

A Research on the Characteristics of Japan's Video Games Focused on the Connection of Japan's Traditional Play Culture

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses the unique characteristics of Japanese video game from the cultural viewpoint of Japan's traditional play. It starts with the possibility that Japanese video game can share the characteristics of traditional Japanese play. Accordingly, this research first considers the connection between play and video game for a theoretical background, by comparing their theoretical definitions and characteristics. Particularly, it shows the research direction from the viewpoint of Ludology that approaches video game from the aspect of play. Second, the characteristics of traditional Japanese play are examined in connection with Japan's inherent animism culture. Based on such characteristics, the common characteristics and backgrounds of Japanese video game and traditional Japanese play are discussed from the 'spatial' aspect of game, from the 'identity' aspect of game characters, and from the 'motive' behind playing game.

Keywords: Japanese Video Game, Japanese traditional Play and Culture, Animism

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

According to the 2010 survey report by the Korea Creative Content Agency on the game users in South Korea and Japan, a clear-cut difference between the two nations exists in terms of the games that are mainly played therein. In South Korea, 72.9% of the respondents chose "online games," which ranked first by a landslide margin, followed by "PC games (8.8%)" and "mobile games (8.4%)." On the other hand, in Japan, portable games (e.g., Nintendo DS, PSP) came out first, cited by 39.0% of all the respondents, followed by "video games (25.5%)" and "mobile games (12.9%)." In addition, another matter that should be given attention in relation to this research is the results of a comparative analysis of the game use characteristics according to the major game platforms used by game players in both nations. To begin with, while online games are the most popular game platform in South Korea, having been selected by more than 70% of all the game users, 37.3% of the game users answered that they did not know online games in terms of basic game recognition, and 84.8% answered that they had never played such games. In addition, while video games, which are also called "console games," are extremely popular among Japanese game players, they are not yet

widespread in South Korea. No less than 53.7% of all the South Korean video game players have never bought a console or DVD game, while 58.2% of all the Japanese video game players have used or are using video games, and of these, 75.2% possess a console for family use. In particular, the Japanese respondents aged 10-14 showed an 88.4% video game use rate, the highest, and it is worth noting that video games have emerged as the most widely used games in Japan, unlike in South Korea, where online games are the most widely used.[1] They are clearly "digital native" and play a pivotal role in evolving and advancing the global network created by the Internet.[2] Nevertheless, the fact that they prefer video games to the games in the online space, to which they are accustomed, implies that the Japanese are unique in terms of the behaviors of the game users among them. This viewpoint can be extensively applied as a methodology for the exploration of the characteristics of the Japanese video games.

1.2. Scope and Methodology

The ultimate goal of this research is to approach and examine the unique characteristics of the Japanese video games from the cultural viewpoint of Japan's traditional play. Japanese traditional play, which is based not only on the relationship between humans and other humans but also on the relationships between humans and nature and humans and *kami*, a supernatural being, has a strong tendency to provide the players with motive and fun. This characteristic and tendency may have come from animism-related factors, which constitute the cultural foundation of Japan's traditional

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Manuscript received Jun 20, 2011 ; accepted Sep.15, 2011

play. In particular, a tendency for *kami* to coexist with Japan's traditional play, typically represented by *matsuri* is vividly shown, and the players can get motive for and interest in the activity of playing from other forms of Japanese traditional play, based on these characteristics. These cultural characteristics of Japan's traditional play cannot be easily found in other cultural areas. While *shinmyungpulee*, which accounts for performance aesthetics, including play, through the relationship between the performers (including the participants) and God, exists in South Korea, which is geographically close to Japan, it does not enjoy coexistence with God while maintaining the identity of the ego, as in Japan. That is, *shinmyungpulee* embodies another ego through union with God, and it can be said that the characteristics of these differentiated play principles of Japan and South Korea have had an influence, to some extent, on the modern entertainment culture of the two nations.

It approaches Japanese video games as a kind of play, thus starting from the possibility that Japanese video games and traditional play have common characteristics. In reality, they fundamentally share distinctive formal characteristics in terms of acceptance and participation environment. Therefore, a more concrete look at the unique characteristics of Japan's video games, which can be regarded as a representative field of Japanese new entertainment, can be taken, by examining the formal characteristics of Japan's traditional play in an in-depth way.

