers, while still possibly enjoying the Chinese or Japanese cultural elements of the game, experienced a distinctly American version of the game. Thus, the resulting localized game existed, and continues to exist, as a product in American culture with heavy influence from distinct cultures.[96] While this appeal naturally varied across American gaming culture, including comparisons to more popular American game series such as *Halo*, the appeal remained. The reasons as to how and why still require analysis.

The most immediately apparent reason for the game's cultural resonance was simple: the gameplay itself is simple. Hack-and-slash games, fundamentally, ask only two things of players: to keep attacking enemies until the level is over, and to have fun doing it. This simplistic approach to gameplay not only enables ease of access but is also ideal for short, but potentially intense, bursts of gameplay. A single character's Musou/Story Mode playthrough could be completed in a few hours, allowing for a full narrative payoff with minimal time investment from the player. For even greater immediacy of gratification, a player can also replay single story levels in Free Mode, which vary in length but generally can be completed in a matter of minutes. While one could play for hours at a time, this level of accessibility has enabled gamers to simply

[96] Jacob Jernigan, text message to the author, July 10, 2025.

turn on their gaming device, jump straight into the action, and exit quickly if necessary. While many popular game genres often require hours of investment to start to see any ludic returns, especially in roleplaying games (RPGs) or grand strategy games, this was a more recent development in American gaming history. Even before *Dynasty Warriors* landed on American shores, American coin-operated arcade cabinets thrived on a business model of short bursts of engaging but accessible gameplay. According to gaming historian Yusuke Koyama, the arcade gaming era itself (1971-1983) was defined by short play times on games designed for quick, efficient bursts of entertainment, both due to technological limitations of the era as well as the coin-operated business model.[97] True enough, both handheld and home gaming consoles emerged in subsequent decades and fundamentally changed American gaming culture. However, the penchant for rapid-turnover gameplay did not evaporate so much as it lost its monopoly. The persistent localization of *Dynasty Warriors* games suggested, at least from the publisher's perspective, that such gameplay was not only still wanted but, in fact, still profitable. Such profit was likewise tied to the series' inherent appeal for new gamers and even non-gamers. To some degree, video games have often peddled power fantasies by enabling players to achieve feats and make actions otherwise inaccessible to the average person, whether as a superhero, super soldier, or true warrior of the Three Kingdoms.[98] While not invested with god-like powers, *Dynasty Warriors* players had access to such power fantasies through the series' characteristic one man army vs. nameless horde gameplay model. Not only did *Dynasty Warriors* provide such power fantasy, but also, as gaming journalist Levi Winslow pointed out, did so to an exceptional degree

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[97] Yusuke Koyama, *History of the Japanese Video Game Industry* (Springer Nature Singapore, 2023), 4, 7.

[98] This last moniker is in reference to a phrase uttered throughout the Dynasty Warriors franchise, presented in gameplay when the player exceeds 1000 enemies defeated within a single level, typically once the player defeats 3000 enemies. Such an achievement often required active effort on the part of the player, as levels can often be completed normally and easily without even hitting the 1000 enemies defeated threshold.

without requiring much gaming experience from the player.[99] This lack of required experience also enabled a particular facet of co-operative gaming: intergenerational play, or more simply family gaming. This ease of access enabled many future gamers to use *Dynasty Warriors* as an introduction to gaming overall. In this dynamic, a more veteran gamer can play with a younger family member in a way that not only serves as interpersonal bonding but can lay the groundwork for future ludic pursuits. Gaming journalist Richard Eisenbeis not only observed this dynamic personally with their own younger family members but also affirmed that *Dynasty Warriors* was "the perfect gateway drug to get someone into gaming".[100]

*Dynasty Warriors* was not only appealing to new and non-gamers, but also to American gaming culture in general. Specifically, through the contextual overlap with video games set in the American Old West. While a gun-like weapon would not be introduced until later into the series, *Dynasty Warriors* presented warriors of the Three Kingdoms in a similar vein as American Old West game protagonists. Players in both contexts were charged as a single warrior (or pair, in the case of co-op play) to face hordes of generic enemies, all in a hostile but ultimately tamable (and somewhat mythologized) environment. In the context of '70s-80s Western games, this warrior was a gunslinger, human but powerful, against waves of Native Americans in the wild, but not untamable, Old West.[101] In the context of *Dynasty Warriors*, this warrior could not only take on as many guises as there were characters available in a given game, but further offered multiple different hordes for the player to fight against as they endeavored to, ultimately, re-establish order in a chaotic and disunified China. Thus, *Dynasty Warriors* not only

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[99] Levi Winslow, "'Warriors' Games Rule, and That's a Hill I'll Totally Die On," *Kotaku*, August 31, 2023, https://kotaku.com/dynasty-samurai-warriors-musou-games-autism-family-bond-1850789397.
[100] Richard Eisenbeis, "Why *Dynasty Warriors* Games are Perfect for Non-Gamers," *Kotaku*, April 26, 2013, https://kotaku.com/why-dynasty-warriors-games-are-perfect-for-non-gamers-481823806.
[101] Wills, *Gamer Nation*, 67-8.

appealed to a fundamental trope within American gaming culture but evolved it beyond such Western video games and maintained popularity while Western games generally declined in popularity. Even considering the *Red Dead* series as an outlier in this trend, *Dynasty Warriors*'s and its own continued popularity within American gaming culture highlighted the persistent (if also intermittent) popularity of these very gameplay motifs themselves.[102]

Given the popularity of such motifs, it was not surprising that Omega Force found further commercial success in the U.S. as they developed the Warriors subgenre across multiple distinct franchises. To be precise, the success of the *Dynasty Warriors* series and its distinct approach to hack-and-slash gameplay resulted in the confluence of publisher and fan interest in creating new games based on this gameplay model. Ultimately, this would include spin-off series set in the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise, the creation of original games using the same gameplay model, and even licensed games that applied the gameplay model to other popular gaming IPs. Most directly, Koei/Koei Tecmo published the *Dynasty Warriors: Empires* and *Dynasty Warriors: Xtreme Legends* sub-series. Rather than fully standalone titles, each of these draw on each entry of main series games (e.g., *Dynasty Warriors 6: Empires*, *Dynasty Warriors 4: Xtreme Legends*) to provide a new gameplay focus with the same characters, settings, graphics, and basic gameplay mechanics. The *Empires* spin-offs lack a strict story mode but rather provided elements common in grand strategy games, such as diplomacy mechanics, resource/personnel development, and an emphasis on long-form play (i.e., hours to days spent on a single playthrough). In this series, players are tasked with either serving a warlord, or becoming one themselves, while they attempt to unite all of China's provinces under a single banner. In the completely opposite direction, the *Xtreme Legends* series leans into the main series' anime

[102] Wills, *Gamer Nation*, 81.

influences to deliver much more bombastic narratives than available in the main series, with later entries even adding new characters to the franchise. This series revolved around the action and fast-paced gameplay that undergird *Dynasty Warriors* as Omega Force frequently tweaked it. This included "Challenge Mode"s that require players complete specific objectives to complete the level (e.g., defeat as many enemies as possible before player character's health drops to zero), "Conquest Mode"s that simplified the *Empires* grand strategy format for quicker play, and "Legend Mode"s that allows for altered versions of previous games' levels as well as original levels not found in previous entries. While both of these subseries allowed offered more content for American fans of the franchise, *Empires* was particularly noteworthy for using grand strategy elements more common in PC gaming. Considering PC gaming has been particularly rare in Japan, with Japanese gamers historically preferring handheld consoles, and much more popular in the U.S., it seemed that Koei/Koei Tecmo did not design the series with Japanese audiences in mind.[103] Rather, the series was indicative of attempts to both expand the *Dynasty Warriors* IP, already popular within Japan, into foreign markets more familiar with grand strategy as well as fill a noticeable void in the Japanese gaming marketplace.

*Dynasty Warriors*'s success at home and abroad was sufficient for Koei/Koei Tecmo to create new IPs based on the series' hack-and-slash gameplay. Specifically, *Dynasty Warriors* served as the proof concept that gave the publisher confidence to release the *Samurai Warriors* and *Warriors Orochi* series. The *Samurai Warriors* series was a *Dynasty Warriors* analogue, set in the Warring States period of feudal Japan. Like *Dynasty Warriors* approach to Three Kingdoms China, *Samurai Warriors* drew on the historical context, characters, and narratives of

[103] Mark West, *The Japanification of Children's Popular Culture: From Godzilla to Miyazaki* (Scarecrow Press, 2009), 91.

this period in Japanese history to present a fast-paced but historically grounded experience. *Warriors Orochi* was a crossover series that not only featured characters and context from both *Dynasty Warriors* and *Samurai Warriors* but often added new characters from Chinese and Japanese mythology (e.g., Sun Wukong, Susano'o) for a more otherworldly experience than obtainable elsewhere in the Warriors subgenre. Both game series have offered American players the same appeals to history and action while shifting the context to Japan in way that not only refreshed fans burnout on the Three Kingdoms period but offered a distinctly Japanese cultural product. Considering the 2000s America undertook a new wave of interest in Japanese culture, especially through popular media like video games, it naturally followed that such a gateway to both Japanese gaming culture and history appealed to American gamers.

Even more appealing to American gamers, regardless of interest in Japanese history, were the Warriors games that utilized other popular Japanese IPs for their characters and settings. Drawing across popular media from anime to video games, Omega Force developed games based on the *Dynasty Warriors* gameplay model. These licensed IPs included *One Piece* (*Pirate Warriors*), *The Legend of Zelda* (*Hyrule Warriors*), *Gundam* (*Dynasty Warriors: Gundam*), and *Fire Emblem* (*Fire Emblem Warriors*). These were internationally established and acclaimed franchises before Koei/Koei Tecmo licensed them, allowing for the Warriors gameplay model to be popularized across a range of audiences. This trend had a threefold effect: it allowed veteran fans of *Dynasty Warriors* to experience the same gameplay with new context; it allowed veteran fans of the licensed franchises to experience familiar characters and settings but with a new mode  gameplay; finally, it allowed further exposure to gamers who were not previously fans of any of these franchises. Essentially, this allowed Koei/Koei Tecmo to supplement *Dynasty Warriors* gameplay model with globally popular IPs to the effect of further popularizing both.

Considering Japanese anime and Nintendo characters would have been more present in the American zeitgeist, especially those from *The Legend of Zelda*, than the relatively esoteric characters of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, this strategy was well-conceived. More relevantly, the willingness of other publishers to attach their already successful IPs to Omega Force's gameplay model spoke to the market viability and popularity of that very gameplay model. These licensed games showed Koei/Koei Tecmo was willing to utilize global perceptions and existing cultural consciousness to enhance the global popularity of the Warriors subgenre which they basically monopolized.

This was not the only realm in which Omega Force played into global cultural perceptions in the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise. The way the series has consistently depicted the indigenous Nanman characters, namely Meng Huo and Zhu Rong, repeated Orientalist tropes found elsewhere in Japanese, and American, gaming culture. Specifically, these and other minor characters from Southern China were depicted as loin-cloth clad barbarians that starkly clashed with the predominantly Han Chinese character roster and overall series aesthetic, beyond simply having darker skin pigmentation. Meng Huo, the boisterous and corpulent leader of the Nanman forces throughout the series, has been consistently depicted as a slow-witted, if endearing, brute. When he was not fighting with stylized gauntlets, Meng Huo would fight using giant mushrooms, trees, and pillars, seemingly pulled from thin air and often used in a clumsy but destructive manner. In a setting in which crossbows, siege works, and even sometimes guns were used as weapons, this technological-backwardness and intellectual simplicity of Meng Huo embodied, and ultimately reinforced, negative Orientalist stereotypes of indigenous populations that, historically, have been prevalent on both sides of the Pacific. This reductive presentation was also extended to Meng Huo's wife and queen-consort, Zhu Rong. Unlike Meng Huo,

though, Zhu Rong's character design was sexualized, often bikini-clad amidst armies of armor-clad foes with her emblematic boomerang. While sexualization of women was not uncommon in *Dynasty Warriors*, with characters such as Diao Chan and Lian Shi often designed around their physical appearance, Zhu Rong was consistently depicted with less clothing than other female characters. Furthermore, women in *Dynasty Warriors* have been narratively centered around their relationship with male characters, particularly with Sun Shang Xiang who goes from a seasoned warrior to simply Liu Bei's wife in the background over the course of the narrative, with Zhu Rong's entire character revolved around Meng Huo and supporting his reign as King of the Nanman. Whereas most of the cast was wrapped in a grand epic of imperial restoration and chivalric combat, Meng Huo and Zhu Rong were presented as somewhat of a sideshow, reduced to Orientalist stereotypes rather than fully fleshed out characters. This relegation was reinforced by the fact that these characters were exclusively featured in the "Other" category of characters that, while including series pseudo-antagonist Lu Bu, was mostly reserved for characters that have brief moments of relevance but no lasting significance within the games' narratives.

Such sexualization was not uncommon in Japanese video games, often lumped in with anime and manga in perpetuating stereotypes of Japanese popular culture being hypersexualized among Americans since the 1980s.[104] Aside from the more obscure dating simulators and visual novels, major Japanese IPs, including *Dynasty Warriors* here, have played into this very trend. For example, the *Metal Gear* series often engaged in Orientalist stereotypes by placing its combat/warfare in almost exclusively exotic, third-world locales while the global North remained largely untouched and out of sight.[105] Furthermore, the series entry *Metal Gear Solid*

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[104] Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization,* "1. Themes in Japanese Pop".
[105] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 229.

*V: The Phantom Pain* stirred significant controversy for its bikini-clad sniper Quiet, who became more powerful with the more of her skin she exposed, as American gamers chided such hyper-sexualization.[106] Orientalization and sexualization were also very prominent among Japanese fighting game franchises, which have historically depicted non-Japanese, including Americans, as emblems of national stereotypes. Chinese were often depicted as kung fu masters, Americans as heavyweight boxers or soldiers, and so on, in famous franchises such as *Street Fighter* and *Tekken*. Such stereotypes revealed the binary perception of the world Japan held in the 90s and beyond, often defining itself in contrast to its global neighbors, especially the militaristic United States.[107] In the case of fighting games, this trend was reinforced by the lack of overarching narratives, which in turn both incentivized narratively shallow characters and ultimately reinforced the same stereotypes such characters embodied.[108] The *SoulCalibur* series was often the poster child of this trend, from the hypersexualized Ivy Valentine or Taki's character designs rooted in their bustlines, to the less sexualized but more Orientalized Talim who often served as a stand-in for Southeast Asian culture collectively.[109] This trend has some transference to Omega Force's depiction of the Nanman in the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise, as not only were the Nanman campaigns depicted as side shows to the war between Shu, Wu, and Wei, but Meng Huo and Zhu Rong rarely received their own Musou/Story Mode within the main series. Thus, with brief roles in the story and gameplay itself, Omega Force thus applied Orientalist stereotypes in lieu of in-depth character development. Not only did this allow Omega Force, and other Japanese developers, to explore their own cultural identity relative to others, but their

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[106] Ryan Dinsdale, "8 Years Later, Metal Gear Solid 5's Quiet Actress Reflects on Sexualisation Debate," *IGN*, November 1, 2023, https://www.ign.com/articles/8-years-later-metal-gear-solid-5-quiet-actress-sexualisation-debate.
[107] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 70.
[108] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 71.
[109] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 234.

diffusion into the U.S. inadvertently provided American gamers with another avenue of defining their own cultural identity in the same manner, even with America's absence in gameplay or narrative.[110]

Despite this series of depictions of characters associated with the Other, from reductive to pejorative, not all Orientalist motifs were applied throughout the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise. Ironically, themes of mysticism and shamanism, which the global North has historically projected (or at least exaggerated) upon cultures within the global South, were presented relatively positively in this series. Characters such as Zhuge Liang, Zuo Ci, and Pang Tong were always ostensibly mystics with otherworldly abilities, in both the narrative and gameplay itself. Wielding sorcerous staffs, magical fans, and even floating talismans, these characters' use of magic were presented as simply weapons analogous to the more conventional weapons used by other characters. Furthermore, these mystics were outspoken devotees to Liu Bei, the most benevolent of the rulers presented throughout the series, often advising or chastising other characters using pathos and moral appeals. Even in the case of Zhang Jiao, a mystic-turned-populist-rebel with a monkish appearance and a Charismatic cadence consigned to the "Other" category of characters, followed this trend. Even as an early antagonist leading a rebellion against the Han, Zhang Jiao was anything from a humorous but dangerous wizard whose rebellion not only revealed the corruption of the Han but would be ultimately completed by Wei, which both absorbed the former rebels into their ranks afterwards as well as deposing the Han Emperor himself under Cao Pi. Even though much more bombastic than the other mystics in the game, Zhang Jiao's temperament was presented more as a point of humor and zeal rather than pejorative posturing—a misguided and silly but ultimately well-meaning figure. Thus, even the

[110] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 72.

antagonistic mystics were spared from Orientalist depiction, instead placed as moral voices in a setting rife with betrayals and competing ambitions of conquest.

## VIII: Conclusion

Between 2003 and 2013, the *Dynasty Warriors* franchise metamorphized right before American gamers' eyes. Starting off as a silly series with localization focused on humor and improvisation, *Dynasty Warriors* expanded localization efforts turned the series into one of grand narratives built on increasingly complex characters (aside from a few) and dynamic, dramatic cutscenes. In doing so, Omega Force transferred the series overt cultural odor from the silly, poorly dubbed media of yesteryear with the increasingly commonplace, and ever dramatic, anime and manga proliferating American popular culture to this very day. While the full impact of such changes requires further analysis, the fact English localization efforts expanded belied American gamers' growing interest in the franchise. From hiring more English voice actors to extending the scope and frequency of cutscenes, Koei/Koei Tecmo clearly endeavored to expand the franchise's fanbase beyond those already familiar with the themes, characters, and setting of *Dynasty Warriors*. This series not only offered some of the same appeals American gamers experienced in American video games, but it also but upon the growing American acceptance and appreciation of Japanese popular culture through integration of these anime-like traits. Even to those new or tangential to American gaming culture found the ease of access and immediacy of action characteristic of *Dynasty Warriors* as appealing. The various spin-off and licensed franchises Omega Force released spoke to the growing global appreciation for the Warriors subgenre overall.

