

# **Early Japanese RPGs as Stylized Simulations**

**A Method and Its Application for the Cross-Cultural Comparison of Video Games**

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# Question

- **What is characteristic of early (the mid-'80s to mid-'90s) Japanese role playing games (JRPGs)?**
- **Of those characteristics, is there any cultural background peculiar to Japan?**

## **But why “early JRPGs”?**

- **Because it was the most popular genre during the time the base of Japanese popular gaming culture was established (i.e. the Famicom and Super Famicom era).**
- **In fact, early JRPGs have a large influence on the whole Japanese gaming culture.**

# From what point of view?

- In terms of **stylized simulation**.
- What is “simulation”?
- What is “stylization”?

# What is “simulation”?

- Simulation is a kind of representation that is **through game rules or mechanics**, as opposed to ones that are through graphics or texts.

# What is “simulation”?



## *OLPC SimCity (2008)*

While its graphics and texts represent a fictional city and events occurring there, **its game mechanics** that is implemented in its program **also represents the way the city is**: e.g. the city development requires electricity, electricity is made from a power plant, etc.

# What is “stylization”?

- Stylization is **how unrealistic** or **how unlikely**.
- For example, that electricity needs a power plant is more likely, i.e. less stylized.
- That it takes only a second to build a power plant is unlikely at all, i.e. more stylized.

# What is “stylized simulation”?

- So a stylized simulation is a representation through game mechanics that is unlikely.



# Why this point of view?

Two theoretical advantages:

1. Simulation is **a game-specific aspect**. Other aspects, e.g. story or visual representation, are not.
2. Focusing on stylization is **an object-based historical approach**, as opposed to text-based historical approaches, e.g. digging great amount of magazines or interviewing designers.

# General features of RPGs

- 1. Character's attribution** (strength, agility, health, class, equipment, item, command, etc.) based resource management.
- 2. Character growth** system (e.g. experiencing and leveling up).
- 3. Fictional context** motivating gameplay (world exploration, mystery, story, role-playing, etc.).

# Brief history of early RPGs

- ***Dungeon & Dragons (D&D, 1974)***, a board game from US.
- The earliest computer RPGs were *D&D's* digitalized successors, e.g. *dnd (1975)*, *Dungeon (1975–6)*.
- ***Akalabeth (1979–80)*** and its sequel ***Ultima (1981)***, the first commercially successful computer RPG.