The contents of this research are largely divided into two parts. First, this research intends to go over the connectivity between play and video games as a theoretical background, by comparing their theoretical definitions and characteristics. As mentioned earlier, this research was methodologically set up based on the premise that play and video games have common formal characteristics. This research also approaches video games by including them in the field of play. Therefore, this research intends to concretely present its viewpoints in the course of proactively discussing this theoretical background. Second, it is true that while Japan's play culture varies in terms of how many kinds there are according to the location, instrument, form, and purpose, it is similar to those of other areas and countries like South Korea. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that a distinctive traditional play culture unique to Japan exists. Thus, this research intends to scrutinize the cultural characteristics that serve as a foundation for Japanese traditional play, and to examine the unique structural and formal characteristics of Japan's video games from various angles, based on the results of the scrutiny. In relation to this, many of the materials that were acquired through this research, particularly from the interviews with Professor Sano Kenji, an authority on Japan's folklore, play, and games, at the Institute of Japanese Folklore & History of Kanagawa University, Doctor Morita Yuzo, the General Director of the Youth Friendship Association, and Hironori Takahashi, a researcher at the Institute of Amusement Industry Studies of Osaka University of Commerce, were used as valuable tools for the multilateral and professional discussion of Japan's traditional play.

1.3. Problem

The problem of this research faces, which is usually seen as well in other countries, is that, while traditional play is enjoyed mainly during special periods like holidays or in special venues like festivals, it is increasingly disappearing from the Japanese society and life. As such, it may seem unreasonable to look for connectivity between Japan's traditional play and modern video games. The Japanese traditional play presented by this research, however, refers to the whole spectrum of immaterial-play characteristics, and includes the material-play characteristics, which have been flowing through the Japanese culture. That is, this research ultimately aims to examine the characteristics of Japan's video games by studying their connectivity with the material and immaterial characteristics of Japan's traditional-play culture encompassing both the video games themselves and the gamers.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:VIDEO GAME AND PLAY

2.1. Discourse on Video Games

The most general and universal definitions of a video game may point to a video game being an electronic game that involves interaction with a user interface to generate visual feedback on a video device. This definition, however, is nothing more than a superficial explanation, which minimally considers the technical aspect of video games. Video games include a large number of games that can be played by a single gamer, which is rare for a game, as the computer can create a proper opponent for itself considering all the elements, even when the gamer cannot find a proper opponent. A game played by a single gamer has a narrative characteristic in that the computer deals with and provides everything. The reason for this is that unlike other games, which are heavily dependent on interaction with the other participants, the contents provided by the game itself decide its experience level to a large degree when one enjoys a video game without other participants. One of the narrative characteristics is the existence of a main character; thus, the video game played by a single gamer puts considerable focus on the sole participant while other usual games made up of a number of human participants have no particular main character to speak of. As a result, a video game also provides intended experiences as all the game environments and computer participants act in accordance with the behavior of the main character, a human participant. Furthermore, a huge number of games are provided as an environment, in which the computer no longer exists as a participant and everything is arranged in line with the individual, a human participant. To do this, the video game tries to provide the game participants with a high level of experience by borrowing the grammars of other narrative media, such as movies or novels. Therefore, most of the writing on video games considers either narrative concerns or game play, and what is usually referred to as "interactivity," instead of focusing on the "game" aspects of the video game.[3] If so, from what

viewpoint are the essential characteristics of the video game most desirably approached?