All these facts spoke to the greater fact that *Dynasty Warriors* appealed to Americans beyond simple entertainment. Rather, *Dynasty Warriors* was a franchise that exposed Americans

to a grandiose narrative set in war-torn China, all through the lens of a Japanese video game. Conceived in China, raised in Japan, and then sent out into the world, this series highlighted the role video games can play in decentralized globalization and cultural dissemination. In this way, this video game franchise expanded America's game catalogue not only through this series but even through an entire genre centered around its distinct yet simple gameplay model. Though flawed, the early localizations in the series became a core facet of the series in the U.S., much in the same way as previous video game series and television spin-offs. As such, the *Dynasty Warriors* series revealed one avenue for understanding the cultural transfusion of Japanese video games in American pop culture, especially where sales figures remained dubious. Future studies of other localized game series remain necessary for understanding how localization impacts the popularity, both short-term and long-term, of Japanese video games among American gamers. Ultimately, the English versions of *Dynasty Warriors* proved themselves as not only a franchise spanning decades and the national borders, but also as a true localization of the Three Kingdoms epic.

# Chapter II:

# New Challengers:

# How Japanese Fighting Games Helped Professionalize American Esports

## I: Introduction

American sports and their surrounding subcultures are dynamic and responsive to changes in the overall national culture. Whether regarding the most minute rule changes or allowing entire races of people to enter the professional scene, sports culture has reflected the overall American zeitgeist. This phenomenon was observable not only in traditional sports but also in the emergent esports scene. In fact, esports exploded in the 2000s, becoming the fasting growing non-traditional sport within that decade.[111] No single American-based tournament series embodied this trend more so than the Evolution Championship Series (more often abbreviated to Evo). Evo started as a regional fighting game tournament operating out of arcades and college campus game rooms. Over the course of the 2000s, Evo evolved by filling convention centers, stadiums, and Las Vegas Strip hotels (See Fig. 7).[112] By 2024, Evo would not only continue its tenure as a leading esports competition but even become the single largest video game tournament series (a collection of tournaments that form a single, overall competition) in world history, with over 10,000 players competing from over 60 countries (See Fig. 8).[113] For comparison, the National Football League (NFL) has recorded 23,000 players between 1920 and 2014.[114] For further comparison, Major League Baseball, as well as the National League that

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[111] Lu Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 175-6.
[112] Jason Fanelli, "Evo 2024 Is Officially the Largest Esports Competition Ever", *GameSpot*, June 26, 2024, https://www.gamespot.com/articles/Evo-2024-is-officially-the-largest-esports-competition-ever/1100-6524526/.
[113] Jason Fanelli, "Evo 2024 Is Officially the Largest Esports Competition Ever".
[114] Jeff Nixon, "List of All Pro Football Players since 1920," SportsBlog, last accessed August 28, 2025, https://www.sportsblog.com/jeffnixon/list_of_all_pro_football-2/.

preceded it, estimated over 21,000 professional baseball players since 1876.[115] In essence, this single Evo event produced almost half as many players at single event than two iconic American professional sports across multiple centuries.

Ironically, the Evo has largely focused on Japanese video games, particularly from the fighting game genre.  Despite this meteoric rise of EVO within the past couple decades, and likely due to such recency, historians are yet to fully analyze its impact on the American esports landscape. In addressing this silence, this chapter was designed as a case study, with Evo as the subject, in how Japanese video game series, such as *Street Fighter, Tekken*, *Soul Calibur*, and *Super Smash Bros.*, helped to shape American esports. Specifically, this chapter asserts that Evo was the exemplar for this trend, with its emphasis on Japanese fighting games both influencing American gaming as well as American popular culture overall.

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[115] "Every Major League Baseball Player in History," Baseball Almanac, last accessed August 28, 2025, https://www.baseball-almanac.com/players/ballplayer.shtml.

Fig. 7[116]

[116] Ivan Simic, "Evo 2023 records 81% increase in total competitors compared to 2022", Esports Insider, August 9, 2023, https://esportsinsider.com/2023/08/Evo-2023-record-number-of-players.

Fig. 8[117]

Essentially, esports are "competitive tournaments of video games, especially among professional gamers."[118] While typically used to reference professional-level play, this also encompasses amateur and semi-professional play. This is distinct from casual competition, such as local co-op or online multiplayer. While such at-home play can still be quite competitive and challenging for players, such video game play is to esports as a pick-up basketball game is to the

[117] Evolution Championship Series Staff, in "Evo 2024 is the biggest video game tournament ever, as it passes 10,000 unique competitors", June 27, 2024, https://www.vg247.com/Evo-2024-the-biggest-video-game-tournament-ever-as-it-passes-10000-unique-competitors.
[118] "esports", Dictionary.com, last accessed August 27, 2025, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/esports.

NBA. Recreational play such as this is worth studying for its impact on the American gaming culture, but no such analysis is present here.

While the majority of the games featured at Evo were of Japanese origin, the U.S. was the undisputed leader in the global rise of esports in the 1990s and the 2000s.[119] This period not only contained the explosion of fighting game franchises in arcade and home play, but also the subsequent emergence of computer gaming at the onset of the twentieth century. The explosion of first-person shooter (FPS) games following 9/11 further supplemented this boom in computer gaming.[120] American gamers turned simulations of modern military combat into both a source of recreation as well as revenue. Centered around such games as *Quake* or *Counter-Strike,* the emergent FPS genre dominated American esports for most of the 2000s.[121] By the late 2000s, esports became among the fastest growing non-traditional sport competitions with the U.S.[122]

For the majority of this esports surge, Evo was not the forerunner. Rather, that title belonged to the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL). As Lu Zhouxiang identified, CPL pioneered esports and professional gaming within the United States, primarily focusing on FPS games that themselves revolutionized American gaming culture.[123] Founded in 1997, this tournament series amassed a series of noteworthy sponsors, including major consumer brands such as Nvidia, Razer, Pizza Hut, and Verizon.[124] By 2005, CPL hosted an international player base across a series of international tournaments and events, prompting Nvidia's million-dollar

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[119] Lu Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 163.
[120] Tara Fickle et al., "Asian/American Gaming," in *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 36, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/798107/pdf.
[121] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 172.
[122] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 175-6.
[123] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 172.
[124] "Sponsors," Cyberathlete Professional League, archived by Internet Archive, last accessed August 28, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20060815170015/http://www.thecpl.com/league/?p=sponsors.

sponsorship for the CPL World Tour tournament series.[125] With this international audience, player base, and sponsorships, from both inside and outside the gaming industry, CPL propelled esports to far greater prestige and attention. Other major American tournament series and leagues, such as Major League Gaming (MLG), Championship Gaming Series (CGS), or the World Series of Video Games (WSVG), likewise rode the wake created not only by the explosion of FPS gaming genre but also by CPL's success.  Despite the promising future for esports that such developments implied, the professional gaming industry was not insulated from global affairs, much less a global recession. This economic downturn affected esports across its various dimensions, from increasing travel costs for both audiences and players to decreasing the size and range of corporate sponsorships. CPL, along with WSVG and CSG, ceased operations by 2008, and CPL cited the global recession and explosion of competing esports leagues (and thus more competition for sponsorships).[126] CPL and many of its competitors, despite their massive sponsorships, focus on the increasingly popular FPS genre, and growing global audience, failed. One tournament series, however, not only survived this sudden shuttering but eventually grew beyond its grassroots to outshine its fellow surviving competitors.

The Evolution Championship series was founded in 1996, under the name Battle by the Bay --- an entire year before the Cyberathlete Professional League. Before the swell of FPS games, the fighting game community (FGC) spearheaded the professionalization of competitive gaming in the U.S. The Battle by the Bay was organized and funded by members of the FGC themselves, hosted at the Sunnyvale Golfland arcade, featuring forty players, and largely focused

[125] "NVIDIA TO SPONSOR $1,000,000 CPL WORLD TOUR," News, GamesIndustry, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/nvidia-to-sponsor-1000000-cpl-world-tour.
[126] Andy Chalk, "Cyberathlete Professional League Shuts Down," The Escapist, last accessed 28 August, 2025, https://www.escapistmagazine.com/cyberathlete-professional-league-shuts-down/.

on a regional rivalry between Northern and Southern California competitors.[127] Adopting the name "Evolution" in 2002 and moving from arcades to college game rooms, this tournament series gained global recognition by drawing players from outside the U.S..[128] This notably included Japanese players, who lent the prestige of the publisher-driven Japanese gaming tournament scene, and of course their own abilities, to then-nascent Evolution tournament series. Considering Evo was a non-profit, community-run tournament without the glittering sponsorships and prize pools of rival leagues, this international draw was exceptionally noteworthy.[129] Rather, it was the members of the FGC itself that largely funded and operated Evo, until its eventual purchase by Sony Interactive Entertainment and RTS in 2021.[130] In doing so, it was the professional players and enthusiastic audiences themselves that propelled Evo to not become the leading American fighting game tournament but also lent to the FGC's overall efforts to professionalize competitive gaming.[131] In 2004, Evo switched from largely playing on arcade cabinets to gaming consoles, both reflecting a growing pattern in American fighting game competitions as well as the largely faded arcade industry.[132] As historian Moriko Koizumi observed, many Japanese software companies ultimately reorganized throughout the early 2000s in response to the increasing costs of porting arcade games to new, high-performing consoles, such as the massively popular PlayStation 2.[133] This was a monumental shift, considering the FGC was centered on arcades and arcade cabinets throughout the preceding decades. Historian

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[127] "1996," About Evo, Evo, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[128]"2002," About Evo, Evo, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[129] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 269.
[130] "Sony Interactive Entertainment and New Esports Venture, RTS, Jointly Acquire the Evolution Championship Series (EVO)," Press Releases, Sony Interactive Entertainment, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://sonyinteractive.com/en/press-releases/2021/sony-interactive-entertainment-and-new-esports-venture-rts-jointly-acquire-the-Evolution-championship-series-Evo/.
[131] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 169, 271.
[132] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 169.
[133] Mariko Koizumi, "Japanese Video Game Industry," in *Transnational Contexts of Development History, Sociality, and Society of Play*, ed. S. Austin Lee and Alexis Pulos (Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2016), 43.

Yusuke Koyama, in *History of the Japanese Video Game Industry*, outlined the cultural distinctions and affinities that defined gaming platforms, and their respective audiences, at this time. Specifically, Koyama highlighted arcade culture's emphasis on high-level play and younger audiences and computer gaming's primary attraction to adults and hobbyists, with consoles marking the middle ground between these two gaming subcultures.[134] As such, Evo's move to consoles not only reflected the shifting video game industry (VGI) but also positioned the tournament series to appeal to the median American video game player. Both this move to consoles and continued focus on fighting games, as opposed to the more popular and lucrative FPS tournament scene, were replicated outside of Evo itself. Over the course of the 2000s, Evo's growing ludic and cultural presence inspired a host of analogous video game tournaments across Asia, North America, and Europe.[135] Evo's international presence was dyed in the wool as a disseminator of the Japanese games that continue to dominate Evo and the fighting game community overall. Publishers Sony and Nintendo initiated this trend, sparking the growth of the Japanese VGI in the 1990s and continued to hold massive influence over global gaming trends into the present.[136] Japanese fighting game franchises, such as *Street Fighter* and *Tekken*, dominated the fighting game genre throughout the 1990s. These games also exuded Japanese cultural odor, from either their protagonists or their settings; they also further conditioned American gamers to accept Japanese cultural motifs into American competitive gaming culture. *Street Fighter II*, a 2D fighting game released by Capcom in 1991, was the first fighting game to achieve international success; this single fighting game not only helped to develop the Japanese competitive gaming scene, but it also revitalized the American arcade industry following the

[134] Koyama, *History of the Japanese Video Game Industry*, 14.
[135] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 170-1.
[136] Koizumi, "Japanese Video Game Industry," 13.

video game crash of 1983.[137] The video game crash of 1983, also known as the Atari Crash, was due to a combination of declining quality of American home console games, growing affordability of home computers, and the entrance of Nintendo and Sony into the American home console marketplace.[138] This economic crash not only led to a drastic decline of American arcades and publishing firms but also enabled these Japanese publishers to fill the void left in both arcades and American homes. Some surviving American publishers attempted to compete (or at least cash in) on this surge of fighting game play, with Midway Games releasing its own 2D fighting game, *Mortal Kombat*, in 1992. However, this American fighting game franchise lived in the shadow of its Japanese counterpart throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as *Street Fighter* (the first entry in the game series, not the series itself) outsold *Mortal Kombat* by five million copies as of 2007.[139] The fact that many of this American fighting game's characters were themselves ninjas, such as Scorpion and Sub-Zero, showed how early and deeply Japanese culture had ingrained itself into the American FGC. Despite this one-sided dynamic between Japanese and American fighting games in the 1990s, the competition still managed to revive America's floundering VGI as well as popularize the fighting game genre across American popular culture. Namely, Capcom's active role in sponsoring and organizing competitions around helped popularize both the game itself as well as the competitive culture surrounding it within American arcades.[140] This influence was hardly singular, as Japanese gaming software a dominated the global gaming industry through the 1990s.[141] Despite finding equal, if not greater, success for their games in Asian markets, Japanese publishers such as Capcom ultimately

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[137] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 92.
[138] John Wills, *Gamer Nation*, 8-9.
[139] Koizumi, "Japanese Video Game Industry," 16.
[140] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 94.
[141] Mia Consalvo, *Atari to* Zelda, 39-40.

focused more on the American video game marketplace.[142] This emphasis on the U.S. ultimately insured that Japanese video games continued to dominate the American FGC throughout the 2000s. One facet of this domination was evident in Evo's game lineup throughout its history, with American fighting games first granted official tournament play in 2011.

The preceding historical background related how Japanese gaming software, hardware, and competitive culture influenced the American FGC and American gaming culture overall. The following evidence, analysis, and argumentation explains Evo's role in reshaping American esports. Similar to how Japanese video games kept American arcades alive following the Video Game Crash of 1983, Evo and its emphasis on Japanese fighting games both facilitated and proved the resilience of the American tournament scene following the Great Recession. This resilience was not due to corporate sponsors and financial backing, like CPL enjoyed, but to the cultural popularity of Japanese fighting games and vigor of the American FGC. The rapid growth of Evo, even through years of global economic decline, both related the vigor of the American FGC as well as American competitive gaming in general. Japanese fighting games not only maintained their American prominence through events like Evo but even inspired various American fighting game franchises, such as *Injustice* and *Mortal Kombat*. While these series further expanded Evo's influence, the bedrock of its popularity was found in Japanese game series, such as *Street Fighter* and *Super Smash Bros.*; these games not only lent their popularity to this tournament series but also further popularized Japanese games in the U.S. The presence of international games was tandem with Evo's international player base, which ultimately increased the prestige of Evo among both American and international audiences. Such global popularity reflected the increasing globalization of Japanese pop culture, essentially making the Evo a hub

[142] Rachel Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 27.

of acculturation. With Evo as its central case study, this chapter's core argument rested on the influence of Japanese popular culture on American popular culture. In fulfillment of this, this chapter argued that, through Evo, Japanese fighting games permeated and transformed American esports between 2003 and 2013. Furthermore, Evo demonstrated the viability of American esports competitions, as both disseminators of Japanese pop culture and spectator sport events, as an alternative metric to video game sales in understanding the popularity of Japanese video games in the U.S.

Ultimately, the expansion of Evo further facilitated the transmission of Japanese cultural odor. This chapter built on the previous chapter's discussion of cultural odor through highlighting another analytical mode for understanding Japanese video games' entrenchment within American life. In the last two decades, historians such as T.L. Taylor and Lu Zhouxiang have increasingly studied the commercial impact of esports across various national contexts. However, understanding of the cultural impact of tournament series, such as Evo, remains understudied. This chapter will supplement this gap in the scholarship by demonstrating how Evo combined Japanese fighting games with American competitive gaming culture to produce a uniquely cosmopolitan cultural odor. The grassroots nature of Evo and its organization over the 2000s, along with the multinational athlete pool it consistently drew upon, highlighted another avenue for understanding the decentralized nature of cultural transfusion via video games. Using this tournament series, along with the various Japanese video games featured therein, this chapter will develop the methodological range of the field by examining the cultural prominence and longevity of one of America's most popular esports competitions.

## II: Historiographical Background

Like the previous chapter, this chapter drew from Iwabuchi's theory of cultural odor. Unlike the previous chapter, this theoretical approach would be applied to various Japanese game series as well as Evo itself, as a disseminator of these games and their attached cultural values. This chapter also drew inspiration from Consalvo's concept of cosmopolitanism, or the decentralized spread of cultural products and values. Evo, itself, embodied this trend: as an American tournament series featuring an international player base; as a venue for global audiences to enjoy and play Japanese (and later American) video games; and as a mode of evolution for American competitive gaming culture, centered around Japanese fighting games. Moreover, historians such as Zhouxiang and Taylor have increasingly studied competitive gaming and the communities surrounding it. Specifically, the social role of esports as a professional sport, from commercial weight to cultural presence, has been increasingly discussed since the early 2000s.[143] In fact, as esports events and communities have globally germinated and publishers take a more active role in fostering both, scholars have increasingly considered esports as a professional sport.

All these historiographical trends will be expanded in this chapter to demonstrate how the Evo demonstrated the cultural transfusion of Japanese video games into American pop culture during the 2000s. Evo, as a confluence of Japanese fighting games and American competitive gaming culture, will be highlighted for its distinct yet composite cultural odor. Evo will be further utilized here to reinforce Consalvo's theory of cosmopolitanism, as this confluence helped to develop the cultural identity of the American fighting game community. The

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[143] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 1-2.

development of the American fighting game community, by engaging with and further popularizing Japanese video games, were ultimately agents of this decentralized acculturation. Lastly, Evo's history, from its commercial endurance in the face of global economic decline to the celebrity status of some esports athletes, would further validate the growing historiographical discussion of esports as a professional sport. In essence, the growth of Evo from a local SoCal fighting tournament into an international fighting game tournament series would further demonstrate how esports events, players, and audiences have entered the same playing field as professional sports.

## III: Evo Historical Survey

### a. Locality

Before it was a fixture of the American esports scene, Evo was a fixture of the California FGC. The changes in the locality of Evo throughout its history were not only related to geography but to its cultural significance. Essentially, despite only featuring two games (*Super Street Fighter II TURBO* and *Street Fighter Alpha 2*), Evo veteran Alex Valle recounted that over 128 people crammed into that single arcade.[144] While the sparce selection of games betrayed the small scale of the event, they also imparted the significance of those games. As professional fighting game player and *Street Fighter* veteran John "Choiboy" Choi related, *Street Fighter II* was "ubiquitous in laundry mats, bowling alleys, 7-11s, video rental stores, etc."[145] The inescapability of *Street Fighter II* was not only reflected in the Battle by the Bay 1996 (or B3) but throughout the American commercial landscape. Both inside and outside of competition,

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[144] Wynton Smith, "The Evolution of the World's Largest Fighting Game Tournament," Gaming, ESPN, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/17016092/the-Evolution-world-largest-fighting-game-tournament.