# Brief history of early JRPGs

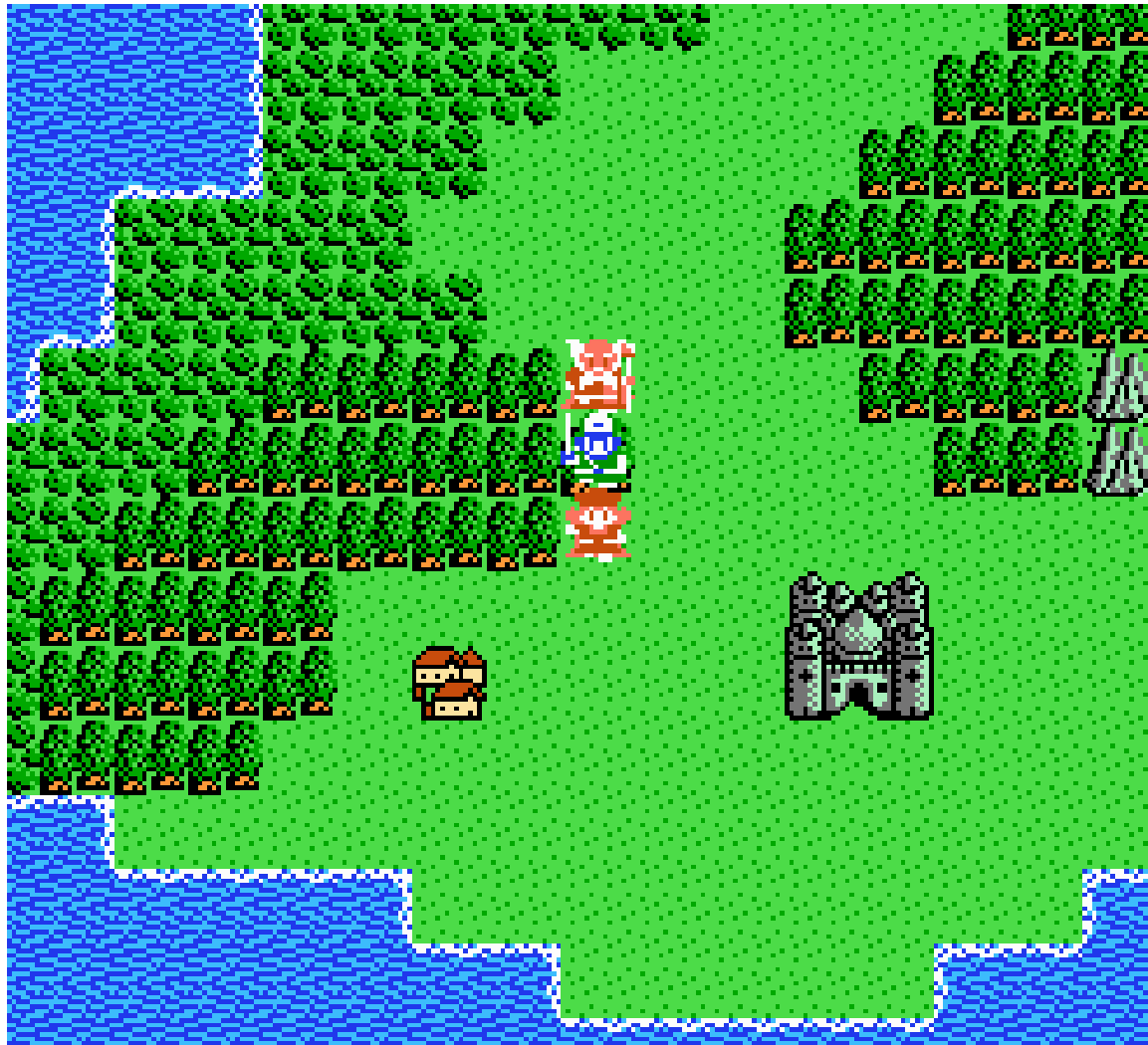
- **1983: the allegedly first reach of US computer RPGs in Japan.**
- **1984: the allegedly first occurrence of RPGs made in Japan.**
- **1985: the outbreak of *Super Mario Bros.* and Nintendo Famicom.**
- **1986: *Dragon Quest*, the first Famicom RPG.**

# Method

- 1. Introducing the work in question.**
- 2. Specifying its stylization of simulation.**
- 3. Interpreting what motivates the stylization.**
- 4. Supposing what Japanese cultural background the motivation has.**

# **Case 1: *Dragon Quest* series**

# *Dragon Quest*, the simulation of journey and growth



*Dragon Quest IV* (1989)

# A stylization in *Dragon Quest* series: **industry and economy**



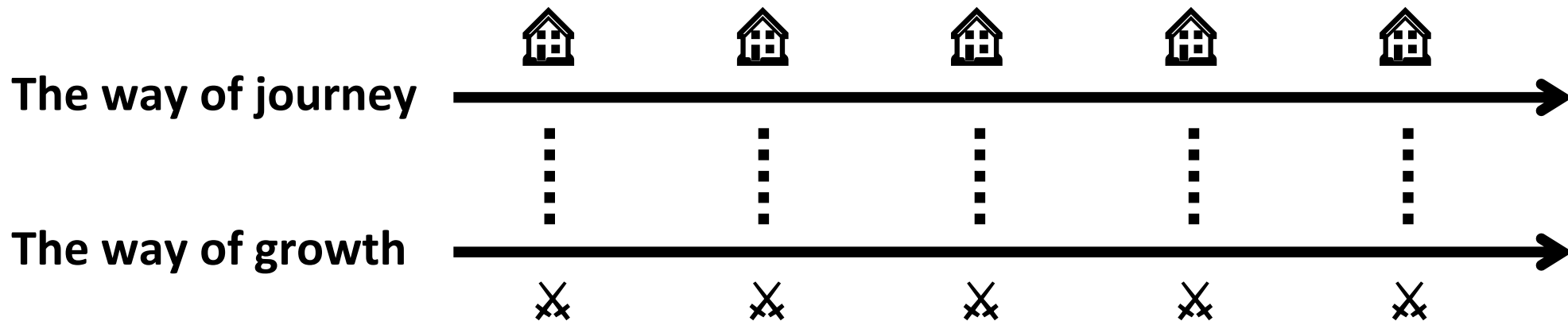
## *Dragon Quest II* (1987)