Researches on the field of games are now being conducted from a variety of viewpoints, and the most representative viewpoints are those of ludology and narratology. The concept of ludology, which was presented by Gonzalo Frasca in 1999, was designed to differentiate it from the existing game theories used mainly in economics or politics rather than being used to understand the games played by real people. Therefore, he presented the term "ludology," which came from the Latin word *ludus*, meaning "game." Frasca began the ludology discussion that he created by dividing Roger Caillois's and Andre Lalande's views on games and play. Caillois suggested that play and games could be understood by presenting play as *paidea*, which means "what is freer and more impromptu," and game as *ludus*, which means "something where regularity is more stressed." Further, Lalande presented a more clear-cut division by pointing out that while a game leads to a winner and a loser, whether or not any rule exists, play does not. Considering the above-mentioned ideas of Caillois and Lalande, Frasca argued that a video game is a form of play that has *ludus* based on the rule structure for deciding victory and defeat.[4] Scholars who adhere to the position of Frasca, who maintains the play-related origin of the video game, as earlier indicated herein, are opposed to the narratology viewpoint, which sees video games as a means for drawing up stories, in that the experience of playing a video game is quite different from that of reading a story. They are also opposed to the idea that video games are storytelling media, like novels or movies, in that the relationship between the gamer and the game world is different from the relationship between a reader and the world in a novel as the narrative concept in the definition of video games as narrative media is so vast that there are clearly narrative attributes, such as a background story.[5] They argue that if games are to be analyzed using the existing narrative yardsticks, the analysis will inevitably overlook the characteristic of simulation, which is truly indispensable to video games because they focus only on representation, and that there is no choice but to discuss only monotonous conclusions that video games also have plots, characters, and backgrounds, or that a game is a text with a partial possibility for gamer choice. Nevertheless, it is not easy to radically conclude that it is right to see video games from a specific viewpoint. As Easpen Aarseth mentioned in his book, "To claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore the essential qualities of both categories. Yet, as this study tries to show, the difference is not clear-cut, and there is a significant overlap between the two." [6] Game scholars like Aarseth maintain that while games have narrative aspects, all such elements are merely subordinate to game play in the end.

In general, simulation can be defined as "(modeling) a (source) system through a different system that maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system." Here, the key term is "behavior." That is to say, simulation does not simply retain the characteristics of the object but also includes a model of its own behaviors. In the common

video games, this model reacts to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements) according to a set of conditions.[7] Therefore, as regards video games with focus on simulation, their essence is playing with participative activities. In particular, compared with the earlier time when Frasca discussed video games, the characteristic of *paidea*, which has existed only in general play, can be combined with the present *ludus* rules of video games as a video game environment provides gamers with various experiences based on technological development and evolution. As a result, the present video games are developing and evolving into freer and more impromptu types.

As David Myers puts it, "Playing is to games as reading is to books." There are important differences between the two, as follows:

Reading, for instance, is a learned behavior and is thus an unnatural behavior – particularly compared with play. Literacy is a difficult goal to achieve, and for that reason, it remains unachieved by large segments of the human population. Play, on the other hand, is widespread, more analogous to some difficult-to-eradicate weed than to the cultivated rose of reading. Play can be motivated and directed by game rules but also appears without evocation by game design; for this reason, the "rules" of play seem, at least in some significant part, pre-formed and hard-wired within humans. [8]

In reality, various types of devices approaching video games now exist around us, and remarkable progress has been made in user interface convenience, which helps gamers play conveniently. In particular, the growth of a digital generation enables gamers to absorb and enjoy the rules of video games as a kind of play, as if they were air. As a result, today's gamers no longer hesitate to see video games as a kind of play, which means that the characteristics of video games can be found in the origin of play.

2.2. Video Games and Play

Johan Huizinga, in his book *Homo Ludens*, supposed that all cultures originate from play, and discussed the essence and meaning of play as a cultural phenomenon through multilateral case studies. That is, he saw that important archetypal activities include play-related characteristics from the beginning, and sought to understand play as a cultural phenomenon by explaining each and every form of them. Thus, from his viewpoint, what biology or psychology has thus far failed to deal with may be dealt with by treating play not only as a phenomenon appearing in the life of a child but also as a function of a culture, in a strict sense. Moreover, play has existed with some prominence even before culture itself came into being, and has always existed in abundance in cultural phenomena from the beginning to the present civilization. In other words, play as a kind of activity with a certain property different from

“ordinary” life has existed almost everywhere.[9] Therefore, according to Huizinga, the area of play is all over the everyday life of people, and if play will be approached by simply focusing on its instruments or main agents, its meaning and value will be reduced. Consequently, Japanese traditional play in this research covers everything, ranging from a form of play using instruments to the whole cultural activity backing up the Japanese culture.