[145] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 96.

this game and its multitude of distinct version releases were foundational to the American FGC. The Battle by the Bay returned in 2000 and 2001 while relocating to the Folsom Game Room in Folsom, California. The Battle by the Bay 2000 (B4) expanded the games roster to 5 total, adding *Street Fighter Alpha III*, *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*, and *Marvel vs. Capcom II* to the original B3 games roster. While Battle by the Bay 2001 (B5) decreased the total number of featured games to four, it most notably was the first major event in which Japanese esports players participated.[146] While a small step, this was nonetheless the first step towards the international presence that Evo eventually embodied.

By Evo 2002, the player and audience base for the tournament series had expanded beyond arcades and game rooms. As such, Evo 2002 took place at UCLA and featured only *Street Fighter II TURBO*, *Capcom vs. SNK 2*, and *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*.[147] Notably, the event's own founders, Tony and Tom Cannon, pooled $10,000 of their own money to book the event space.[148] Not only did this help facilitate the tournament series' growth, but it also embodied the grassroots reputation of Evo that would last throughout most of the tournament's history thus far. Evo would relocate again in 2003 and 2004 to California State Polytechnic University, Pomona's gaming center, known as the Bronco Center. Evo 2003 was most noteworthy for significantly increasing the number of featured games, including the first inclusion of 3D fighting game series, such as *TEKKEN TAG Tournament* and *SoulCalibur II*, that would later become staples of the tournament series.[149] Furthermore, this expanded game roster marked the first inclusion of non-Capcom games which not only revealed the growth of the fighting game genre in general but

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[146] "2001," About Evo, Evo, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[147] "2002," About Evo, Evo, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[148] "Why You Should Care about Evo 2019," News, Vertagear, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.vertagear.com/blogs/news/why-should-you-care-about-Evo-2019.
[149] "2003," About Evo, Evo, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.

also, more critically, the growth of the American fighting game community that was previously synonymous with Capcom's *Street Fighter* series.

Evo 2004, while maintaining this expanded game list, also contained one of the most famous moments in fighting game history, if not gaming in general. Evo Moment 37, also known as the Daigo Parry, referred to a moment during the semi-finals match for *Street Fighter III: Third Strike* between Japanese player Daigo Umehara (playing Ken) and American player Justin Wong (playing Chun-Li). Umehara's health bar could only sustain one or two more hits when Wong went for a fifteen-hit long Super Art, which would still cause damage to Umehara's Ken even if Wong's attacks were successfully blocked. Instead, Umehara shocked the entire room by successfully parrying each individual hit and countering with his own combo, winning the match and turning the audience ecstatic.[150] This single event not only encapsulated the skill level Evo attracted, furthering the prestige of the tournament series, but also conveyed the high stakes, high energy nature of fighting games, American gaming tournaments, and of course Evo itself. All these factors would make Evo more attractive to more casual players and fans, further facilitating Evo's overall growth in the American esports environment.

In 2005, Evo evolved from game rooms to ballrooms. Specifically, Evo began renting event spaces in Las Vegas to host their increasing, and increasingly international, players and audiences. Considerably more expensive and prestigious than college game rooms and local arcades, this transition marked Evo's step into a level of prominence comparable to other

[150] For brief mechanical context, fighting games operate at sixty frames per second (60/fps), and thus each frame lasting a 1/60th of a second, or roughly seventeen milliseconds. In order to parry an attack in *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*, the defending player needs to input the parry within two to ten frames of the attack to negate the damage. Umehara parried all fifteen hits of Chun-Li's Super Art with almost exact timing. Furthermore, Umehara did so as a reaction, while under the pressure of tournament and surrounding audience, and followed up with a game-ending combo of his own, all in the span of roughly ten seconds. This is extremely difficult even by professional standards of play, thus cementing the Daigo Parry as a legendary moment in both Evo and gaming history. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzS96auqau0.

American video game tournaments, such as CPL or MLG. These venues included Green Valley Ranch, Red Rock Resort, Tropicana Las Vegas, Caesar's Palace, the Rio Convention Center, and Paris Las Vegas between 2005 and 2013. In addition to these notably jump in venue size, 2007 was the first year that Evo featured the massively popular *Super Smash Bros*. series on the official tournament roster.[151] This addition was very significant, as *Super Smash Bros. Melee* was included in MLG tournaments starting in 2004, kickstarting what many players and fans considered as the "Golden Age" of Melee.[152] Thus, by including this game at the peak of its popularity, it ultimately lent greater popularity to both Evo and fighting games in general.

Finally, in 2011, Evo was able to overcome its locative limitations for audience reach by streaming the tournament series in front of a global online audience. Initially, Evo utilized the UStream streaming platform to gain over two million viewers for Evo 2011.[153] Moving to the nascent Twitch streaming platform in 2012, Evo not only solidified its online presence but eventually also became a major annual event for the platform, as it continues to be to this day.[154] By 2013, Evo's international popularity was made even more evident when it began to officially stream on the Japanese streaming platform NicoNico.[155] These turn towards streaming audiences not only reflected the rise of livestreaming within esports but the rise of Evo itself, evidently able to transcend locality and expand avenues for audience engagement.

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[151] "2007," About Evo, Evo, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[152] Travis Beauchamp, "Smash Melee's 4 Ages," Smash History, Metagame, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://www.metagamedoc.com/smash-history.
[153] "2011," About Evo, Evo, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[154] "2012," About Evo, Evo, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[155] "2013," About Evo, Evo, last accessed August 29, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.

## b. Frequency

Like its locality, Evo's frequency provided further understanding for the overall growth of Evo between 2003 and 2013. The multitude of gamers that participated in Evo, along with the variety of games played professionally, were centered around a single event. That is, the main event of the grassroots organization, the Evolution Championship Series, was an annual event. Even when qualifying and regional events eventually spawned from this main event, these acted as steppingstones for players and audiences as the main annual events drew nearer. For example, Evo initiated a pair of regional preliminary events in 2006, Evo East and Evo West, held on the East and West Coast of the U.S., respectively. These regional events served as tools to both foster emergent regional tournament play across the U.S. while simultaneously promoting Evo's annual national event.[156] However, Evo would ultimately discontinue these by 2008 and any official reasoning and explanation behind this decision has been absent from Evo's official website and multiple online news outlets reporting on it.

Considering the emergent global financial crisis of the time, this decision was likely made from concern for financial cost to hold these events, as well as players and audiences funding their own attendance. In fact, when one considers the financial state of its fellow tournament series, such reasoning becomes more likely. CPL's sudden closing in 2008, despite its position as a pioneer in esports organization both nationally and globally, along with its host of sponsors, likely had a chilling effect on the esports industry on the whole.[157] The Championship Gaming Series, by 2008, was "one of the most well-funded televised league initiatives ever" with sponsors such as DirectTV and British Sky Broadcasting, was defunct.[158]

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[156] "2006," About Evo, Evo, last accessed September 1, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[157] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 172-4.
[158] T.L. Taylor, *Raising the* Stakes, 1.

Major League Gaming survived though, with historian T.L. Taylor accrediting this survival to the league's focus on consoles gaming, similar to Evo and dissimilar to the computer-focused CPL or CGS.[159] What MLG lacked, however, was Evo's pool of international players and audiences as well as the connection to other national esports cultures outside of North America, such as Japan and its own esports community's fascination with Capcom games.[160] This international appeal would not diminish despite the international recession of Evo in subsequent years. In fact, Evo enacted the Road to Evo series of qualifiers in 2011, an international series of tournaments that determined placements for the main event, Evo 2011 in Las Vegas.[161] Furthermore, this was conducted in collaboration with Capcom, not only bringing the company's own expertise in organizing and marketing esports competitions but also a level of sponsor confidence that evidently abandoned other American tournament series and leagues.[162] While Capcom had "officially supported" Evo since 2006, this 2011 financial investment marked Evo's emergence as a lasting esports institution, regardless of its grassroots origins.[163] Basically, where rival esports leagues either consolidated their American participants/audiences or outright failed, Evo managed to maintain its American presence, emerged from the Great Recession with an even greater international presence and audience, and obtained a major sponsorship from within the global gaming industry while sponsors and players alike looked on esports with apprehension.

This persistence of Evo was indicative not only of the tournament series survivability but to the survivability of the various American subcultures Evo represented. Where corporate

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[159] Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 1.
[160] Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 146.
[161] "2011," About Evo, Evo, last accessed September 1, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[162] "2011," About Evo, Evo, last accessed September 1, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[163] "2006," About Evo, Evo, last accessed September 1, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.

sponsors and contracts failed to preserve CPL and CGS, Evo both weathered the financial crisis by its fans and rebounded with a prestigious sponsorship. The FGC itself, even outside of Evo participants and attendants, should be credited here as well. Considering the main reason MLG survived was tied to its use of consoles in tournament play, Evo and its early switch to consoles greatly facilitated its survival. As historian Taylor also observed, fighting games in general were a breakthrough genre of esports, and thus Evo's position as the premier American (if not global) fighting game tournament series allowed it to tap into this ludic wave.[164]

Finally, the fact that the fighting games featured were distinctly Japanese, as both games and cultural products, allowed Evo to further tap into America's popular culture that was increasingly localizing and distributing Japanese pop culture, from anime and manga to gaming hardware and software. As historian Roland Kelts explained, the 2000s was the third wave of "Japanophilia", a term denoting American fascination with Japanese cultural products.[165] This particular wave was more associated with the explosion of anime and manga, such as *Naruto*, *One Piece*, and *Bleach.* One direct example of this cultural influence was the massively popular *The Matrix* series, with the series' writers directly inspired by the hit Japanese animated film *Ghost in the Shell*.[166] This massive success led to Japan shifting its export focus away from manufacturing to cultural products, including video games.[167] Japanese video game series, most notably *Pokémon*, both capitalized on and added to this American fascination. Ultimately, Japanese fighting games entered the U.S. at a time when both competitive gaming and Japanese video games gained greater American awareness.

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[164] Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 1.
[165] Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 6.
[166] Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 75.
[167] Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 113.

c. Player Participation

One of the most important metrics in assessing a professional sport's size and scope is player participation. For organizations such as the NFL and MLB, there have been decades worth of data compiled on the players, whether transmitted academically, casually, or on the backs of trading cards. As such, even when reliant on estimations in lieu of consistent records, player participation across traditional sports has been fairly accessible. While esports have exploded in popularity and prestige in the past two decades, Evo's player participation statistics have yet to achieve this level of transparency. Evo's official website does not list these figures, aside from years in which participation records are broken (e.g., Evo 2009's +1000 player bracket, 2010's +1800 players in *Street Fighter IV* tournament); even in these cases, these figures were presented as general estimations rather than specific figures.[168] Correspondence with Evo staff cited a third-party site for recent event player participation, this only went as far back as 2017, and Evo staff presented no source for player participation in years preceding 2017.[169] Until or if such exact figures on player participation become available, estimations are the best available tool for understanding the scope of player participation in Evo between 2003 and 2013.

The estimations presented here were based on the total number of placing players (i.e., players who placed within the top eight for their respective events) rather than total number of participating players. As most online databases for esports record these top eight placements, whether regarding Evo or other tournament series, this value was the most readily available as well as the most verifiable through cross-reference.[170] Regardless, the number of placing players,

[168] "Evo Timeline," About Evo, Evo, last accessed September 1, 2025, https://Evo.gg/about-Evo.
[169] Evo Support, direct email to author, February 18, 2025.
[170] That is, since so many of these online databases cover Evo events' top eight placements consistently, they are more easily confirmed. Furthermore, players who placed within the top 8 in multiple events were only counted once.

as well as the number of tournaments held at a given Evo event, were valuable metrics in determining the historical trajectory of Evo player participation. Though not definitive, such data was still useful here. Namely, the consistency of top eight rankings, as well as the frequency of returning players, provided insight into the professionalization of Evo participants. That is, the annual return of players such as Qudans, Justin Wong, Daigo Umehara, or Knee (to name a notable few) implied a sufficient return on investment for these players, who were responsible for their own lodging and travel expenses. The fact that many of these placing players traveled overseas to compete in Evo reinforced this implication. Basically, such players would not have trained for and traveled to Evo without expectation of sufficient prize pools for placing players, and Evo would not be able to provide such prize pools without community (and later corporate) investment. While placing player participation may not provide full understanding of total player participation, it is a good starting point for further research.

The figures presented below (see Table 2) were drawn from online databases dedicated to collecting and archiving quantitative data on esports events and players. As online databases with low barriers to edit (relative to academia) and inconsistent citation practices, they served as imperfect substitutes for the official data missing from Evo's official website. Evo's official website was the first resource used in finding placing player participation, followed by the fighting games wiki Liquipedia and competitive gaming statistics database EsportsEarnings. Liquipedia's standards for citations and site format were much more consistent and transparent than EsportsEarnings, and thus held primacy among these two tertiary sources for this chapter. While both sites contained data on qualifying and side tournaments under the Evo umbrella, the main events held annually were the only events referenced here. While these more minor events

and competitions are integral to understanding the growth and scope of Evo within American esports, they are also worthy of their own, separate research and analysis within a future project.

Table 2.

| Evo Event | Total Games Featured in Evo Event | Total Placing Players |
|---|---:|---:|
| Evo Champion Series, 2003 | 9 | 54 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2004 | 9 | 58 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2005 | 7 | 42 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2006 | 7 | 46 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2007 | 7 | 64 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2008 | 5 | 31 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2009 | 6 | 53 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2010 | 7 | 48 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2011 | 5 | 39 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2012 | 6 | 60 |
| Evo Champion Series, 2013 | 9 | 64 |

As evident in the chart above, placing player participation fluctuated but ultimately recovered from a 2008 downturn. Considering the Great Recession and its effects on the esports industry, this downturn was understandable. However, this could also be attributed to the number of games featured at Evo 2008 being almost half as those in previous years, as was the case for Evo 2011 as well. Therefore, without definitive data on total player turnout, this drop in placing player participation was increasingly less attributable to a downturn in total player participation. When also considering the trajectory of other tournaments, such as CPL or CGS, this downturn for Evo might in fact be an upturn for the esports industry overall. Interestingly, this upturn hypothesis had some corroborating evidence. As was the case with MLG, which was founded as a console-focused esports league, Evo’s use of consoles over PCs made it more accessible to the average gamer (themselves more likely to play on consoles). Even though only five games were featured during Evo 2008, many leagues and tournaments had been based on even fewer games, if not a single game. As such, Evo’s eclectic game lineup translated into greater resilience by providing inherently more arenas for players to compete in than some of their counterparts focused on just *Counter-Strike*, *Halo*, or *Quake*. Therefore, while the data presented in Table 2 seemed to show a downturn in placing player participation, the surrounding historical context of Evo and American esports in general implied that this presumed decay was, in fact, assured resilience. Even so, this data table was far from definitive, and further research is needed to draw any objective conclusions. Specifically, more data on total participation will be necessary for any sound conclusions on player engagement and professionalization.

d. Audience Attendance

One of the most direct metrics for gauging a given sport's cultural impact has been the size of the audience it has attracted. Unfortunately, measuring audience attendance for Evo between 2003 and 2013 proved even more difficult to obtain than its player participation data. This difficulty was multifaceted, with multiple points of the operation and its observers lacking this information. According to Evo Support, the official contact on Evo's website for general inquiries, Evo not only does not release such information to the public but even that audience attendance data from before Evo's current management is not archived.[171] Furthermore, Evo Support clarified that both audience and player registration between 2003 and 2013 were simply "difficult to procure" but failed to further explain that difficulty, even when prompted.[172] However, considering the especially open and grassroots nature of Evo competitions during this time period, the likelihood of consistent record-keeping for audience attendance, especially with no tickets or registration fees, became understandably slim. Even in 2012 and 2013 when Evo began utilizing the Twitch livestreaming platform for its official event livestreams, Twitch was either unable or unwilling to provide such data. When such data was requested via email, Twitch only returned with a generic response to content complaints that was completely unrelated to that request.[173] Third party sources were no more accommodating, as the online databases and sites dedicated to esports data have not recorded or disseminated any apparent audience attendance data. Considering the purpose of these sites was cataloging player statistics and history, with event history confined to brackets and tournament outcomes, this dearth of data was reasonably

[171] Evo Support, direct email to the author, April 9, 2025.
[172] Evo Support, direct email to the author, February 18, 2025.
[173] Twitch Support, direct email to the author, August 7, 2025.

explainable. As such, the data presented in this subsection was the product of estimations, more useful as a springboard for further research than establishing a definitive narrative.

Such estimations were derived from research into Evo's various venue spaces, and these spaces' respective occupancy limits, between 2003 and 2013. The venues were gathered from either Evo's official website or from news articles and online blogs that directly listed them. For the specific rooms and spaces within these venues, direct correspondence was the first source, as in the case of determining the Bronco Center as the space used at Cal Poly Pomona for Evo 2003.[174] More often, however, such information was not archived with Evo Support citing changes in management as the reason for this statistical absence.[175] In these cases, online databases such as Liquipedia were referenced, with all the listed venues corroborated through concurrent news articles that reported on Evo events. With venues confirmed through this process, the official sites of the venues were used to estimate the audience attendance. Specifically, these estimated capacities were derived from the provided maps and capacity charts of venues' official websites. Since the specific venue spaces were only provided by Evo for the 2003 and 2004 events, ballrooms were assumed as the primary event space for subsequent Evo events through 2013. This decision was made, in part, due to these venues' failure to provide any specific information pertaining to the event spaces used by Evo, even when prompted through email correspondence. The notable exception to these unanswered information requests came from Cal Poly Pomona, which promptly responded and confirmed the game room of the campus's Bronco Center as the specific venue space for Evo 2003 and Evo 2004.[176] Another fundamental assumption that undergirded this data was that the venue spaces obtained seventy-

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[174] Evo Support, direct email to the author, March 27, 2025.
[175] Evo Support, direct email to author, April 9, 2025.
[176] Scott Macleod, direct email to author, April 1, 2025.

five percent capacity. The reasoning behind this assumption was twofold: for one, Evo's growing popularity and resultant moves to large venues implied player participation substantial enough to fill these venues spaces; for another, considering the non-profit nature of Evo, such a capacity would have helped to justify the monetary cost of renting these venue spaces. Thus, while not definitive, the following data was rooted in historical context and earnest research (see Table 3).