For some reason, the further the protagonists travel, the stronger weapons the shopkeepers sell, regardless of the town scale.



# What motivates this stylization?

The journey and the growth being in parallel.



# The cultural background

The story combining the protagonists' journey with their growth through their battles with powerful enemies, was one of the most salient motifs in **the '80s Japanese comics for boys**, in particular *Weekly Shōnen Jump* comics, e.g. *Dragon Ball* (1984–95), *Hokuto No Ken* (1983–88).

## **Case 2: *Final Fantasy* series**

# Class system

- Many RPGs feature the class system. Class is a characters' attribution that determines what ability they have, what item they can use, what action they can do, etc.
- The class system works as a part of **simulation of characters' personality**.
- Standard class examples: fighter, mage, thief, cleric, etc.

## A stylization in *Final Fantasy* series: **personality**



The class “Scholar”

*Final Fantasy III* (1990)



Scholars use books. It's likely. But they swing big books to physically hit enemies and do large damages...

## A stylization in *Final Fantasy* series: **personality**



### *Final Fantasy VI* (1994)

The gambler throws dices. Yes it's likely. But the roll of them determine how crucial the physical attack is. Why???

# What motivates this stylization?

## An interpretation:

- The characters that are intended to simulate might be **themselves stylized**. For example, what is intended to simulate might be, in the first place, unrealistic characters that wear fancy clothes and swing huge weapons around to beat evil monsters.

# The cultural background

The '90s popular culture, in particular otaku culture, tends to focus less on the coherent story or the coherent personality of individual characters, more on **the combination of character attributions**: the attitude Azuma Hiroki calls the “data-base consumption.”



## **Case 3: *Fire Emblem* and Simulation RPGs**

# SRPGs: combination of wargames and RPGs



*Fire Emblem (1990)*

# Simulation RPGs (SRPGs)

- A subgenre of RPGs that combines the strategy wargame genre with the character growth system of RPGs.
- Wargames are unit-based tactical games where each unit usually a corps of nameless soldiers.
- In SRPGs, **each unit is an individual with personality**: they have their proper names, profile pictures, characteristic abilities, etc.

## A stylization pattern in SRPGs: **conflicts between double demands**



### *Fire Emblem (1990)*

SRPGs must meet demands from both wargames and RPGs.

There are too few soldiers for war. And one soldier is of great importance. One person's participation, betrayal, death, etc., are all crucial events in war.



## Other variation of simulating war with RPG system



***Sanada Jūyūshi* (1988):** The number of soldiers effectively works as hit points in RPGs.



***Romancing SaGa 2* (1993):** The emperor ventures into the enemy's territory alone for power diplomacy.

# **What motivates this stylization?**

**An interpretation:**

- To simulate the dramatic situation in war, and what makes it possible is that each unit has their own identity as an individual with personality: that is, the SRPG's structure.**

# The cultural background

To represent personal dramatic situations in war is very common in the '80s Japanese fictions, in particular, in the SF-oriented animations, e.g. *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979–80), or the fantasy novels, e.g. *Record of Lodoss War* (1988–93).

# Conclusion

- **I specified some stylizations of simulation in three cases of early JRPGs.**
- **Each stylization derives from the different motivations, but these motivations all have the background that is characteristic of Japanese culture in that time.**