Roger Caillois, in his book *Man, Play and Games*, agrees with Huizinga in that play is a free and voluntary activity and a source of joy and fun, but he adds that this definition is too vast and at the same time too narrow. That is, while Caillois claims that Huizinga deserves praise for grasping the intimacy that exists between play and a secret or play and mystery and that implies many things, Caillois argues that it is out of place that Huizinga includes his ideas in the definition of play by confidentially connecting them. From Caillois' viewpoint, without doubt, secrecy, mystery, and even travesty can be transformed into play activity, but it must be immediately pointed out that this transformation is necessarily to the detriment of the secret and mysterious, which play exposes, publishes, and somehow expends. In a word, play tends to remove the very nature of the mysterious. On the other hand, when the secret, mask, or costume fulfills a sacramental function, one can be sure that not play but an institution is involved. All that is mysterious or make-believe by nature approaches play. The role of fiction and distraction, however, should be put ahead of anything else in play. In other words, the mysterious must not be respected, and imitation must not be the beginning or sign of transformation and bewitchery. Caillois's argument, however, is not free from controversy to some extent. Secret and mystery had better be preferentially discussed at a formal dimension approaching play activities or at an existential dimension of specific play, not from the conceptional viewpoint of play, and in that case, secret and mystery may be more respected in a sense. A video game in which ego is realized chiefly through the game characters makes the gamers fall deeply into fiction and distraction from the beginning through the game characters, who take the place of the gamers. In this case, secret and mystery can be seen as a preferential premise and basic property to back up the play of the video game, a giant genre. If so, the role of fiction and distraction in play stressed by Caillois cannot be fully played until secret and mystery are guaranteed and respected. In addition, traditional play with the property of mystery or mimicry, like playing house or animal play, can be easily found, and such play will do play-related roles to the fullest degree only when the above-mentioned property is respected and preferred. In explaining the common characteristics of play and video games, the definition of play activity presented by Caillois can be considered a considerably significant previous research material. He defines play activity through the following six characteristics:

1. *Free*: Playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as a form of diversion.

2. *Separate*: Circumscribed within the limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance
3. *Uncertain*: Its course cannot be determined, its result cannot be attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations are left to the player's initiative.
4. *Unproductive*: Creates neither goods nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind, and except for the exchange of property among the players, ends in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game
5. *Governed by rules*: Under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establishes new legislation, which alone counts
6. *Make-believe*: Accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life. [10]

These characteristics cannot predict the contents of play or of a video game as a pure form. In addition, fictional activity, the last characteristic, is something that a participant can finally possess only when the other five characteristics are properly satisfied and play their functional roles to the fullest degree. This secondary reality can be seen as a virtual reality separated mentally and psychologically from the existing reality. Therefore, multilateral and diverse storytelling can be achieved in both play and video games within the scope allowed by their common rules. This is closely related to the third characteristic of play activity, which is an undefined activity, and a variety of results can be drawn through various developments according to the determination of a participant. In addition, as a case in which the participant can recognize the special consciousness that the virtual-reality ego is experiencing in those courses is rare and undoubtedly unrealistic, it could be problematic to literally accept the earlier mentioned whole idea of Caillois as regards virtual activities. In other words, it is more appropriate to regard play as a secondary reality that exists on a par with the primary reality rather than as a simple, unrealistic, fictional activity compared with the primary reality, so that all the video games that can be seen as a whole play or a form of play included in a certain area of play can properly perform the original role of play, a kind of distraction. Needless to say, some people approach the essence of play from the collective viewpoint, and say that online games, which have rapidly grown thanks to the progress in the Internet technologies and environments, and in particular, MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), are genuine accomplishments with the appearance of true play, but this research wants to emphasize that it should be excluded from the scope of discussion whether they should take part in a single or collective way in approaching the essence and formal requirements of play. In other words, play is a wide category encompassing video games and MMORPG, so they can be seen as a kind of play that is included in the large category of play.

3. CONNECTIVITY BETWEEN JAPANESE VIDEO GAME AND TRADITIONAL PLAY CULTURE: INFLUENCE OF ANIMISM

3.1. The Foundation of Japan's Traditional Play: Animism Culture

The Japanese people, an agricultural ethnic, have wanted to exist together with nature and to be identified with it, and most of Japan's contents created from such natural characteristics consider the thematic and formal confusion with nature as important. In this regard, animism can be seen as an essential factor. In a narrow sense, animism is a theory on the idea of the soul, and in a wide sense, it is a theory on the existence of souls. Japan is a country where animism remains as a traditional form of religion and has been handed down as a form of native religion, Shintoism. Shintoism was the only religion in Japan before Buddhism came thereto, and unlike other religions, it has no specific system and can be defined as a religion that embraces *kami*, meaning a soul that lives in everything. A *kami* is nothing like the Western idea of a god. A *kami* is the essence or soul of anything that inspires awe. An impressive mountain or a beautiful waterfall can be a *kami*. An ancient tree, an oddly shaped rock, and almost all animals can be *kami*. Human emotions such as anger, jealousy, or mirth can be *kami*. Thus, war, fertility, and mercy can be abstract qualities, and of course, people can be *kami*.