Table 3.

| Evo Event | Evo Estimated Venue Capacity, 2003-2013 | Evo Estimated Spectator Attendance, 2003-2013 |
|---|---|---|
| Evo Championship Series, 2003 | 500 | 375 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2004 | 500 | 375 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2005 | 1500 | 1125 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2006 | 2880 | 2160 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2007 | 1500 | 1125 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2008 | 2300 | 1725 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2009 | 6110 | 4583 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2010 | 8,520 | 6390 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2011 | 6110 | 4583 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2012 | 5555 | 4166 |
| Evo Championship Series, 2013 | 8,520 | 6390 |

Even if estimations, the growing size of Evo's venue capacities, and thus estimated audience attendance, reflected Evo's ascension as a rising star in the history of American esports. As shown above, the estimated audience attendance for Evo 2013 was roughly seventeen times larger than for Evo 2003. Furthermore, the sudden (almost) doubling of estimated audience attendance between 2008 and 2009 reflected the established trend of Evo's post-Great Recession recovery. While not as substantial, this growth continued through the remainder of the temporal scope validated further validated other evidence of Evo's continued growth in the early 2010s, such as the event's expansion on multiple major streaming platforms. As one might expect from a growing spectator sport, the estimated audience for Evo outpaced its player base. Again, Evo organizers' decision to host official livestreams to reach interested audiences beyond the walls of their venues and directly into the homes of fans reinforced the notion of a growing fanbase. This growth was likely accelerated further by Evo's growing international presence, made evident both through its international player base and eventual expansion to the Japanese streaming service NicoNico.

While promising and reflective of Evo's established rise in popularity, this data was nonetheless inconclusive. While these estimations are useful for further contextualizing Evo's growth based on venue capacity, they cannot replace the objective data from the events themselves, even if Evo itself does not archive such data. In lieu of such data, analysis of the peak viewership, as well as total viewership, for Evo's official event livestreams would be singularly useful. Streaming data for these Evo main events, from 2011 and onward, would grant greater objectivity to any estimation of audience attendance. Such streaming figures would also be useful for fuller understanding of Evo's total audience growth since the event organizers began to officially stream its competitions. Furthermore, where objective data was unavailable,

digital inquiries (i.e., emails or direct messages via social media platforms) to event staff, players, and audience members could provide insight into the size of audiences, in experiential or numerical. Oral histories of event staff, players, and audience members, and especially those who annually attended Evo, would be immensely useful in gauging the growth of Evo through an organizer, participant, and/or fan's own perception as well as simply expanding the qualitative data pool regarding Evo's history. In essence, there is still a significant amount of work ahead for any who would attempt to objectively measure the historical trajectory of Evo's audience.

## IV: Survey of Major Franchises Featured at Evo

### a. *Street Fighter*

The various major fighting game franchises Evo hosted between 2003 and 2013 were a formative part of both the organization and players' identities. Of these major fighting game franchises featured throughout Evo's early history, none would become as synonymous with the American FGC as the *Street Fighter* series. While the series has boasted a host of titles and editions, even more so than the famously numerous *Call of Duty* series, certain core elements remained stable throughout this milieu of variations. At the core, *Street Fighter* was centered around a 2D, side-scrolling model for fighting games. Each player could move left to right, within the bounds of the given stage (the digital platform on which the player characters traverse). This has often been associated with fast-paced, high-energy gameplay, especially at the competitive level. Fittingly, combos and controller inputs are centered around timing, from pushing enough buttons in a certain order and time frame to pull off certain combos to timing inputs with those of the opponent in order to parry (and thus neutralize) their attacks. This kind of gameplay is relatively straightforward, especially compared to later 3D fighting games, allowing for even new competitive players, or even those new to gaming in general, to pick up

and play to some degree of efficacy. This gameplay was the central facet of the series, from old-school arcades to the floors of contemporary arenas. While newer entries such as *Street Fighter V* (2016) featured a dedicated story mode, older entries often lacked this. Instead, character backstories and gameplay narratives were secondary, with some games featuring an "Arcade Mode". In this "Arcade Mode", which was the closest to a dedicated narrative mode the series had for many entries, players picked a single character to fight through a gauntlet of computer-controlled opponents, with minimal narrative interjection in between each encounter. The various, and frequent, intra-version releases for many of the *Street Fighter* games (e.g., *Street Fighter II TURBO*, *Street Fighter Alpha 2, Ultra Street Fighter IV*) also often tweaked, if not completely retconned, narrative elements from previous games that ultimately muddied the narrative continuity and canon of the series, especially for newer players. While difficult for players seeking narrative structure, many fighting games featured barebones stories that reflected the overall fighting game genre's focus. Namely, fighting games focused on fighting and gameplay, with other genres such as adventure or role-playing games, often filling gamers' needs for narrative structure and pay off.

That is not to say the *Street Fighter* had no narrative at all. Broadly, these games' stories frequently focused on the protagonists Ryu and Ken, the original playable characters for player 1 and player 2, respectively. With these two at the center, the cast of characters remained consistent between 2003 and 2013, including iconic characters such as Chun-Li, M. Bison, and Akuma. Each character had their own personal goals and relationships. Each character also featured distinct designs to not only make each character unique but also colorful enough to supplement the series' overall lack of strong narrative. In furtherance of this, many characters were rooted in cultural stereotypes and shorthands (e.g., Zangief as a Russian wrestler, Guile as

an American soldier, and Dhalsim as an Indian yoga master) in a similar manner to many fighting games featured at Evo over the years. Even the main protagonist himself, Ryu, was based on stereotypes. The main character, ironically, was less rooted in stereotypes than player identity. That is, Ryu was designed as a player-insert character. Player-insert characters, most often presented as protagonists, are characters designed for the player to identify with throughout the narrative, often with stoic or even silent personalities with which to allow a wider player base to more easily self-identify. Ryu not only fits this with his stoic demeanor and generic martial artist design, but his goal of fighting a series of combatants to prove his abilities inherently parallels the player themself. This would prove true not only for the casual player picking up the series for the first time but also to the esports pro seeking to hone their abilities at the highest level.

As previously alluded, the historical significance of the *Street Fighter* series to Evo, the American FGC, and the transfusion of Japanese culture into American life in general, has been difficult to understate. One apparent avenue for this influence rested within the character of Ryu himself, not only designed to reflect the player themselves but, intentionally or otherwise, to reflect Japan's own self-image in the late twentieth century. Ryu was consistently presented as a young up-and-comer who, through both gameplay and the occasional narrative moment, endeavored to prove themselves on the global stage against a series of stereotypical characters. Similarly, the Japan of the 1980s was one amid a major economic boom that made even the economic juggernaut U.S. anxious for the new global economic role that Japan was carving for itself.[177] In this way, Ryu was a manifestation of Japanese anxieties to their new role within the world economy. As Ryu became the face of fighting games and Japan became the face for

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[177] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 79.

gaming, this ingrained self-perception naturally transmitted to the U.S. fighting game community. Furthermore, the centrality of Japaneseness to Ryu's character, and his centrality to the series in general, exuded a distinctly Japanese cultural odor that diffused throughout American fighting game tournaments and tournament series. This transmission was further facilitated by Capcom's launch of official global *Street Fighter* tournaments in 2012. This not only marked Capcom's return as a major tournament organizer in esports, but also as a shift in strategy regarding tournaments, no longer sponsoring events such as Evo. Specifically, Capcom used these tournaments as a marketing tool to both maintain their brand as an active member of the global FGC as well as to heighten the prestige of gaming tournaments (and thus increase the number of those watching/playing Capcom games).[178] By the late 2010s, other major fighting games publishers followed suit and began launching and sponsoring their own tournament series as modes of advertising, such as Bandai Namco's Tekken World Tour.[179] Through this massive expansion of publisher involvement, Japanese video game series such as *Street Fighter* developed the professionalization and cultural prestige of not only the global FGC but also demonstrated the commercial value of video game tournaments internationally. Finally, *Street Fighter*'s easy-to-play-but-difficult-to-master gameplay maintained the spirit of competitive arcade culture long after arcades fell to home consoles in the 1990s and early 2000s. Arcades were often the domain of gaming savants that manifested as a unique, competitive subculture lit with neon and amidst a cacophony of bleeps and bloops. Furthermore, as historian Rachel Hutchinson pointed out, *Street Fighter II*'s emphasis on player vs player (PVP) play, over simply battling a computer, helped to foster this competitive culture within the American arcade

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[178] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 171.
[179] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 171.

scene.[180] This was a uniquely American phenomenon as well, with the hypercompetitive culture surrounding *Street Fighter* directly facilitating the explosion of arcades across the U.S., whereas Japanese gamers were more likely to be intimidated by, and thus avoidant of, this kind of hypercompetitive setting.[181] Thus, this distinctly Japanese game series collided with American competitive gaming culture to produce a new, distinct cultural odor that emanated from Evo. Even when Capcom ported *Street Fighter II* to Nintendo's SNES home console, it did not cease disseminating arcades' unique competitive culture. In fact, this port and those that followed often transplanted that culture within American homes. Not only did this decision reinforce the presence of video games within the American home, but it also allowed for gamers to practice the game at home for the arcades; essentially, Capcom enabled the expansion of arcade and tournament culture beyond their traditional confines of neon lit rooms and into backlit home televisions.[182] This trend was further reinforced by the advent of consumer internet access, which enabled moments such as Evo 2004's Daigo Parry to go viral and further ingratiate American competitive video game culture within the spectrum of American popular culture. In all these ways, the *Street Fighter* series not only helped popularize arcade culture, but ultimately set the groundwork for greater popularity and organization of video game tournaments within the U.S.

### b. *Super Smash Bros.*

Though a later edition to Evo's main lineup, the *Super Smash Bros.* series was another Japanese fighting game series to influence American esports. Similar to the *Street Fighter* series, *Super Smash Bros.* (or *Smash*, as often abbreviated in the American FGC) was a series of 2D fighting games. Dissimilar to *Street Fighter*, that more or less focused on a single plane which

[180] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 88.
[181] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 88.
[182] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 89.

player characters move on, Smash instead integrated platforms and changing stage layouts. This design both added greater verticality and emphasis on character movement as well as integrated a kind of platforming and level design familiar to fans of Nintendo series, most notably the *Super Mario Bros*. Smash was also known for its fast-paced gameplay, with the series generally rewarding players more for integrating movement and positioning into combos than long strings of combos common throughout fighting games.[183] This balanced design fit well with Nintendo's overall strategy of appealing to many skill levels at once, without disqualifying the series from high level/professional play. Regarding narrative, Nintendo followed many contemporary fighting games by focusing more on gameplay than story. Outside of *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*'s story mode, called "Subspace Emissary", the series lacked any dedicated narrative modes. Considering Nintendo was also known for its party games that lacked overarching stories and focused on gameplay, such as the aptly named *Mario Party* series, this design philosophy was evident throughout the Smash series. Despite Nintendo's inconsistent history with allowing their games to be played in tournaments, this lack of narrative content ironically made the game not only more suitable for couch co-op or party play but also for competitive gaming overall.

The most narrative baggage was carried by the series' characters themselves, with Nintendo drawing on a host of its own original characters, along with those licensed from other publishers, to fill their Smash ranks. Characters such as Mario, Kirby, Samus, and Link not only

[183] This design distinction was rooted in the series unique character health system. Many fighting games continue to rely on the traditional video game health bar, in which a player's character can only take so many hits before depleting the health bar and thus losing the round/match. Smash, however, used a percentage system, with characters starting at 0% and with each hit received increasing that percentage. As the percentage rises, the player character receives increasing knock back, until hits are enough to knock an opponent out of the bounds of the stage. This not only rewards players who are able to capitalize on this knock back and accurately follow/exploit their opponent's trajectory, but also enabled comebacks that, while possible with a health bar system, become much more likely. Considering Nintendo has historically marketed itself as a family brand that made games accessible to anyone, this was likely a deliberate design choice to enable players with lower skill to have greater chance of success against more skilled opponents.

granted the series more recognizability with Nintendo fans but also drew fans of other series/genres to Smash and the FGC overall. These characters' recognizability, both individually and as series representatives, further reinforced the series' cultural odor. Specifically, every character's inherent association with Nintendo or other Japanese publishers (such as Konami's Snake or SEGA's Sonic the Hedgehog), along with their distinctly Japanese animation styles, carried deeply ingrained associations with Japanese gaming culture. Considering the high skill ceiling and level of dedication associated with fighting games and the community surrounding them, appealing to a wide player base, including casual players, was no small feat. The role of these characters in eliciting the attention of other fandoms, both within and without Evo tournament play, is worthy of its own dedicated analysis elsewhere.

While not as fundamental to Evo as the *Street Fighter* series, the Smash series nonetheless made waves from its very first dive into this tournament series. *Super Smash Bros. Melee* was the first game in the series featured, debuting at Evo 2007. Despite Melee's established presence in the American FGC prior to this, including in MLG professional-level events, Evo 2007 ironically featured the largest single Smash tournament in history, at that time.[184] While generally celebrated, its inclusion was not without controversy, namely around the official Evo tournament ruleset for Smash. The decision to allow items in tournament play alienated East Coast players, who preferred rulesets that banned items and the randomness they brought into play. Conversely, West Coast players preferred at least some item allowance in tournament play and their associated randomness, which went against traditional esports rulesets and caused a divide in the professional player base.[185] When Evo dropped *Melee* from its official

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[184] AlphaZealot, "Smash in 2007: A Year in Review," Smashboards Forums, Smashboards, February 10, 2008, last accessed September 4, 2025, https://smashboards.com/threads/smash-in-2007-year-in-review.143600/.
[185] Jacob Wolf, "Evo: An Oral History of Super Smash Bros. Melee," *ESPN*, July 12, 2017, last accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/19973997/evolution-championship-series-melee-oral-history-evo.

lineup and replaced it with the then-recently released Brawl, many fans simply kept playing Melee elsewhere, furthering the divide among Evo's Smash players and fans.[186] Despite this rocky start for the series, Smash's most impactful controversy with Evo emerged in 2013. Specifically, it was Nintendo that triggered the uproar this time as they attempted to block Brawl from the main lineup for Evo 2013.[187] However, Evo's 2007 inclusion of *Melee* had set a precedent for the series' presence, leading to a massive fan outcry against Nintendo, who eventually reneged on its threats and allowed the game into Evo 2013.[188] Not only was Smash included in the main lineup for the tournament series, but it also contributed to the event's streaming record. As online gaming news outlet Polygon estimated, roughly 134,000 of the record-breaking 1.7 million of Evo 2013's total viewership for their official live stream were watching the Brawl tournament.[189] Not only did this number reflect the growth of Evo's online viewership, but it also demonstrated the substantial role Smash had achieved within Evo after only five years.

*c. Tekken*

In a tournament series typically dominated by 2D fighting games, *Tekken*'s longevity in Evo spoke to the game's influence on the American FGC. Unlike the aforementioned series, the *Tekken* series consisted of 3D fighting games that allowed movement on the Z-axis, in addition to the X and Y axes to which 2D fighting games were confined. This enabled both more forms of movement as well as making movement and positioning more strategic. As a result, the *Tekken*

[186] Wolf, "Evo: An Oral History of Super Smash Bros. Melee".
[187] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Video Games*, 271.
[188] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Video Games*, 271.
[189] Michael McWhertor, "Evo 2013 livestream draws record numbers on Twitch with 1.7 million viewers," *Polygon*, July 16, 2013, last accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.polygon.com/2013/7/15/4526702/evo-2013-livestream-draws-record-numbers-on-twitch-with-1-7-million/.

series presented a slower pace of play, with intermittent, long strings of combos resulting in sudden bursts of high-speed play. These long strings of combos varied between each of the characters, with more complex characters such as Yoshimitsu or King having over fifty unique combos in some entries. This further fueled the slower pace of gameplay, as the series inherently encouraged players to both practice more to fully master characters as well as be more cautious of the likewise numerous options of their opponents.

Narratively, *Tekken* once again strayed from the pack, as the series has supported an overarching storyline surrounding the pugnacious Mishima family of characters and their intergenerational combat. Such combat often took place under the narrative umbrella of the King of Iron Fist tournament, in which an international cadre of martial art prodigies gathered to compete against each other. This event was often organized by the Mishima Zaibatsu, an evil corporation headed by the eponymous Mishima family that inherently, and uniquely, placed Japan as the center of the narrative. This potent narrative focus on Japanese characters, who practice traditional and modern versions of Japanese martial arts, all under the umbrella of a distinctly Japanese form of business organization (i.e., *zaibatsu*), represented the most odoriferous example of Japanese cultural odor among the game series presented here.

The series' character roster reinforced this Japanese-centric tone, with most of them being short hands for various national identities and embodying regional/national unarmed martial art styles. For example, the Mishima family characters have all been prodigies of some form of karate, from the more traditional style of Heihachi to the more free-style form of Jin. The fact that these characters were central to the series' overarching stories further reinforced Japan's centrality to the narrative, as well. The remaining cast of characters, with their own distinct martial arts styles, typically revolved around the events and plotlines of the Mishima family.

These characters though were much more characterized by their national identity (to make them further distinct from the Japanese characters): the Mexican characters, King and Armor King, were crowd-working luchadores; the Brazilian character, Eddy, was a capoeira master; and the American character, Paul, was a loud and destructive mixed martial artist. While much of the series' story was transmitted through various characters' Arcade Modes (similar to *Street Fighter*'s game mode of the same name), *Tekken 6* introduced a dedicated story mode that furthered the series' focus on its overarching narrative. For these reasons, *Tekken* filled a unique niche within the American esports, and particularly Evo, as a narratively driven, strategic fighting game series.[190]

Evo 2003 was the first event to feature the *Tekken* series, with *Tekken 4 and Tekken Tag Tournament* featured in the main lineup that year. The *Tekken* series became a staple of the tournament series, with Evo only omitting the series from the main lineup in 2009 and 2012, with *Street Fighter X Tekken*'s feature in Evo 2012 showing that, even when absent, the 3D fighting game series remained influential on Evo.[191] While not as ingrained in Evo's identity as deeply as *Street Fighter*, this still spoke to the unique value the *Tekken* series provided. *Tekken*, through its use of shorthand characters and making the Japanese characters protagonists, reinforced a core trope of Japanese fighting games while simultaneously, through its emphasis on the narrative progression of the Mishima Family, breaking the mold.[192] Namco/Bandai Namco further deviated from established fighting game formulas with *Tekken*'s 3D gameplay. This not only helped make *Tekken* a forerunner in 3D fighting games, especially in the context of the 2D-

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[190] This is not to say that other games did not encourage strategic play. Timing, positioning, and input speed play a part in all fighting games. 3D fighting games, however, add another dimension of movement that 2D fighting games simply lack. Therefore, 3D fighting games hold strategic elements inherently prohibited by 2D series, such as *Street Fighte*r or *Smash*.
[191] Evo Timeline, About Evo, Evo, last accessed September 5, 2025, https://evo.gg/about-evo.
[192] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 95.

dominated Evo but also invited further comparison to the forerunner of 2D fighting games, *Street Fighter*. With both series' American fanbases growing throughout the 2000s, such comparisons ultimately manifested in a crossover title: *Street Fighter X Tekken*. Though this title implied a balanced crossover game to bridge (and then cash in on) the gap between *Tekken* and *Street Fighter* fans. However, considering the game relied on *Street Fighter*'s 2D format and was published by Capcom, this game was evidently more for *Street Fighter* fans than for *Tekken* fans. However, the fact that Capcom saw *Tekken* as a marketable addition to one of its flagship series spoke to the growing popularity of *Tekken*, which was supplemented by its prominent historical role in Evo.

### d. *SoulCalibur*

*SoulCalibur*, at the basic level, was developed by Namco to provide a weapon-wielding alternative to the *Tekken* series.[193] As such, the *SoulCalibur* series has remained similar to *Tekken*, mechanically and otherwise. *SoulCalibur* games were 3D fighting games, with the resultantly slow-paced gameplay that emphasized character reach and spacing even more so than *Tekken*. This was largely due to the variations of weapon types and reaches within *SoulCalibur* exceeding the variations in body types and sizes in *Tekken*. Conversely, the narrative across the *SoulCalibur* games was much less central than in the *Tekken* series, instead presenting a more general story centered around various warriors' pursuit of the mythical cursed sword, Soul Edge. "Arcade Mode" and "Weapon Master Mode" were common throughout the series, with each playthrough focused on a single character's ability to fight through a gauntlet of opponents rather than a single, overarching storyline.

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[193] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 234.

While lacking the narrative focus of the *Tekken* series or a Mishima Family analogue, *SoulCalibur* singled out a single character as the series' pseudo-protagonist. This character was Mitsurugi, a rather stereotypical stoic samurai and one of the only characters to appear in every game in the series. In fact, Mitsurugi was often visible from the arcade cabinet facade or box art itself, particularly on the same side of the cabinet as the Player 1 controls. Similar to Ryu in the *Street Fighter* series, Mitsurugi was often the default Player 1 character. The prominence of this Japanese character played into the trope of Japanese characters being central to the series, as seen in *Street Fighter* or *Tekken*. Interestingly, Mitsurugi took this trope a step forward by not necessarily reflecting contemporary Japanese culture, such as Ryu's embodiment of 1980s Japanese cultural outlook, but evoking an archetype found in Japanese history. Specifically, Mitsurugi embodied the archetypical *shishi*, figures from the late Edo period that rallied under the cry of *Sonno Joi* (Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians), that stood militantly against Western imperialism and influence.[194] While this historical significance was largely lost on the U.S., it was much more evocative in Asia, particularly in nations that were subjugated by Imperial Japan. This association between Mitsurugi and modern Japanese militarism was so apparent throughout East Asia, and particularly in South Korea, where the character was censored by changing him into an English sailor-turned-samurai named Arthur that was otherwise identical to Mitsurugi.[195] While this version of Mitsurugi was available in some Western releases, it was due to more asset recycling than any reaction to historical sensitivity. This dynamic demonstrated how the cultural odor of a video game was not always equally detectable, nor equally palatable, across various cultural contexts. While American gamers could easily recognize Mitsurugi as the archetypical samurai, the imperialist associations with such found throughout East Asia was not as readily

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[194] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 237.
[195] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 237.

apparent. Thus, American gamers could uniquely enjoy the aroma of Mitsurugi's character without catching a whiff of the character's controversial historical subtext.

Other East Asian characters were likewise cultural short hands, though lacking the historical baggage of Mitsurugi. Other East Asian characters, such as the Okinawan Maxi, the Korean Yun-seong, or the Chinese Xianghua and Kilik, were likewise cast in protagonist roles, though still subordinate to Mitsurugi throughout the series. While Western characters, such as the German Siegfried, also acted as protagonists in various games, they were more often presented as colorful and fantastical antagonists. These included the zombified Spanish pirate Cervantes, the infamously sparsely clothed and English Ivy Valentine, to Siegfried's demented and grotesque alter ego, Nightmare. These characters and their often-antagonistic roles further reinforced the centrality of East Asian characters, with Japanese Mitsurugi embodying the most direct conceptual challenge to this Western characters. While such dynamics were likely lost on most American gamers, Namco/Bandai Namco often licensed characters from popular franchises familiar to American gamers, such as Heihachi Mishima from *Tekken*, Ezio Auditore from the *Assassin's Creed*, or Link from *The Legend of Zelda*. While such licenses were more common in the *Super Smash Bros*. series, *SoulCalibur* was unique for including characters from outside video games, including Darth Vader from the *Star Wars* franchise and Spawn from Image Comics, appealing not only to American gamers but consumers of American popular culture as well.

Considering many of these characters drawn on history more so than other fighting game franchises, it was not shocking that this series held historical significance. The series first appeared at Evo in 2003, along with its open-handed counterpart *Tekken*. While the series enjoyed frequent appearances in Evo's main event lineups, this was not the core of *SoulCalibur*'s controversy. Rather, the series was often criticized as the poster child of stereotypical racial and

sexual characters designs, hypersexuality, and unrealistic character physiques tropes frequently seen in Japanese fighting games.[196] The character often singled out for this was Ivy Valentine, a femme fatale who fights with a snake sword (which can magically extend in size) and often in clothing more reminiscent of lingerie than armor. Furthermore, the series was known for frequently employing the historical Japanese trope of the red-haired foreigner, an emblem of the Other (often Westerners). Ironically, this trope was more often applied to non-Japanese East Asian characters, with this trope's implementation waning as the series progressed.[197] This made the *SoulCalibur* unique in its early years, applying the Other status to those from Japan's former imperial colonies, rather than applying this Other status to the world outside of Japan in general, as seen in the *Tekken* or *Street Fighter* series.[198] These practices would have likely affected the series reception across East Asia, though no definitive claim to such was made here. Rather, the consistent appearance of *SoulCalibur* at Evo, as well as the series later appealing to American gamers via inclusion of American pop culture icons, showed that Americans had no qualms in embracing this controversial series.

## V: Influences of Japanese Fighting Games on American Esports

The influx of these Japanese games not only helped Evo germinate into a massive spectator sport event but also influenced American esports overall. The stable longevity of Evo, especially as other competing competitions failed in the late 2000s, facilitated the professionalization of esports players. This stability of play also translated to a greater degree of parasociality between players and fans, allowing for a greater degree of celebrity for esports professionals. Furthermore, by simply gaining greater exposure to American pop culture via

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[196] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 234.
[197] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 235.
[198] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 238.

esports events, these Japanese games further globalized Japanese pop culture. This was especially true with fighting games, with their feature and broadcasting at Evo helping to popularize the gaming genre in tournament play. In essence, Evo was a proving ground not only for the host of players and fans the participated in it, but also for American appreciation of esports and Japanese pop culture through video games.

a. Professionalization of American Esports

The growth of professional esports competitions, such as Evo, further popularized tournament play as a profession. This dynamic was similar to how traditional sports broadcasts have inspired amateur and casual players to pursue professional careers. Professional gamers often played a direct part not only through this inspiration but also through directly mentoring newer players. Such mentorships also reinforced the sociality and sense of community amongst esports players, essentially bridging the skill gap that would otherwise limit interactions between players at distinct levels of professional play.[199] This inter-player dynamic was limited, however. Specifically, there was tension coming from more experienced players who were sometimes critical of new players‘ commonplace ignorance of established professional norms, or simply that newer players were not “hardcore enough“.[200] Despite this tension, American esports leagues and tournaments, including Evo, have strived to strike a balance between growing mainstream recognition and maintaining a culture of authenticity, centered around a simple “love of the game”, or gameplay for its own sake.[201]

Unfortunately, this “love of the game” often outlived the same professional careers of players who touted it. As Zhouxiang pointed out, most professional players start their careers in

[199] Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 96.
[200] Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 235.
[201] Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 236.

their teens only to retire by their mid-twenties.[202] While there has been a multiplicity of reasons behind players' decisions to retire, the most commonly cited reasons were biological. Specifically, general declines in hand-eye coordination, reaction speed, and hand dexterity associated with aging.[203] Despite this projected decline, many famous fighting game players, such as Knee, Hungrybox, and Justin Wong, continued to compete (and even place) in major tournaments into the 2020s, such as Evo, despite starting their careers in the 2000s. While these elite level players may simply be the exception to the rule, these players' multi-decade-spanning careers warranted further examination of the potential longevity of esports careers.

Fittingly, gaming publishers have often modeled official tournaments of their games on traditional sports events. Specifically, publishers and event organizers modeled these tournaments after professional soccer and baseball games and tournaments not only to expand the player base and audience size, but also to attract greater levels of sponsorships and media attention.[204] This dynamic was apparent in Evo's acquisition of an official Capcom sponsorship in 2006, as well as Evo's collaboration with Capcom in establishing the "Road to Evo" qualifier tournament series in 2011. Furthermore, Evo's implementation of livestreams starting in 2011 not only facilitated exposure in lieu of mainstream press coverage but also paralleled live sports' television coverage and such's ability to maintain audience engagement from afar.

This ability to maintain Americans' attention on esports was further buttressed by the growth of the video game industry itself. Specifically, the increasing revenues of major international games studios (often dubbed AAA studios by the gaming community), such as Capcom or Bandai Namco, allowed for their greater financial investment into esports

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[202] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 268.
[203] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 268.
[204] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 171.

competitions, such as Evo. Rising production costs across the gaming industry in recent decades led to the dissolution of most mid-level games studios, with AAA studios not only able to absorb the costs but also greater profits from a less competitive market.[205] Such profits were also supplemented by the rise in esports, with tournaments acting as a form of advertising even before direct sponsorships. In this sense, Evo acted as a prevalent advertising platform for studios such as Capcom. As Evo's success and influence grew, it not only generated greater awareness for the studios whose games were featured but also encouraged greater AAA investment in Evo that would only grow beyond 2013.

### b. Globalization of Japanese Popular Culture

As this involvement of Japanese AAA studios in American esports competitions implied, Evo also helped further the globalization of Japanese popular culture. As Hutchinson observed, Japanese video games international distribution, including but not limited to the U.S., constituted a new, rapidly growing dispensary of Japanese culture on a global scale.[206] These Japanese video games, including the previously examined fighting game series, provided a mode for both the exposure to Japanese pop culture as well as for non-Japanese to critically examine their own assumptions about Japanese culture overall.[207] Not only did this form of acculturation demonstrate the global marketability of Japanese pop culture, but it also challenged the binary conceptualization of globalization. As historian Mia Consalvo explained, the persistent prominence of Japanese firms across global markets, in both gaming hardware and software, countered the Orientalist assumption of globalization as a U.S./Western-centric diffusion.[208] Rather, Consalvo presented cosmopolitanism as an analytical alternative to this apparently defunct

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[205] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda,* 213.
[206] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 5.
[207] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 256.
[208] Consalvo, *From Atari to Zelda*, 215.

formulation of global ties. Specifically, Consalvo argued the spread of cultural values were determined by negotiations in and among various video game localization firms, rather than cultural spill-over by, for example, the U.S.[209] In this vein, Consalvo attributed Capcom's global success not only to the company's stalwart maintenance of its original IPs but also in its extensive localization of game series that eventually became more popular in the West, such as *Devil May Cry* or *Resident Evil*.[210] While more pronounced in these series, this logic was nonetheless applicable to more universally popular Capcom series, such as *Street Fighter* and its fundamental role in developing Evo and the American FGC in general. The application of this lens of cosmopolitanism to Evo and the various Japanese video games it featured over the decades ultimately supported Consalvo's claim. The first example of support lied with the way Japanese fighting games presented its protagonists. Specifically, the presentation of Japanese characters as both grounded and central protagonists reinforced the centrality of Japaneseness within the American FGC and abroad.[211] Such characters included *SoulCalibur*'s Mitsurugi, *Tekken*'s Kazuya Mishima, *Street Fighter*'s Ryu, along with the majority of *Super Smash Bros*. Japanese video game character roster. The centrality of Japaneseness to these series' characters and narratives collectively fostered Japanese cultural odor in the American FGC overall. In this sense, the smell of Japanese fighting games permeated events like Evo in a manner that not only popularized such culture within the tournament scene; in fact, as fighting game tournaments featuring Japanese games gained popularity, they essentially became dispensaries of Japanese cultural odor that lent themselves to the growing cultural fascination with the archipelago that swept the U.S. throughout the 2000s.

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[209] Consalvo, *From Atari to Zelda*, 103.
[210] Consalvo, *From Atari to Zelda*, 161.
[211] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 86.

### c. Parasocial Status of Professional Gamers

Considering the growing popularity of competitive gaming, it was no surprise that the esports athletes gained greater social visibility in tandem. Esports' fandom, naturally, also expanded in proportion to esports overall popularity within the U.S.[212] Such fandom not only centered around the competitions or games themselves, but the players themselves. The history of Evo demonstrated this, as this annual tournament series raised the American profile of both Japanese fighting games as well as the professional gamers who mastered them. A host of online clips of gameplay moments, such as the Daigo Parry, enhanced the virality of esports. This was alongside the creation of an official event livestream, which made Evo viewership significantly more accessible. As a result of these, pro gamers who placed at Evo or even other tournament series obtained celebrity status and greater regard from their audiences by the 2010s.[213] This not only reflected the social progression of a thriving spectator sport but was ultimately an extension of the competitive arcade culture from which the modern American FGC emerged. As Hutchinson pointed out, the social context of arcades was just as imperative to their popularity as the games featured therein, as arcades cultivated an environment primed for escapism and power fantasies in response to the increasingly corporate and controlled society from which they blossomed.[214] Though arcades were well-withered by 2003, the competitive culture that underpinned these third places transferred to esports, with the highest level of pro gamers inhabiting the zenith of agency and ability within this American subculture. Esports athletes at this level were not celebrities for the increased exposure alone; rather, their skill level that allowed them to consistently compete at the highest level of competitive gaming attracted and maintained this exposure. The fact that many

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[212] Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 235.
[213] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 169.
[214] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 96.

of these athletes were publishing memoirs before even hitting fifty, such as Daigo Umehara's *The Will to Keep Winning* (2016) or Kevin "iDK" Hu's *The Human Behind the Controller* (2019), reflected both the briefness of esports careers as well as the level of celebrity players were able to obtain in such a short time. In fact, attempts by sponsors and organizers to model esports off traditional spectator sports like baseball eventually manifested in the emergence of esports training cards, with the Electronic Sports League selling esports athlete trading cards on its official website.[215] The ability to not only maintain careers but even publish books on them, ultimately, further revealed the growing popularity of esports.

d. Popularization of Japanese Fighting Games

While Japanese fighting games existed outside of tournaments, events like Evo further popularized this genre to American audiences. However, American affinity for Japanese fighting games preceded Evo's own recognizability. Japanese fighting, horror, and, most notably, roleplaying games the emerged in the 1990s and 2000s were globally influential, establishing the gameplay and aesthetic standards for these genres.[216] By 2014, Evo and other esports events worldwide achieved a market revenue of roughly $194 million.[217] Competitions such as Evo also drew the attention of commercial brands outside of the traditional hardware or software companies. Esports competitions' rebound in the early 2010s provided opportunities for greater access to the "young cyber generation" that global brands such as Nike, BMW, and Red Bull took increasing advantage of since.[218] As these events garnered increased attention for Japanese fighting games, Japanese publishers saw a growing market for their gaming software. In fact,

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[215] "Trading Cards," Collectibles, ESL Shop, last accessed September 7, 2025, https://shop.esl.com/collections/kolex-trading-cards?srsltid=AfmBOopwcJDhTzRsUoPNeHXBffWGgZ6ye3wfUKfn-hFnGuSfXuLchKlZ.
[216] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 203.
[217] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 1.
[218] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Video Games*, 218.

though often contingent on domestic success, popularity in the West was often a historical catalyst for these Japanese publishers to expand internationally.[219] However, this initiative waned with the emergent global prominence of American video game publishers throughout the 2000s, with Japanese games going from fifty in 2002 percent of the global market to only ten percent by 2009.[220] This fall from dominance encouraged Japanese firms to be more experimental, including Capcom and other major Japanese fighting game publishers' more aggressive investment in esports as an alternative mode of influence to the increasingly saturated game marketplace. As a result of this trend, major esports tournament series increasingly occupied the same spaces previously reserved for traditional sports by the early 2020s, including Evo 2022 taking place at the Michelob ULTRA Arena, the home court for the WNBA team, Las Vegas Aces.[221]

This growth was not only noticeable to players, fans, sponsors, and organizers, but academics as well. As Zhouxiang both related and demonstrated, academic study of video games has grown between 2000 and 2020.[222] In this way, American scholars of Japanese video games joined their colleagues who studied anime and manga, such as Susan Napier and Frederik Schodt, in recognizing and documenting the growing influence of Japanese video games within American pop culture. Consalvo noticed this growing culture affinity outside the context of competitive gaming when she highlighted *Katamari Damacy*'s uniquely Japanese style and aesthetic as a case study in the cultural persistence of Japanese video games within the U.S.[223] Considering the *Street Fighter* series' longevity in the U.S. FGC and overall mechanical influence on 2D fighting games, including the massively popular American fighting game series

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[219] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 121.
[220] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 122.
[221] "Evo 2022," Start.gg, last accessed September 7, 2025, https://www.start.gg/tournament/evo-2022/details.
[222] Zhouxiang, *A History of Competitive Gaming*, 1.
[223] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 30.

*Mortal Kombat*, Consalvo's analytical lens was clearly transferrable here. Furthermore, considering how Japanese fighting games' distinct aesthetics, more cartoonish than the American *Mortal Kombat* or *Injustice* series, Susan Napier's theory that the distinct animation styles of anime facilitated their longevity within American pop culture was likewise transferrable to Japanese video games.[224] In this way, both Japanese video games' cultural odor and the American scholarship that studied such were assisted by the established cultural presence of anime and manga and the scholars that catalogued this presence.

## VI: Conclusion

Evo's historical trajectory demonstrated America's historical love of Japanese popular culture. While only becoming the world's largest esports event in 2024, the 2000s served as the launchpad for Evo's atmospheric growth. The tournament series' move from arcades and college game rooms to the Las Vegas Strip reflected the growing prominence of both the tournament series and fighting games among American gamers. The annual frequency of the tournament series, even throughout an economic recession that decimated other American tournaments, if not entire industries, reinforced this cultural prominence. While further research is needed to objectively analyze Evo's player engagement across recent decades, the data here reflected the tournament series' ability to maintain its professional player base. Though also requiring further research, the data on audience engagement here was congruent with Evo's growing popularity.