The characteristics of such an animistic native religion can be easily found in *matsuri*, a Japanese traditional-play culture. *Matsuri*, a representative traditional-play form in Japan, means a series of events through which "the Japanese people greet God, pray to Him by offering Him a tribute, and help Him go back to His abode after performing a festival for God and humans." It can be translated in English as "festival," "ceremony," or "rite," and it refers to animistic, native, and shamanistic events that can include ancestral rituals, memorial services, festivals, banquets, dances performed during exorcism, folklore plays, etc. in Korean. Therefore, while *matsuri* generally means the ancestral ritual of a shrine, its meaning can be widely applied to almost all kinds of events, from a small one performed at an individual's home to a village, regional, and national event. Moreover, *matsuri* has a complete play form and characteristic, which makes it a representative example for the play-related concept discussed by Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. Consequently, it may be desirable to accept *matsuri* as a form of play in which the Japanese people voluntarily create a space and time environment that they can enjoy with *kami*, which they worship under the influence of Shintoism.

3.2. Differentiation of Motive

Nobody can readily deny the fact that such an animistic characteristic seen in the culture of Japan's traditional play has had a complete influence on the field of other Japanese entertainments with a play attribute. Antonia Levi, a Western scholar on the Japanese culture, pointed out that the creatures made by the Japanese people appear to be unfamiliar to overseas spectators because they make use of their own

materials, drawing from a native-religion-oriented culture and an animism-oriented cultural tradition, which can be seen as the foundation and characteristics of Japan's native religion when they make a product.[11] In many cases, Japan's fantasy products come from the Japanese native religion, Shintoism, or folk tales. In fact, the largest numbers of stories are drawn from Shintoism, an animistic form of nature worship that provides animation and video games with over eight million deities and their legends from which to draw on. For example, Hayao Miyazaki's animation uses trees as a major material. In addition, *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* can be classified as a representative work in connection with this discussion. Isao Takahata's *Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pompoko* can be included in this discussion's category in that it deals with a spirit living in the woods. As mentioned earlier, these works are based on an animistic way of thinking that is deep-seated in the Japanese society, which means that the presence of life should be provided to everything that is living with the human race.[12]

The effects of animistic Shintoism can be easily found in the Japanese video games, the main subject of this discussion. For example, Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator and designer of such video game hits as *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda*, is a self-professed Shintoist. *The Legend of Zelda* was published by Nintendo of America Inc. in 1987. It is the first action adventure title of the popular Nintendo series. In one of the darkest times in the Kingdom of Hyrule, a young, points-earned boy named Link takes on an epic quest to restore the fragmented Triforce of Wisdom and to save the princess Zelda from the duchess of evil, the power-hungry Ganon. The players must make their way through the various forests, graveyards, plains, and deserts of the Overworld to find the secret entrances of the eight dungeons, in an attempt to piece together the broken Triforce. Once all the pieces are joined, Link will be able to gain entry to Death Mountain, the home of Ganon, and to the prison of Princess Zelda. Therefore, from a thematic point of view, it can be said that *The Legend of Zelda* was one of the first mainstream games that introduced players to the concept of parallel worlds/dimensions. Far from being a figment of Miyamoto's imagination, this is a concept drawn from Shintoism based on animism. To be a legitimate ruler, Shintoism states, one must possess the virtues of power, wisdom, and benevolence. Similarly, in *The Legend of Zelda*, Miyamoto chose to symbolize these virtues as a sacred triangle made up of three smaller triangles, each representing one of the virtues. This object, called "Triforce," was placed by the Gods of Creation in the Sacred Realm as a symbol of divinity, and thus became highly sought after by those wishing to rule the world. In the game, Triforce resides in this Sacred Realm, and it is said that the one who succeeds in taking hold of it will be able to rule the dimension. This drives hordes of people to the Sacred Realm, battling unto death to get hold of Triforce. What has to be paid attention to here is the fact that *kami*, the reverential spirits in Shintoism, dwell in another dimensional realm. Therefore, in terms of the player, Triforce, which turns up in *The Legend of Zelda*, is a sacred existence and not a symbol of a means or