Evo's expansion was greatly facilitated by the expansion of Japanese fighting games in the American marketplace. The *Street Fighter* series was massively popular even before becoming a main event for the Battle by the Bay; by becoming a staple event for Evo, it lent its inherent popularity to create greater exposure for the tournament series, as seen with the virality

[224] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 33.

of the Daigo Parry. Even though *Super Smash Bros*. joined the Evo lineup late, its arrival nonetheless supplemented Evo with a series that was popular among casual and professional gamers alike. Fan reactions to Nintendo's attempt to prevent *Brawl*'s event at Evo 2013 further demonstrated the global influence of Smash fans and professional players, as well as Evo itself. The inclusion of the *Tekken* series not only allowed Evo to transcend the traditional 2D format but also reinforced the centrality of Japanese characters and fighting games within the American FGC. This trend was extended by the inclusion of the *SoulCalibur* series, with its prolific (and often problematic) depiction of global populations parallel to Evo's growing global presence. All these series enjoyed a mutualistic relationship with Evo; as they grew more popular, so did Evo, and vice versa.

Lastly, Evo's impact on American gaming and pop culture was felt throughout the 2000s. As its community grew tandem to American esports scene, Evo expanded both interest in professional gaming as well as avenues for American gamers to professionalize. As such professional gamers participated and placed throughout Evo's history, they gained a celebrity status that raised the prestige of themselves and American esports overall. Furthermore, Evo's near exclusive use of Japanese video games between 2003 and 2013 not only reflected the growing prominence of Japanese video games in the U.S. but even contributed to it. Specifically, Evo transplanted Japanese fighting games from fading arcades to luxury hotels and convention centers; in this way, Evo acted as an accelerant for the explosion of Japanese video games in both casual and professional play.

Considering these facts, it was no small wonder that the Evolution Championship series became a household name in American competitive gaming. Ultimately, Evo's history was brilliant example of how Japanese video games maintained their popularity, despite prevailing

narratives of Japanese video games' stagnation and declining sales. Evo not only demonstrated that Japanese video games remained popular throughout the 2000s but even laid the foundation for what would become the most popular Esports event in world history.

# Chapter III:

# Self-Emulation:

# Independent Localization and the Popularization of the *Fire Emblem* Series

## I: Introduction

Independent localization is the translation and dissemination of foreign language games by individual, or small groups of, fans and gamers. This is distinct from (but not unrelated to) video game piracy, or the unlawful copying and distribution of gaming software. However, both have been an increasingly present aspect of Japanese cultural dissemination in the U.S. Institutionally, this presence was evident from the FBI's famous "You Wouldn't Steal a Car" anti-piracy campaign, in which digital film piracy was likened to grand theft auto. Independently, this was also apparent with several websites dedicated to enabling digital piracy, such as Reddit's r/Piracy or The Pirate Bay. While often associated with digital downloads of films and television, there has been growing interest in the piracy of video games over the past decades as well. One facet of this interest has been expanding the access of foreign video games otherwise inaccessible to American audiences. One facet of this expansion was found among the one section of Nintendo's *Fire Emblem* series' fanbase. Specifically, a notable minority of the fanbase copied and translated digital files of *Fire Emblem* games, yet to be localized/released in the U.S., and digitally distributed them for free. Such fans, relying on their own Japanese linguistic and technological expertise, did so without direct compensation from a publisher, localization firm, or even a customer. These freelance and free-of-charge fans thus did not conduct the simple piracy that so incensed the FBI throughout the 2000s. Rather, such fans earned the moniker of independent localizers for effectively assuming the role of localization

firms, as both translators and cultural negotiators. These independent localizers occupied a unique position in Japanese cultural diffusion into the U.S. Specifically, they were able to not only maintain an authentic level of Japanese cultural odor in their fans translations but also maintain narrative elements that were particularly evocative of contemporary American culture. This chapter will argue that *Fire Emblem*'s character and narrative tropes appealed to 2000s American society. Furthermore, it will argue that the independent localization of the series constituted another metric for gauging the cultural permeation of Japanese video games in the context of the U.S.

Ultimately, this independent approach to video game localization enabled its agents to create a cultural odor that is both more authentically Japanese as well as more uniquely American. While the study of independent localization is particularly new, historians such as Consalvo have begun to pay more attention to the ways fan translations can produce this seemingly paradoxical cultural odor. Building from the previous two chapters, this one analyzed both how cultural odor of a video game can be maintained outside the context of publishers and localization firms as well as the cosmopolitan nature of independent localization. Specifically, this chapter will highlight the independent localizations of the *Fire Emblem* series in order to demonstrate the distinct methods, priorities, and community of ROM hackers and fan translators. This chapter will expand the methodological range of the field by juxtaposing the institutional and independent localizations of the *Fire Emblem* series in the 2000s to better understand the distinct ways independent localizations facilitate cultural transfusion.

### a. *Fire Emblem* Series Primer

Among Nintendo's eclectic game catalogue, the *Fire Emblem* series has historically filled a particular niche. Specifically, *Fire Emblem* has served as Nintendo's flagship strategy game series. While its early history with independent localization correctly implied a lack of commercial interest outside of Japan, the modern state of the series could not be farther from its roots. For example, the most commercially successful game in the series was *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, released globally on July 16, 2019, which sold over three million copies by June of 2020.[225] In fact, 2.29 million of those copies were sold in the first three months of the game's concurrent global release; this placed *Three Houses* as a close second to the then-most successful entry *Fire Emblem: Fates*, released in 2015.[226] As video game collector and commentator Stealth observed in 2025, this commercial success further enabled *Three Houses* to become the most successful strategy role-playing game (SRPG) in history.[227]

While *Three Houses* marked the peak of any single entry's popularity, such main series games only related part of the series' overall popularity. Specifically, multiple games outside of the relatively niche SRPG genre have featured *Fire Emblem* characters and settings. The most famous of these was Nintendo's flagship fighting game franchise: *Super Smash Bros*. (also known as *Smash*), first featuring *Fire Emblem* protagonists Marth and Roy in *Super Smash Bros. Melee*. More characters, such as Ike or Lucina, would be featured in later games, which made

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[225] Prince of Iris, "Report: Three Houses is the best-selling Fire Emblem of all time, surpassing three million units sold worldwide," News, Serenes Forest, November 6, 2020, last accessed September 22, 2025, https://serenesforest.net/2020/11/06/report-three-houses-is-the-best-selling-fire-emblem-of-all-time-surpassing-three-million-units-sold-worldwide/.

[226] Abby Espiritu, "Fire Emblem: Three Houses On Track to Become the Best-Selling Fire Emblem," *TheGamer*, November 5, 2019, last accessed September 22, 2025, https://www.thegamer.com/fire-emblem-three-houses-on-track-best-selling-fire-emblem/.

[227] Stealth40K, "The only thing I'd push...," X, September 2, 2025, last accessed September 22, 2025, https://x.com/Stealth40k/status/1962889314179653918.

*Fire Emblem* one of the most represented Nintendo game series within *Super Smash Bros*. history. This representation was so acute (roughly 10% of the most recent game's total character roster) as to incite the ire of the *Smash* fans, many of whom chaffed at the sheer volume of *Fire Emblem* characters and their distinctive play style.[228] While this chagrin was compounded by the abundance of anime-esque, sword-wielding characters with the *Smash* series, the particular focus on the *Fire Emblem* characters tacitly conveyed the series influence on the fighting game franchise. The popularity of the *Fire Emblem* series also manifested in the spin-off games *Fire Emblem Warriors* and *Fire Emblem: Three Hopes*. These games were a part of the Musou genre of games, which were popularized and standardized by the *Dynasty Warriors* series. This genre, known for its fast-paced, hack-and-slash gameplay, was the polar opposite of SRPG's slow and strategic pace of play. While such genre crossovers revealed the growing prevalence of the Musou genre of games, they also revealed the popularity of *Fire Emblem* and the confidence Nintendo had placed on their main SRPG series.

Though many of the handheld and home consoles that featured *Fire Emblem* games have become obsolete, there are two prominent avenues for fans to play these older games. For one, the Nintendo Switch Online has re-released titles such as *The Blazing Blade* and *The Sacred Stones* for play on the Switch, and *Path of Radiance* on the Switch 2. However, these are based on a subscription to Nintendo Switch Online, which does not allow players to retain ownership of the game if that subscription expires. Conversely, online ROM distribution from sites, such as CoolROM or ROMsGames, have been offering these same titles for free since the early/mid

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[228] Marcus Stewart, "Super Smash Bros. Ultimate Does Not Have Too Many 'Anime Sword Users'," *Game Informer*, October 6, 2021, last accessed September 22, 2025, https://gameinformer.com/opinion/2021/10/06/super-smash-bros-ultimate-does-not-have-too-many-anime-sword-users.

2000s, with emulators allowing players to access and own their own digital copies, in perpetuity. Despite Nintendo's series of lawsuits against ROM sites such as LoveROMS in the past decade, ROM and emulator sites continue to carry Nintendo titles, including many entries in the *Fire Emblem* series.[229] This perseverance of *Fire Emblem* ROMs, even as Nintendo attempts to monopolize access to its games, spoke to both the persistence of ROM play among American gamers as well as the cultural entrenchment of the *Fire Emblem* series overall.

### b. Independent Localization Primer

Independent localization is a complex process, in both translation and emulation. This has been more commonly known as ROM (Read Only Memory) hacking, with ROMs consisting of file images that are digitally extracted from existing game cartridges or disks.[230] The copying of extracted ROMs was, and remains, a form of copyright infringement. Despite this legal boundary, the strict localization standards for Japanese video games ultimately produced a subculture of gamers centered around the creation, dissemination, and enjoyment of hacked game files, later including those of the *Fire Emblem* series.[231] The biggest wave of this form of localization was in the 1990s, when most Japanese publishers only localized their most popular titles for American gamers.[232] Furthermore, Japanese publishers focused primarily on home consoles throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which ultimately limited the marketability of Japanese games; this was not only due to American gamers being more focused on PC gaming but also American publishers, such as Microsoft and Electronic Arts, who shared this focus on computer

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[229] Sam Machkovech, "Nintendo to ROM sites: Forget Cease-and-Desist, Now We're Suing," *Ars Technica*, July 23, 2018, last accessed September 25, 2025, https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2018/07/nintendo-to-rom-sites-forget-cease-and-desist-now-were-suing/.

[230] Mia Consalvo, "Unintended Travel: ROM Hackers and Fan Translations of Japanese Video Games," in *Gaming Globally: Production, Play, and Place*, ed. N. Huntemann and B. Aslinger (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 122.

[231] Consalvo, "Unintended Travel," 120.

[232] Consalvo, "Unintended Travel," 127.

gaming.[233] This divide was further widened by the unique success of handheld gaming throughout Japan, which encouraged Japanese publishers to maintain focus on local markets, rather than trying to spark fascination with handheld gaming abroad.[234] However, as Americans increasingly accepted and anticipated Japanese video games and gaming consoles, publishers such as Nintendo or Sony increasingly localized their catalogues to cash in on this receptive consumer base. Americans became more receptive to Japanese cultural odor, especially more prominently in television and comics, Japanese publishers' unwillingness to localize their products ultimately hindered the potential growth of the Japanese video game industry.[235] One result of this change was the localization of *Fire Emblem: The Blazing Blade* in 2003, the very first *Fire Emblem* game to officially cross the Pacific, despite the series' established popularity in Japan. Despite this turning point for *Fire Emblem*'s American popularity, this was not a complete rotation. Rather, many Japanese firms remained focused on the Japanese gaming market, with localization efforts remaining relegated to secondary interest.[236] *Fire Emblem* games including and after *The Blazing Blade* received American localizations while previous entries remained region locked. As Valve founder and primary owner of Steam Gabe Newell famously explained:

> "Piracy is almost always a service problem and not a pricing problem... If a pirate offers a product anywhere in the world, 24x7, purchasable from the convenience of your personal computer, and the legal provider says the product is region-locked, will come to your country 3 months after the US release, and can only be purchased at a brick and mortar store, then the pirate's service is more valuable."[237]

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[233] Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 196.
[234] Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 211.
[235] Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 195.
[236] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 176.
[237] Greg Tito, "Valve's Gabe Newell Says Piracy is a Service Problem," *The Escapist*, November 28, 2011, last accessed September 22, 2025, https://www.escapistmagazine.com/Valves-Gabe-Newell-Says-Piracy-Is-a-Service-Problem/.

In essence, video game piracy is a response to publishers' unwillingness to make their games more universally accessible. Thus, independent localization represented an alternative to waiting an undisclosed amount of time for a particular game to receive U.S. localization. In this way, ROM hackers not only actively facilitated American commercial interests but ultimately acted as Japanese pop culture distributors. By focusing on recreating as authentic of a translation as possible, independent localizers possessed a unique potential to disseminate more Japanese cultural odor than their institutional, profit-oriented counterparts.

## II: Historiographical Background

Like the previous chapters in this thesis, this chapter drew upon Iwabuchi's theory of cultural odor and Consalvo's theory of cosmopolitanism. The former was interwoven throughout this chapter, particularly in the contrasting the ways American institutional and independent localization negotiate and present the original cultural odor of Japanese video games. The latter was evident in how ROM hackers and fan translators, along with the websites where they operated, further decentralized the localization process by circumventing publishers and the traditional distribution process. More uniquely, this chapter drew upon the emergent historical discussions of ROM hacking and fan translations of Japanese video games. This discussion has been led by Mia Consalvo, in which independent localization represented another avenue for American acculturation of Japanese video games. Consalvo rooted this discussion in independent localizers unique ability to modify these Japanese games, free from institutional prerogatives, from simple localization to completely changing a given game's narrative and aesthetic

identity.[238] Furthermore, argued that fan translators produced new points of entry for Americans interested in Japanese video games, or even Japanese culture overall.[239]

These historiographical trends will be further developed in this chapter to establish how fan translations of the *Fire Emblem* series helped popularize the same series in the U.S. The inherent incentive of independent localizers to maintain the cultural odor of the original game in their translations will be expressed throughout this chapter; this would further validate both Iwabuchi's theory of cultural odor as a source of cultural appeal as well as Consalvo's theory of cosmopolitanism as a decentralized process where cultural odor is not dictated by one but negotiated by many. Finally, the *Fire Emblem* series will be used as an exemplar in how even originally Japanese games can present characters and narrative motifs that carry American cultural odors. In this way, this chapter will expand on Consalvo's claim that ROM hackers expand points of access to video games by explaining how they can maintain and highlight American cultural odor in Japanese video games.

## III: *Fire Emblem* Series Background

The history of the *Fire Emblem* series goes back as far as 1990, when the first game (*Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon and the Blade of Light*) was first released on Nintendo's Famicom console. The period between this release and the series' official entry into the U.S. is vital for understanding the series' total historical trajectory. However, this study only focused between 2003 and 2013, beginning with the American release of *Fire Emblem: The Blazing Blade* and

[238] Consalvo, "Unintended Travel," 125-7.
[239] Consalvo, "Unintended Travel," 135.

ending with the release of *Fire Emblem: Awakening*. This period reflected the period in which *Fire Emblem* went from a niche Nintendo franchise to an internationally acclaimed SRPG series.

A strategy role-playing game, also known as a tactical role-playing game (TRPG), functions exactly as its name implies. Specifically, these are narratively driven (and thus dialogue-heavy) games, centered around various kinds of characters which the player controls, with gameplay emphasizing slow-paced, methodical strategy as the player combats a computer-controlled army. These are very similar to JRPGs, or Japanese role-playing games, which are known for both known for their distinctly Japanese origin and animation style as well as heavy amounts of dialogue and narrative focus compared to other genres. Some of Japan's most popular franchises fell into this genre, including *Pokémon*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Dragon Quest*. While the *Fire Emblem* series is a Japanese series, it has remained distinct for various reasons: the use of a cadre of characters that exceeded the typical character roster of JRPGs; these application of anime art styles to characters with Western attire and names, evocative of Medieval Europe; and, most importantly, the use of gridded maps on which characters move on, akin to chess. In these ways, and despite being a Japanese game series, Western cultural odor was deeply embedded within the *Fire Emblem* franchise. While the player's characters are distinct and present varying motivations and personalities, the enemy characters are often presented as generic, faceless hordes led by authoritarian villains ranging from Shakespearean to cartoonish.[240] Examples of this genre have come from both the U.S., such as the *XCOM* series, as well as Japan, such as *Final Fantasy: Tactics* or *Disgaea*.

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[240] In the case of *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, there is a class of enemy-only monsters known literally as Faceless. These zombie-like characters arguably best embodied *Fire Emblem*'s historic trope of using mindless droves of enemies. While these kinds of enemies do not appear in every game, such as in *Blazing Blade* or *Path of Radiance*, they remained a frequently occurring motif throughout the series.

## a. Narrative

Narratively, *Fire Emblem* games have been distinct if somewhat formulaic. Each game focuses on a distinct story, with settings sometimes overlapping between titles. This came in the form of direct sequels (as *Radiant Dawn* was to *Path of Radiance*), direct prequels (as *The Blazing Blade* was to *The Binding Blade*), or simply recycled settings (as *Awakening* was to *Shadow Dragon*). Across these various settings, stories centered around a single heroic protagonist (often a member of the nobility, if not royalty) gathering allies to combat an aggressive and malevolent army, often led by an evil monarch. The first protagonist of the series, Marth, set the formula that would inspire later characters, such as Roy from *The Binding Blade* or Eirika from *The Sacred Stones*. Even when protagonists lack the obligatory noble or royal genealogy, such as the humble mercenary-turned-general Ike from *Path of Radiance*, they are still presented as unambiguously good. Furthermore, these evil monarchs were almost always puppets or figureheads for the real, final antagonists, often avatars for a malefic deity, if not said deities themselves. Examples of this included the possessed mage Lyon from *The Sacred Stones*, the Mad King Ashnard from *Path of Radiance*, and Shadow Dragon Medeus from *Shadow Dragon*.

These narrative dynamics were distinct from the typical storylines and character motifs that Nintendo published, often marketed towards children or families. Games designed for children/families, Nintendo's target audience, tend to focus on characters making sense of and thriving in chaotic environments, such as a world of monsters to be captured in balls in order to fight against other captured monsters; games designed for teens and young adults, especially adventure games and RPGs, tend to emphasize rebellion or struggle against monstrous or

authoritarian antagonists.[241] *Fire Emblem*'s consistent focus on this teen-oriented, anti-authoritarian narrative focus contributed to its niche (though not necessarily singular) status within Nintendo's family-oriented game catalogue. However, this same narrative focus likewise appealed to older fans seeking a more mature experience, especially for those already fans of Nintendo. Arguably, this shift in narrative focus was just one expression of Nintendo's tendency towards innovation, though more visible in hardware (e.g., dual-screen system of the Nintendo DS or motion controls of the Nintendo Wii). In essence, *Fire Emblem*'s story motifs enabled Nintendo to reach new audiences outside its traditional base.

Despite the big eyes and colorful hair that dominated the series' plethora of character designs, the settings, clothing, and weaponry of the series were ostensibly Western. From European plate armor, European weaponry such as broadswords and lances, European-style castles and fortifications, to even social titles such as kings, bishops, and knights, Western influence was omnipresent. In these various ways, the settings of the *Fire Emblem* series Japanese cultural odor coincided with Western cultural odor. As such, *Fire Emblem* not only appealed to Americans interested in Japanese games and character aesthetics, but also to those Americans interested in medieval European designs and settings. This bident of cultural appeal evidently landed, and in doing so revealed that cultural odor is not a zero-sum game between competing cultural influences. Rather, cultural odors can be combined in various, complex ways that constitute a new, composite cultural odor. This cosmopolitan cultural odor reflected an increasingly familiar and interactive global community in the late twentieth century, showing another way in which video games can provide windows into the cultures in which they arise. As

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[241] Derek Burrill, "Jet-Set Kids," in *The Japanification of Children's Pop Culture: From Godzilla to Miyazaki*, ed. Mark West (Scarecrow Press, 2009), 111.

such, *Fire Emblem*'s fantastical narratives and settings reflected the reality of an increasingly intertwined global environment.

b. Characters

The characters and archetypes presented throughout the *Fire Emblem* series further reinforced the formulaic nature of the series, already evident through its narrative motifs. The main thrust of these motifs was evident through the series' various protagonists. In addition to their oft noble bloodlines, these characters were also vested with unique, magical swords. These swords, such as Falchion and Ragnell, in addition to their magical powers (more deadly to dragons, able to pierce divinely blessed armor, etc.), ultimately reinforced these characters' centrality to the narrative. This motif within the *Fire Emblem* reflected a common trope with Japanese pop culture. Specifically, *Fire Emblem* protagonists personified the "Born Under a Lucky Star" trope found throughout anime and manga, especially those marketed towards young men. Under this trope, protagonists have been portrayed as inherently gifted, if not uniquely superior, within the setting they inhabit.[242] In this way, *Fire Emblem* characters were reminiscent of many heroic fantasy figures of divine destiny recognizable to American audiences in the 2000s: King Arthur and Excalibur of Arthurian legend; Thor and Mjolnir from Marvel Comics; and Link and the Master Sword from *The Legend of Zelda*, to name a few noteworthy examples.

While the list of examples of this trope is expansive, one of the most recognizable expressions of this archetype was the *Pokémon* animated series protagonist Ash Ketchum. While

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[242] Kristen Nyitray, "Game On to Game After," *References and User Services Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (Fall 2019): 215, https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/stable/26875438?searchText=%28video+game+historiography%29&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoAdvancedSearch%3Fq0%3Dvideo%2Bgame%2Bhistoriography%26f0%3Dall%26c1%3DAND%26f1%3Dall%26acc%3Don%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A91657bde69a18a9bcc0064af2ac2f78b&seq=3.

this character's lackluster win-loss record with Pokémon battles has become a meme among fans, Ash Ketchum was centered in the narrative and setting even outside their role as the series' protagonist. His unique goal to become the very best Pokémon trainer, the frequently changing supporting cast that consistently revolved around Ash's journeys, his uniquely powerful Pikachu that was able to defeat more evolved/strong Pokémon, and often unearned narrative victories made this "Born Under a Lucky Star" application painfully apparent.[243] Likewise, characters such as Marth, Roy, Chrom/Lucina, Hector/Lyn/Eliwood, and Eirika/Ephraim were all of noble birth, were uniquely destined to save their respective settings from existential threats, possessed magical swords that only they could use, and had supporting casts of characters that revolved around their particular mission. Even though *Path of Radiance*/*Radiant Dawn*'s Ike was unique for not having noble lineage, his unique martial prowess, role in overthrowing his setting's major deity, and his obligatory magic sword ultimately syncopated on this trope, rather than fully deviating from it.

While this character trope was central to *Fire Emblem*, this was but one of many archetypes that defined characters across the series' various titles. A full breakdown of these various archetypes and their various syncopations would be worth its own study. Therefore, this section will provide only some noteworthy examples, for the sake of brevity. These archetype examples, as well as those not featured here, were named for the characters in *Shadow Dragon and the Blade of Light* that originally fulfilled these archetypical roles (healers, tanks, damage dealers, etc.). While somewhat minimizing character variation across the series, this formulaic approach inherently appealed to those who were fans of these archetypes. In essence, the fundamental nature of these archetypes both shaped the series' narrative identity and provided

[243] Gina O'Melia, *Japanese Influence on American Children's Television* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 121-22.

easily identifiable character roles essential for any role-playing game. Even when characters deviated from these archetypes, these deviations provided a new way for players to engage with characters while still maintaining their overall role in gameplay and narratives.

The first exemplary archetype, the Jagen, was often among the first kind of character which players encounter, aside from the protagonist. Jagen was himself a mentor and guardian figure to the first protagonist, Marth. He also started as a pre-promoted character, leaving him significantly stronger than other concurrently playable characters in the early game.[244] While these characters were useful for the early game, especially for those new to the series or SRPGs in general, they typically lost ground to other characters as the game progressed. Prominent examples of this archetype included Marcus and Oswin from *The Blazing Blade*, paired with lords Eliwood and Hector (respectively) as both narrative and ludic guardians. Many of these guardian characters broke from this dynamic, including Seth, Titania, and Sothe. Seth and Titania, from *The Sacred Stones* and *Path of Radiance*, respectively, were noteworthy for both being introduced early as well as continuing to maintain power and utility throughout the entire game. Sothe from Radiant Dawn was even more unique in this role, as his availability in Path of Radiance allowed his final stats to transfer to his starting stats Radiant Dawn, essentially allowing the player to decide how powerful he could be. With characters such as Gandalf, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and other archetypical mentor characters having cultural prominence throughout the 2000s, the Jagen archetype coincidentally possessed a cultural odorlessness/transferability that American gamers easily recognize.

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[244] Leveling up throughout the *Fire Emblem* series was fairly consistent. Typically, there are two tiers regarding a character's level: starting classes such as cavalier, mage, or priest, and promoted classes, such as paladin, sage, or bishop. Most characters are recruited as their starting class, with pre-promoted characters becoming more common in the mid to late game. Jagen characters, by nature of starting early and pre-promoted, assist less experienced (or cautious) players by providing a character that is both less likely to die as well as more likely to defeat enemy units.

Another major archetype in the series referred to a pair of characters: Cain and Abel. Somewhat reminiscent of these names' biblical origins, they denoted close-knit companions (typically horsemen but not exclusively) that possessed opposite personalities as well as gameplay abilities. Cains were often clad in red armor and had serious personalities, whereas Abels tended to wear green armor and were more laidback. They often appeared simultaneously or soon after Jagen characters, though Cain and Abels tended to assume the role of Jagens in the mid to late-game. Furthermore, due to the dual nature of this archetype, they often appeared much more frequently than other archetypes. Sain and Kent were the most direct example of this archetype in *The Blazing Blade,* fitting for their appearance in the first American-localized *Fire Emblem* game. Forde and Kyle from *The Sacred Stones* broke from the early game tradition by appearing mid-game and having each assume the opposite personality associated with their colors. Oscar and Kieran of *Path of Radiance* further deviated from the formula by being introduced individually in the early game and mid-game, respectively.

Finally, the Est archetype constituted low-level/weak, and often child-age, characters introduced relatively late in the game, for their level. These characters were a challenge to use, as their fragility and late entry inherently disincentivized their own use. By the same token, Ests were uniquely rewarding for players who put the time and effort into training them and making them viable for the late game, with their stat growths often outpacing earlier characters. Nino best fits this mold, being a mage (an already fragile character class) introduced very late into *The Blazing Blade* that has the potential to be one of the best playable magic users. Elincia from *Path of Radiance* was another example of a low-leveled and introduced in the late game; interestingly, she also broke from this mold by being an adult as well as possessing a unique and magical sword, reminiscent of one of the series' protagonists. The most unique expression of this

archetype was in *The Sacred Stones*, which presented three distinct characters that all fit this mold. These characters, Ross, Amelia, and Ewan, were introduced as children that started as a class even lower than standard starting classes. As such, they both reinforced the Est archetype while also fundamentally shifting their presentation through their unique class progressions.

c. Historical Significance

Outside of its ludic and narrative facets, the *Fire Emblem* series both played into and shaped American pop culture. In fact, multiple consistent plot tropes throughout the series (and Japanese video games as well) evoked American social experience in the 1990s and the 2000s. Firstly, the trope of the absentee father permeated the *Fire Emblem* series. This trope is common to adventure games and RPGs, as they provide protagonists with the narrative freedom/rootlessness to set out on a grand adventure.[245] This trope was so common throughout JRPG series, such as *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Quest*, or *The Legend of Zelda*, as to become a meme across these various fanbases.[246] It could also be seen through most of the protagonists of the series, including Marth in *Shadow Dragon*, Hector in *The Blazing Blade*, and Chrom and Lucina in *Awakening*. While the absence of these characters' parental figures were tangential to their respective games' plots, some games went a step further by making the sudden death of parental figures (most often the father) as a plot catalyst, such as the death of Ike's father and his quest for revenge in *Path of Radiance* (somewhat continued in *Radiant Dawn*) or the death of Eirika and Ephraim's father as sparking the war that defined most of *Sacred Stones*' story. While not always this specific, American media and society was no stranger to parental estrangement by the 2000s. In the 1990s, the majority of families did not fit under the umbrella of the

[245] Rachel Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 109.
[246] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 104, 107.

"traditional" nuclear family model.[247] This reality was reflected in American pop culture throughout the 1990s. Popular television shows (such as *The Sopranos*) and films (such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) presented themes of familial dysfunction and disintegration.[248] While these shows were directed towards older audiences and their perspective on this societal change, this trope was no less evident in child-oriented media as well. Disney films, a quintessentially American cultural staple, frequently depicted characters living within single parent households in the 1990s and 2000s, from *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Lilo and Stitch*, and *Finding Nemo*, to name a few.[249] Considering the percentage of single-parent households in the U.S. rose from 19.5% of all child-present households in 1990 to 29.5% by 2008, this trend not only continued concurrently with U.S.'s formal introduction to the *Fire Emblem* series but even accelerated alongside it.[250] Jagen characters' guardian roles often played into this trope as well, essentially acting as surrogate paternal or maternal figures for their respective lords. Considering *Fire Emblem*'s target audience was teenagers, the series' American independent localizers filled a dual role of disseminating Japanese cultural products while simultaneously presenting American audiences with a familiar narrative trope.

Another common trope within *Fire Emblem* further appealed to the U.S., especially after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Specifically, the plot catalyst of sudden, surprise attack from an existentially hostile, outside enemy from throughout the series was coincidentally evocative of American collective memory in the years following 2001. For one, evocations of terrorism and rhetoric surrounding the War on Terror replaced communism and that around the Cold War

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[247] James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 5.
[248] Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out*, 64.
[249] Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out*, 74.
[250] U.S. Census Bureau, *U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2011*, "Single-Parent Households: 1980 to 2009," last accessed September 26, 2025, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2010/compendia/statab/130ed/tables/11s1336.pdf.

under the W. Bush administration.[251] In this period of reignited patriotic rhetoric, game series that evoked themes of national defense and retaliation, including *Fire Emblem* (as well as the much more popular *Call of Duty*), inherently played into the national mood. George W. Bush's presentation of terrorists as irredeemable, faceless collective not only paralleled Cold War rhetoric of the Red Menace but also games with similarly presented antagonists. Entries such as *The Blazing Blade*, *Sacred Stones*, *Path of Radiance*, *Shadow Dragon*, and *Awakening* all featured storylines that began with a surprise invasion. Even more congruent with the Islamophobic tension of post-9/11 America, the invaders in these games often subscribed to foreign religions that worshipped cartoonishly evil deities hellbent on existential destruction. In this manner, *Fire Emblem* games both expanded American gamers access to foreign games as well as providing characters reminiscent of a growing self-concept of American purpose in the War on Terror. In essence, by assuming control of these heroic protagonists, Americans gamers reenacted the good-versus-evil fight that George W. Bush consistently evoked in during his administration.

This trope was related to another, with this one centered around gender roles. Specifically, *Fire Emblem* often presented its protagonists as heroic males charged with protecting and/or saving sympathetically victimized female characters from an inherently alien "Other." As scholar Lynn Spigal pointed out, this trope of masculine saviors of feminine innocents was reemergent in American television following 9/11.[252] In this way, American television presented militant organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, as both martial and existential

[251] Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out*, 122.
[252] Lynn Spigal, "Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11," in *Public Culture: Diversity, Democracy, and Community in the United States*, ed. Marguerite S. Shaffer (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 125.

threats to American life and freedom.[253] *Fire Emblem* protagonists, and specifically the Lord characters, were routinely presented as heroic saviors of their respective countries. Conversely, female deuteragonists and supporting characters often embodied the innocence and vulnerability of those very countries, with their rescue and preservation conflated to those of their respective nations overall. This dynamic was evident in the relationships between *Path of Radiance*'s General Ike and Princess Elincia, *Shadow Dragon*'s Prince Marth and Princess Elice, and *Awakening*'s Prince Chrom and Exalt Emmeryn. In Ephraim's story mode within *The Sacred Stones*, this trope was further developed by the character Myrrh representing the natural order of the in-game world, with protagonist Ephraim's protection of her symbolizing his quest to save that same world from a corrupting, malefic force. Ironically, Eirika's role within the early stages of the same game syncopated this trope, with Eirika leading the rescue of her brother Ephraim before his story mode can take place. Furthermore, *The Blazing Blade* completely flipped this trope as Lyn, the sole female and first playable Lord in the game, saved her noble grandfather and his lands from her great uncle's invasion. Overall, these examples highlighted how *Fire Emblem* character and narrative tropes were introduced to the U.S. during a period of heightened affinity for such.

More research is needed to determine how much these tropes contributed to *Fire Emblem*'s American popularity. However, it was clear that the popularity of the series was significant enough to encourage Nintendo to further disseminate the series throughout the U.S. Specifically, the *Fire Emblem* series has grown so popular in the U.S. that Nintendo has begun to re-release Nintendo GameCube (GCN) and Game Boy Advance (GBA) titles on the digital

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[253] Spigal, "Entertainment Wars," 126.

libraries of the Nintendo Switch and Switch 2.[254] This commercial effort also reflected the growing obsolescence of these 2000s gaming consoles, with even systems designed with backwards compatibility (the ability of a console to play games from older consoles) for the GCN and GBA (i.e. The Nintendo Wii and Nintendo DS, respectively) were themselves becoming outdated. Even before this expansion of the Switch/Switch 2 digital libraries, Nintendo endeavored to capitalize on the series' growing popularity in the U.S. Nintendo released *Shadow Dragon* in 2009 as a Nintendo DS remake of *Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon and the Blade of Light*, itself released in 1990 on Nintendo's Famicom console that was never localized for the U.S. In 2017, Nintendo also remade *Fire Emblem: Gaiden*, another game previously exclusive to Japanese fans, on the Nintendo 3DS as *Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows of Valentia*. Considered in concert, these efforts to remake or re-release older series titles reflected American interest in games that were either harder to play or otherwise unavailable in the West. While this could reasonably be attributed to the popularity of the officially localized games, the prevalence of independently localized versions of *Fire Emblem* games cannot be ignored as a contributing factor.

IV: ROM Hacking/Independent Localization

To paraphrase Gabe Newell, gaming piracy is a result of a product's availability. This mentality has been baked into the massive online gaming platform and distributor Steam, with its vast yet easily accessible and usable making piracy a "non-issue" for the company.[255] While Steam has demonstrated that the best way to compete with piracy is to make your service easier

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[254] Jordan Sirani, "Every Fire Emblem Game on the Nintendo Switch in 2025," *IGN*, September 15, 2025, last accessed September 26, 2025, https://www.ign.com/articles/all-fire-emblem-games-on-nintendo-switch-in-order.
[255] Matthew Handrahan, "Valve: Piracy is a 'non-issue' for Steam," News, GamesIndustry, last accessed September 27, 2025, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/valve-piracy-a-non-issue-for-steam-9.

to access and use than piracy, not all publishers shared this philosophy. Nintendo has been among the most stalwart defenders of its IP in the gaming industry—they also have a contentious history with game piracy. For example, Nintendo's cult classic entry into the *Mother* series, *Mother 3*, released in 2006 and only in Japan, where it would become one of the top-selling games of the year.[256] Despite this popularity, along with the American release of and affinity for *Earthbound* (known as *Mother 2* in Japan), Nintendo remains unwilling to officially localize *Mother 3* for the U.S. As a result of this official inaccessibility, American hacking group Starmen released their own English translation of the game in 2008.[257] Despite being on the GBA in 2006, two years after Nintendo released the DS handheld console to mitigate declining GBA sales, this independent English localization did well.[258] In fact, Starmen's fan translation not only became the most famous independent localization in gaming history but even spawned a wave of independent localizations throughout the U.S. and across various languages.[259] The group's main site even rivaled professional localization operations, from being a forum for other independent localizers to interact with distributing patches and updates to their translations.[260] One aspect of this professionalization came from this forum role of Starmen's site, which facilitated coordination as fan translators checked each other's work and reinforced the pseudo-professional community around independent localization.[261] Despite filling a distribution void left by Nintendo, Starmen has and continues to foster dialogue with Nintendo, including banning the distribution, or discussion, of pirated content and ROM hacks on their website.[262] In this way,

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[256] "Vapor Trails: Games that Never Were," IUP, archived April 26, 2015, last accessed September 27, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20150426100703/http://www.1up.com/do/feature?pager.offset=1&cId=3154276.
[257] Consalvo, "Unintended Travel," 132.
[258] Koizumi, "Japanese Video Game Industry," 35.
[259] Consalvo, "Unintended Travel," 132.
[260] Consalvo, "Unintended Travel," 133.
[261] Consalvo, A*tari to Zelda*, 126.
[262] Consalvo, "Unintended Travel," 133.

independent localization further distinguished itself from simple piracy in actively encouraging official localization. Furthermore, the presence of Starmen, along with other independent localization teams, demonstrated the increasingly decentralized nature of international video game localizations. By addressing some Americans' calls for Japanese video games, Starmen demonstrated that independent localizers had the potential to distribute Japanese cultural products in an organized, professional manner. In essence, they are uniquely able to circumvent institutional barriers while still maintaining a comparable level of localization quality.