instrument for power. In addition, to “hold” Triforce means to communicate with *kami*, which exists in an other-dimensional realm. That is, considering the effects of Shintoism on the Japanese culture, it can fully serve as a motive for enjoying games—that is, to be able to communicate with *kami*, which exists in another dimensional realm, through games, which can ensure the commercial success of a game. These characteristics of Japan's video games can be found in *Super Mario Bros.*, a representative product of the Japanese game industry. *Super Mario Bros.* was developed by Nintendo as a platform video game in 1985. In *Super Mario Bros.*, the player controls Mario, and in a two-player game, a second player acts as Mario's brother Luigi as he travels through the Mushroom Kingdom to rescue Princess Toadstool from the antagonist Bowser. Mario and Luigi, brothers working as plumbers, break down all their enemies to rescue the princess and finally succeed in getting her out of the Mushroom Kingdom after passing through several obstacles on land, at sea, and in the sky. The motive for the game *Super Mario Bros.* is the characters turning up in the game. That is, for a Japanese player, the game character of the princess has the value of *kami*, and a look at *The Legend of Zelda* and *Super Mario Bros.* from the larger viewpoint will reveal that they have a common theme: “*kami* exists, so they tide over a variety of difficulties to get to *kami*.” While this may sound strange to Western players, who do not understand the animistic Shinto religion, Japanese players enjoy the same Japanese video game contents with a motive from another viewpoint. In other words, Western players generally have a strong cultural and conscious tendency to understand the story in a video game from the viewpoints of money, love, power, fame, and immortality, the usual objects of craving of humans, so the pursuit and achievement of such objects is usually their main motive for playing a video game. Japanese players, however, perceive the story in a video game as a process and environment in the search for material and immaterial *kami*, so the expectation and joy of directly communicating with *kami* at another dimensional realm become their most powerful motive for playing a video game.

3.3. Spatial Characteristics

When approaching Japan's traditional play from the animistic viewpoint, one must always consider the connectivity among nature, humans, and supernatural *kami* to be vital. The reason for this is that Japan's traditional play has come into being and has grown in the correlations of these three factors, as shown in the relationship between God and humans, between humans and humans, and between nature and humans. For example, while it is a form of play generally seen in every culture, reed pipe play, in which people have a good time by using reed stems and making something out of them, and water play, in which people have a good time while feeling the water's coolness, are kinds of play between nature and humans. In addition, in the case of Kagomekagome, the tagger acts as a *kami*, showing the relationship between a supernatural being and humans. In this play, which is similar to the drop-the-handkerchief game in

South Korea, being a tagger can be directly interpreted as the descent of God. That is, God comes down as a human participant and becomes a tagger, identifying himself with humans. With that in mind, while Japan's traditional play is merely a recreational activity to be enjoyed, it can also be seen as a process through which the players can learn the cultural and social characteristics of adults who worship *kami*. In addition, playing house is a representative traditional play based on the relationship between humans and other humans. This traditional play enables children to learn about nature, humans, and the existence of a supernatural being at various levels.

In addition, Japan's traditional play has diverse spatial environments according to the characteristics of each. For example, the play environments vary, such as inside the house, along the corridor, in the garden, and at a wide plaza, and the wider these spatial environments become, the wider sociality also becomes, which gamers can learn by playing a game. Moreover, generally speaking, each play is executed in the optimized environmental space so that its unique purpose representing its differentiated connectivity can be realized. Therefore, a case cannot be easily found in which each play activity representing its unique connectivity and purpose is unfolded at a multilateral way irrespective of space. These spatial characteristics of Japan's traditional play can be applied to the Japanese video games, and can be examined.

The history and development of the Japanese video games show that a game is developed based on selective and conclusive situations like + or-, Yes or No, Win or Lose, and discontinuous spatial characteristics rather than focusing on a leading game character based on spatial continuity. These characteristics of the Japanese video games provide a player with motive and interest by which to gradually go towards *kami* through a game character like an avatar replacing the player.

The Japanese video game industry started from a very primitive type of programming game. Thus, only games for one person with very simple forms and environments were put out at the beginning, and game producers studied and made all-out efforts under such industrial environment to make a single player happy. In spite of such simple game type, the video game industry recorded rapid development at an early stage. While the Japanese video game industry's development at an early stage can be explained by multilaterally approaching it from various viewpoints, this essay intends to discuss it only from the aspect of cultural and social tendency based on Japan's traditional play.

In reality, it is difficult to entirely deny the fact that the early Japanese video game industry was reflected by the cultural and social tendency across the Japanese society. In connection with this, Hironori Takahashi, a researcher at the Institute of Amusement Industry Studies of Osaka University of Commerce, says, “It is right to conclude that there is, to a certain degree, a connectivity between traditional play and video games because if a video game provides the players with something totally different from traditional play, the players will have difficulty adjusting to it.”[13] This discussion can be more closely approached from the

correlative viewpoint of *matsuri*, in which the players can experience daily and non-daily things. *Matsuri* is a space and time for something non-daily, and in particular, what cannot be done in normal situations can be done in *matsuri*, a non-daily space. For example, it is possible for men to try on female clothing, and vice versa. It is all the more tense and exciting because the consciousness is based on the belief that the players are with *kami*. Therefore, if it is believed that these traditional-play characteristics were reflected in the early Japanese video games, it may not be very important for Japanese players to play a leading role in the game development through the spatial continuity. It may bring greater joy to be continuously conscious of the existence of *kami* in spatial development, as a form of 'stage', rather than to forget *kami* through complete immersion in a game world. Further, the complicated and sophisticated storylines of the Japanese video games are very effective in maximizing the players' motive for playing the game in the above-mentioned spatial development of the Japanese video games.

3.4. The Identities of the Game Characters

In South Korea, people use the expression "Let's play cheerfully" while watching an interesting performance, taking part in a festival, and playing games. This expression is defined as *shinmyungpulee*, and it is not recorded in the literature but is handed down orally. Today's researchers see *shinmyungpulee* as important in discussing the characteristics of Korea's traditional drama. While *shinmyungpulee* itself can be understood without having to be translated into Chinese characters, it can be said that if one wants to find something similar to it, it is similar to "興趣." In other words, *shinmyungpulee* means that a spectator takes part in a drama, lets out what the spectator has in his or her mind, and feels cheerful.[14] Therefore, in the case of Korea's traditional drama, where *shinmyungpulee* becomes crucial aesthetics, it, as an incomplete open structure that turns into a whole content only when the spectators take part in it and feel excited.

By comparing the principle of *shinmyungpulee* with that of Japan's traditional play, something interesting can be found. In the case of *shinmyungpulee*, God enters a human and becomes a unity of God and humans as well as God and myself. God means play itself and a major character and object standing at the center of the play. Consequently, "get cheerful -*shinmyungpulee*" means that one forgets his ego at the end and is reborn as a new being. In Japan, there cannot be *matsuri* without God. Thus, when young people prepare for a university festival, they prepare for *omikoshi*, a symbol of God, and even if they do not prepare for *omikoshi*, they replace it with something like a wooden pail, and *omikoshi* shows that "God is here" by symbolizing it. While such young people put *omikoshi* on their shoulders, chant slogans, and walk away, it becomes a situation in which they are with God. *Matsuri*, therefore, cannot be established without coexistence with God. That is, in terms of the relationship between God and humans, while South Korea's *shinmyungpulee* stresses unity, Japan's traditional play, based on its animistic culture, is characterized by coexistence with

God.

The cultural characteristics shown in Japan's traditional play can be explained by expanding the dramatic entertainment, which can be considered one of the fields adjacent to video games. Actually, what people get used to is a completely different way of responding to dramatic entertainment. The effect of contrived unreality is to create a different kind of empathic response in the audience, one that does not necessarily disengage the mind. Traditional Western drama tries to utterly enfold the people making up the audience to persuade them that what they are seeing is really happening. Ideally, the empathy created between reality and fiction is temporarily lost. Japanese drama, on the other hand, goes out of its way to remind the audience during the course of the production that what they are seeing is unreal. These characteristics shown in the Japanese drama entertainment can be called "aesthetic distance." [15] In this context, similarities between the Japanese video games and the Japanese drama entertainment can be easily found. The Japanese video games have a strong tendency to bring up motive and interest for the players by repeatedly reminding them of the whole theme and story aimed at *kami* rather than making the ego of a player as a leading figure immersed in and identified with the game characters. Such point can be fully understood by connecting it with the earlier-discussed spatial-discontinuity characteristic of the Japanese video games. In reality, spatial discontinuity refers to the gap between a player's conscious reality and the fictional reality presented in a video game. In other words, the aesthetic distance shown in the Japanese drama entertainment also shows up in the Japanese video games.