Despite this unique display of American affinity for Nintendo's region-locked titles, the massive Japanese publisher continues to view independent localization, as well as piracy, scornfully. This was tied to Nintendo's strict regulation of its games' licensing, distribution, and overall content, derivative of the company's defensive response to the global recession between 1981 and 1982.[263] As Nintendo zealously safeguarded its IP, it inadvertently created a bottleneck for many of their games globally, including the U.S. Independent localizers were one response to this bottleneck by forming a small but impactful community around hacking, translating, and distributing region-locked video games.[264] These localizers endeavored to provide an authentic alternative to official localizations, which included maintaining the distinct cultural odor of foreign video games. Specifically, these fan translators' separation from institutional affiliations and prerogatives enabled them to more directly negotiate and determine the cultural authenticity of their translations. Despite (and perhaps because of) these independent localizers assuming the institutional localizers' role, Nintendo nonetheless acted to curb this growing trend in American gaming. This was seen most starkly through Nintendo's various copyright lawsuits against

[263] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 41.
[264] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 43.

American ROM/fan translation websites in recent decades. Notably, this included against the major ROM distribution site RomUniverse in 2019, which Nintendo denounced as "among the most visited and notorious online hubs for pirated Nintendo video games".[265] RomUniverse ultimately lost the lawsuit in 2021, which resulted in Nintendo forcing the fan site to pay over $2 million.[266] Other prominent ROM sites, such LoveROMs and LoveRETRO, were concurrently sued but ultimately settled with Nintendo for a total of $12 million.[267] Almost six hundred other popular ROM sites, including CoolROMs, received cease and desist letters from Nintendo, often resulting in these sites removing their entire Nintendo catalogue.[268] While Nintendo has been infamously within and without the context of independent localization, this particular pressure against ROM distribution sites was demonstrative of the growing prevalence of fan translations in the U.S. Thus, analysis of the utility, distribution, and cultural impact of independent localizations is necessary to fully understand how such relatively small community of gamers was able to evoke the ire of one of the biggest gaming companies in the world.

a. Utility and Distribution

In lieu of official localization, ROM hacking/independent localization has existed as a useful alternative for fans attempting to access region-locked titles. The reasons for Japanese publisher's lack of localization in the early 2000s were many. The most common reason for this was the prevalent American stereotype for Japanese games, namely that they were hypersexual,

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[265] Nicole Carpenter, "Nintendo files multimillion-dollar lawsuit against ROM website," Polygon, September 11, 2019, last accessed September 27, 2025, https://www.polygon.com/2019/9/11/20860039/nintendo-copyright-trademark-infringement-rom-lawsuit/.
[266] "Cease and Desist," SuedbyNintendo, last accessed September 27, 2025, https://www.suedbynintendo.com/.
[267] Carpenter, "Nintendo files multimillion-dollar lawsuit against ROM website."
[268] "Removed due to Copyrights," CoolROMs, last accessed September 27, 2025, https://coolrom.com.au/removed.php.

ultra-violent, and thus generally offensive.[269] However, Nintendo had earned much of its success from its family-oriented games catalogue, and thus the *Fire Emblem* series was able to avoid this pitfall, despite the series‘ relatively late localization. Another prominent reason was that domestic success was a prerequisite for Japanese publishers to feel confident enough in international localization.[270] While franchises such as *Pokémon* and *Super Mario Bros.* were able to achieve this success in the 1990s, *Fire Emblem*'s relegation to consoles limited their transferability to the West until the early/mid 2000s, when home consoles became more accepted. This growing acceptance was tied to the growing quality of home consoles, an industry innovation that resulted in many Japanese gaming software companies reorganizing in order to cover the costs of porting games to these newer consoles.[271] Finally, the sheer volume of text and dialogue in JRPGs, as well as Japanese SRPGs such as *Fire Emblem*, was a significant disincentive for the sheer financial cost of translation and localization.[272] In fact, the Support mechanic in *Fire Emblem*, in which certain units can unlock dialogue with other units through gameplay, made it uniquely verbose for an SRPG. The ultimate utility of independent localization was the circumvention of these pitfalls. Fan translations that were distributed digitally, and for free, did not have to consider the same commercial factors as Japanese publishers and American localization firms. Institutional localizers can see huge swaths of text and must consider both the temporal and financial costs of such. Independent localizers can see the same thing and find a passion project that can keep them engaged for years.

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[269] Tara Fickle et al., "Asian/American Gaming," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 37, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/798107/pdf.
[270] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 111.
[271] Mariko Koizumi, "Japanese Video Game Industry", 43.
[272] Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Video Games*, 114.

Overall, fan translations' lack of corporate funding and international coordination was more of a boon than a curse. Independent localizations allowed relatively region-locked games to reach the U.S., as was the case with many *Fire Emblem* games. Before Nintendo localized *The Blazing Blade* in 2003, hacking group J2e Translations released an English version of *Fire Emblem: Genealogy of the Holy War* as early as 2000.[273] This not only marked the first entry of a *Fire Emblem* game into the U.S. but also demonstrated how the internet facilitated the erosion of traditional publication barriers of video games. In fact, this instance demonstrated how independent localizers could notice and respond to American interests in Japanese games before even the Japanese publishers themselves. This trend continued even after *The Blazing Blade* and *Super Smash Bros. Melee* popularized official translations/characters of the series in the early 2000s. In 2006, hacking group Dark Twilkitri Net Translation Division localized *The Binding Blade*, only a year after *The Sacred Stones* was localized for the West.[274] Both finished and unfinished fan translations of Japanese-only *Fire Emblem* games would be released over the next two decades, parallel to the series' growing popularity in the U.S.[275] Notably, this would even include games with official English localizations, such as shadowofchaos's 2012 fan translation of *Path of Radiance*.[276] While all of these fan translations reflected the growing popularity of the series, the independent localization of *Fire Emblem* games already available in English spoke some fans desire for an experience as authentic to the Japanese version as possible. While these are but a few examples, they reflected the tendency of independent localizers to help popularize

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[273] "Fire Emblem: Seisen no Keifu," ROMHacking.net, archived December 29, 2014, last accessed September 26, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20141229183358/http://www.romhacking.net:80/translations/358/.
[274] "Fire Emblem: The Binding Blade," ROMHacking.net, archived November 20, 2022, last accessed September 27, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20221130203709/https://www.romhacking.net/translations/854/#expand.
[275] "fire emblem," Games, ROMHacking.net, archived November 21, 2022, last accessed September 27, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20221121015105/https://www.romhacking.net/?page=games&genre=&platform=&perpage=20&title=fire+emblem&gamesearch=Go.
[276] "Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance," ROMHacking.net, archived January 20, 2023, last accessed September 27, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20230120155038/https://www.romhacking.net/translations/5621/.

Japanese games in the U.S., a prerequisite for Japanese firms to invest in official localizations. While this data does not confirm causation, the growing frequency of fan translations that coincided with the increasing number of official *Fire Emblem* English localizations was, nonetheless, a noteworthy correlation. Even if the number of fans that played these ROMs is ambiguous, the host of ROM sites and Nintendo's respondent litigation efforts implied this was perceived as a prominent threat to Nintendo's IP.

### b. Cultural Impact of Independent Localization

The cultural impact of independent localization was evident through the fan translations of Japanese video game series, including *Fire Emblem*. In general, Japanese games received the most frequent and numerous edits in institutional localization; everything from graphics to character names were adapted to better suit the American entertainment marketplace.[277] The most apparent example of this was the English localizations of the *Pokémon* video game series. Specifically, Japanese cultural motifs and sexual references within this series were often edited if not removed in favor of less ambiguous good-versus-evil plots and American cultural motifs.[278] In the case of independent localization, however, this profit motive has been replaced with a focus on authenticity. In addressing existing fans, rather than attempting to expand the fanbase, independent localizers were uniquely able to emulate the original cultural odor of Japanese video games. Thus, independent localizations constituted a uniquely American form of localization that appealed to American fans without sacrificing the translations' authenticity to the source material. This perception of Japanese cultural odor has been observed, both within and without the context of

[277] William Tsutsui, *Japanese Pop Culture and Globalization*, "4. Lost in Translation? Adapting Japanese Popular Culture for Global Audiences".
[278] Tsutsui, *Japanese Pop Culture and Globalization*, "4. Lost in Translation? Adapting Japanese Popular Culture for Global Audiences".

independent localization, as an accelerant for enjoyment among American fans of Japanese video games.[279] In essence, independent localizers could maintain the cultural odor of a game and distribute it successfully, but even to a level of authenticity often prohibited in institutional localization.

American independent localizers' focus on authentic translation and game experience was, ultimately, a form of acculturation. This was true even in institutional localization practices, in which localization firms negotiated the presentation of American and Japanese cultural values in video games.[280] This phenomenon was not unique to this field of distribution, either. As cultural scholar Derek Burrill explained, video games are, in equal parts, modes of acculturation and cultural mutation.[281] What made independent localizers of Japanese video game series, such as *Fire Emblem* unique, was their prerogative to capture the experience of the original game, as closely as translation allowed. Japanese cultural motifs were not a value to be mitigated but celebrated. Even so, even these hackers could not avoid changing the nature of these games through their translation, resulting in a product that was neither completely American nor Japanese.[282] Through this middle ground, independent localizers went beyond piracy by not only disseminating digital content but by fundamentally transforming this content. By presenting authentic recreations of Japanese games for American audiences, rather than simply making translations recognizably American, these hackers ultimately constructed new highways for accessing Japanese video games and culture. Thus, independent localizers should be considered a distinct mode of cultural diffusion that prioritizes the interests of fans over those of stockholders.

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[279] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 216.
[280] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 220.
[281] Burrill, "Jet-Set Kids," 113.
[282] Consalvo, "Unintended Travel," 127.

The full historical significance of this uniquely concentrated form of acculturation continues to unfold and demands the attention of scholars, including those in the professional field of history.

## V: Conclusion

As was the case with many video games that crossed the Pacific into North America, the *Fire Emblem* series transformed from a series of ported Japanese games to recognizable and acclaimed titles within the American VGI. While Nintendo and their institutional localizers played an integral role in this process, so too did independent localizers. These ROM hackers saw Americans' interest in *Fire Emblem* games, both in fan requests and their own appetites, and responded with translation and distribution. Entire online communities formed around websites distributing these and other region-locked Japanese titles. The cultural resonance of these sites and their respective communities was great enough to spark the ire of Nintendo; even still, these sites continue to operate and disseminate uniquely authentic translations of Japanese cultural products.

These translations not only maintained the Japanese cultural odor but also conveyed narrative elements and characters evocative of their counterparts within contemporary American pop culture. The battle between untainted good and irredeemable evil prevalent throughout the *Fire Emblem* series was evocative of the rhetoric surrounding the War on Terror. The various noble protagonists of the series were singular saviors of their worlds in a manner evocative of America's self-concept as it evolved in its global policing role. Despite this lofty position, *Fire Emblem*'s protagonists were often burdened by many of the same familial and existential anxieties that faced Americans at the onset of the twenty-first century.

Overall, this facet of American gaming history presented another avenue for understanding the growing popularity of Japanese video games in 2000s America. The *Fire Emblem* was both a product and accelerant of this trend, demonstrated in the popularity of both its official and fan translations. Independent localizers worked both within and without this particular series as decentralized, grassroots distributors of contemporary Japanese culture. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrated that, even if not officially sold in the U.S., there is a way for Japanese video games to permeate American pop culture and gain popularity.

# Conclusion

## I: Argument Summary

Over the course of three chapters, this thesis has argued that Japanese video games, contrary to prevailing narratives of commercial decline, maintained popularity in the U.S. throughout the 2000s. Though distinct in subject and methodology, each chapter here presented avenues for greater understanding of Japanese video games cultural presence in the United States. Chapter I argued that Koei Tecmo's gradual improvement of the *Dynasty Warriors* series removed the cultural odor that had endeared many Americans to this series. Chapter II asserted that the success of Evo over the course of the 2000s, and especially in the face of an industry-shaking global recession, demonstrated another path towards the entrenchment of Japanese video games in the U.S. Chapter III illuminated how independent localization of Japanese-exclusive video games—using the *Fire Emblem* series as a case study—could be used to expand understanding of how Americans could circumvent institutional barriers to disseminate and enjoy Japanese video games. While much research and argumentation are still necessary to fully understand these pathways to popularity and their overall impact, these chapters provided a proof of concept to those interested in further scholarship on this subject.

Chapter I demonstrated how the removal of a series' cultural odor can ultimately lessen its inherent appeal to American gamers. The *Dynasty Warriors* series' cutscenes, at the onset of the decade, were rife with mouth-flap desynchronizations, bombastic voice-acting, and a generally silly tone; but by 2013, the games not only began to stagnate ludically, but localizations had improved to the point of undetectability, effectively removing this source of cultural odor. In essence, the series shifted from being obviously foreign but nonetheless endearing to simply another ostensibly American game in an increasingly saturated video game

industry. This chapter expanded on previous scholarship that acknowledged the impact of cultural odor by outlining how the removal of such can facilitate the decline of video games series popularity.

Chapter II demonstrated how the player participation in, audience attendance of, and overall growth of the Evolution Championship Series lent itself to the popularity, and resultant cultural transfusion, of Japanese video games in the U.S. This chapter thus expanded upon the existing scholarship in showing another avenue of cosmopolitan acculturation of Japanese pop culture in America. The fact that this tournament series almost exclusively featured Japanese video games spoke to both the centralization of the fighting game genre under Japanese firms as well as the ludic affinities of American esports athletes and audiences. Furthermore, this grassroots tournament series ability to survive the Great Recession, despite other corporate-sponsored American tournament/tournament series (focused on the more popular FPS genre) failing, spoke to a level of popularization that could not be detected by analyzing game sales. This internationally acclaimed tournament series further demonstrated the cosmopolitan model of acculturation, with Japanese video games facilitating acceptance, and even affinity for, the Japanese fighting games and the international competitive gaming culture that surrounded them.

Chapter III demonstrated how American independent localizations of the *Fire Emblem* series, particularly those previously region-locked to Japan, assisted the popularization of the series among American gamers. Even before institutional localizations of the series arrived in the U.S. in 2003, fans created entire websites devoted to the hacking, translation, and distribution of Japanese video games and series, including *Fire Emblem*. Through the appearance of *Fire Emblem* games on these sites, and the growth of these sites over the course of the 2000s, highlighted another avenue of popularity. Furthermore, this trend demonstrated the unique roles

of independent localizers, simultaneously assuming the roles of fans, technical experts, and cultural negotiators. This chapter expanded upon the existing scholarship by demonstrating independent localization's unique ability to present a cultural odor that is both more authentically Japanese as well as uniquely American.

## II: Avenues for Further Research

Despite this project's multiple contributions to the field of professional history, it still left many doors in this field of study unopened. This was not only due to the time constraints that limit any historical project, but also due to the avenues of analysis left to be explored. The most obvious absence here was direct examination of the original Japanese-language versions of the various video games discussed here; the inclusion of such would have allowed for more complete understanding of how the American localization of these games (institutional or independent) ultimately altered their narrative and character content. Secondarily, the oral histories of the various localizers, esports athletes/audience, and Japanese video game in general could significantly address the dearth of data within the written record. While this does limit the applicability of this thesis, it should be comforting to any current or future video game historian that there is plenty to keep them busy for years to come.

Chapter I, with its focus on localization trends, could most abundantly benefit from further exploration of the Japanese-language versions of *Dynasty Warriors* games. This would not only facilitate greater understanding of the series original tone and presentation but also enable greater understanding of how this original tone and presentation were apparent in American localization. Oral histories of these institutional localizers would also be necessary to more fully understand the various cultural considerations, levels of expertise, and overall experience of these cultural negotiators. Lastly, oral histories of *Dynasty Warriors* fans

themselves would be greatly beneficial to understanding the full range of interests and experiences of the series' players across its lifespan.

Chapter II's research period highlighted the need for expanding archival efforts on documenting the history of American esports. At all levels, from local tournaments organized via social media to international tournament series such as Evo, further documentation of esports events, player statistics, and general experiences of fans, players, and organizers would be a massive convenience for future researchers. Oral histories of esports athletes, including (but not limited to) those who achieved celebrity status through Evo, could further highlight their parasocial relationship with fans, American competitive gaming culture, and even simply the range of player experiences across various American esports competitions. Oral histories of fans and attendees of American esports events would likewise expand academic understanding by highlighting their parasocial perspectives on esports athletes, the spectator culture surrounding esports (both in-person and remotely), and the range of experiences regarding esports spectatorship. Finally, oral histories of the organizers behind these events would provide a fuller internal perspective of the considerations in planning, executing, and managing esports competitions, as well as the resultant experiences thereof.

Chapter III would also benefit from analysis of the original Japanese-language versions of *Fire Emblem* games. This would allow further comparisons of authenticity between institutional and independent localizations of the series, as well as simply better understanding the characters and narrative content of these original versions. Oral histories of the institutional localizers of *Fire Emblem* games would enable further examination of the cultural considerations, levels of expertise, and overall experience of these cultural negotiators. Furthermore, oral histories of the independent localizers would not only provide these same

benefits but could also develop further academic understanding of the independent localization process itself, the community surrounding it, and the range of internal perspectives on the process. Ultimately, the creation and maintenance of digital archives for independent localized games would not only provide researchers with another invaluable resource but could also help insulate these cultural artifacts from corporate censorship.

III: Significance

Despite the many avenues for further research left untraveled here, this thesis nonetheless provided significant contributions to the field of history. These contributions were historiographically, historically, and culturally relevant. Historiographically, this thesis challenged existing narratives of the general decline in Japanese video games popularity over the course of the 2000s. While the growth of the American VGI and the resultant decline in localized Japanese game sales are objectively true, this project highlighted at least three distinct avenues for popularity outside of game sales. Even still, these three chapters served as mere proofs of concept, with the methods contained herein to be developed further by other professional historians. Though focused on a limited number of game series here, these same methods could be both validated and/or challenged via application to a much-less-limited number of other Japanese video games present in the U.S. Historically, this thesis highlighted examples of Japanese games that continue to enjoy American popularity outside of the most popular series, such as *Pokémon* or *Final Fantasy*. Furthermore, it provided more examples of the increasingly decentralized nature of the global VGI; this was particularly evident through the ability of Japanese video games to permeate the national boundaries of the U.S. Finally, discussions of localizers and members of the esports community demonstrated the growing role of individuals and various gaming communities in facilitating U.S.-Japanese acculturation. Culturally, this

study highlighted ways in which the Cool Japan strategy has succeeded (at least for publishers) in the U.S., with Americans at the grassroots organizing communities around accessing and enjoying Japanese video games. More generally, it showed many ways in which Americans' growing appetite and consumption of Japanese cultural products, despite the growth of American video games and the increasing familiarity of Japanese pop culture in the U.S. If nothing else, this thesis endeavored to impart the growing prevalence of video games in American life. As Americans continue to search for and enjoy video games from across various global contexts, it is left to historians to fully catalog, interpret, and educate the public on the cultural impact of video games.

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