Thus, the identity of game character, which the Japanese video games could have, can be explained chiefly from the viewpoint, according to the cultural backgrounds of the players. Western players are smoothly immersed in and identified with the game characters in a state where the game skill and challenge are balanced at a more-than-certain level rather than recognizing the Japanese video games' spatial discontinuity and the aesthetic distance appearing from it. On the other hand, Japanese game players have a strong tendency to see a game character as an instrument in place of themselves, so they could get closer to *kami*, rather than forgetting their ego and getting immersed in it while furthering the expectation of coexistence with *kami* and the challenging activities they come across with in a spatial discontinuous environment created by the game's story. That, as mentioned earlier, the Japanese players, who are accustomed to their animistic culture, are more interested in enjoying a story for the material and immaterial *kami* while at the same time maintaining their realistic ego and coexisting with *kami* rather than totally getting immersed in the game.

4. CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to determine the unique characteristics of the Japanese video games from their cultural connectivity with the Japanese traditional play, and

to examine the connectivity that both can share based on the premise of the play-related attribute of video games. Therefore, the cultural background of the Japanese traditional play was first looked into, and as a result, animistic elements that make up the cultural foundation of the Japanese traditional play were found. Thus, a conscious tendency showed up strongly—that is, that *kami*, a supernatural being, exists together with the players in the Japanese traditional-play culture, and that the players can derive their motive for and interest in play activities based on such characteristics. These cultural characteristics of the Japanese traditional play cannot be easily found in other cultural zones, but similar elements could be found in the Japanese video games in the same cultural zone, largely from three viewpoints: the game motive viewpoint, the spatial viewpoint of a game, and the identities of the game characters.

First, from the viewpoint of momentum, Japan's video games employ communication and coexistence with *kami* as a major momentum for the game. This view brings Japan's video games to a level different from that of the video games of other cultural areas, in which the game emerges as a major momentum to crave for and pursue the five general human desires of money, love, power, honor, and eternal life. Second, when Japan's video games are seen from the space viewpoint, they allow the players to enjoy the game while maintaining and continuously reminding them of the relationship between their ego and *kami*, which exists in the game world, through the discontinuity of space. The leading game development style through the space continuity may not be very important to a Japanese player enjoying a Japanese video game. It may bring greater joy to a player to be continuously conscious of the existence of *kami* in the space development, in stage form, rather than oblivion of *kami* through a complete immersion in the game world, where the player exists together with the being of *kami*. Moreover, the complicated and sophisticated storylines of Japan's video games are effective in further maximizing the game momentum for a player in its space development. Finally, a Japanese player goes on with the challenging activities with which the player is faced in a sense of expectation for coexistence with *kami* created by the game's story and discontinuous space environment. In addition, instead of forgetting his ego and getting immersed in the game characters, the player shows a strong tendency to see the characters as instruments that take the place of the player as *kami*. This characteristic is different from that of a typical Western player, who is deeply immersed in the game characters and identifies them with himself in a situation where the game technology and challenge are balanced at a more than certain level.

There must be a limitation to the uniform application of all the above-mentioned contents to all the Japanese video games or players in other cultural areas that are enjoying them, but it can be said that the foregoing viewpoint has an academic value to a large degree, and is a kind of methodology for approaching the unique characteristics of Japanese video games. Further, play is obviously the relationship between humans and other humans. Although it

looks like a player takes on another player even though a video game is usually enjoyed by a single individual, a video game is a relative activity created by its program involving coming up with a judgment. Therefore, online games like MMORPGs, in which communication and cooperation can be done between a player and another player, can be seen as closer to traditional play. This is a superficial viewpoint, however, that overlooks the animism characteristics possessed by Japan's traditional play. In other words, a Japanese player has a cultural background through which he can perceive all the material and immaterial subjects that coexist with humans as well as humans as a subject of awe and communication. Consequently, it is evident that there is a certain connectivity between Japan's video games and traditional play, and it would be desirable to further see the characteristics of such relationship.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by the Sumitomo Foundation's grant for 'Japan-related research projects'.

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