

INNOVATIONS AND GAMES

This author spent many hours on the Tokyo subway and train systems in the spring of 2009, but seldom did I see anyone reading manga. (The most noticeable manga readers were at convenience stores such as *am/pm*—any store that did not tie up its manga or enclose them in shrink wrap.) Granted, I avoided public transport during rush hours, so during non-peak times I did not observe hordes of people; however, the transit riders on my routes (the ones not sleeping or staring into space) concentrated on silent uses of their cell phones, which could have included cartoon options (games, manga or anime). More likely, though, my fellow passengers were texting using the Japanese syllable system. By 2007, manga Internet sales for mobile phones and computers had risen to ¥3.4 billion.

Richmond (2009, p. 185) describes the downloadable manga format, costing ¥50 per chapter, that "offers stories frame by frame, with the ability to pan across an image. Readers can control the speed at which they watch, turn speech bubbles on and off and, for a more stimulating read, the phone will vibrate at key moments." Macias (2006) points to another area with future promise: "Most Japanese DVDs are currently 'region-coded' to work only on Japanese players, but future video releases on the new HD-DVD and Blu-ray formats are expected to work on U.S. machines."

Toy makers such as Japan's Bandai see anime, with its many sub-genres, as a source of already-known characters that they can market around the world. Namco-Bandai is a related business that markets games, some of which have anime and manga as their genesis.

The following paragraphs on anime-based games were written exclusively for this book by Meghan Ventura, a game-savvy university student who has studied Japanese and has lived in both Saitama and Aichi prefectures in Japan. Most of the industry statistics come from IBISWorld (2009).

Putting two niche interests—video games and anime—together does not seem like a winning combination. For the select North American fandom, it seems like a winning chocolate-and-peanut-butter combination. To the mainstream audience, however, it can seem about as appealing as the smelly, fermented Japanese bean dish called *natto*.

Still, a handful of large North American video game companies have cranked out scads of mediocre anime titles over the past few years, with some titles being more or less mediocre than others. These titles, most of which adhere closely to the story and universe established in the anime, have spanned a handful of anime franchises including: "Naruto," "Dragon Ball Z," "Gundam," "Bleach," "Yu Yu Hakusho," "Fullmetal Alchemist" and "Bakugan"; the latter has become remarkably popular among young kids in America, but seemingly much less so in Japan. A few smaller North American games companies, such as Nippon Ichi Software and Atlus Games, even brand themselves as specializing in anime-style games and strive to reach out to the anime-loving Japan-aholic crowd.

Like anime, the games industry is a rapidly growing and increasingly globalizing industry. Worth over \$40 billion, the industry grew 12.2% in 2008 and continues to grow, albeit more slowly, in the midst of a national recession. The video games industry is segmented into the video games themselves, consoles and accessories, as well as into the retail, manufacturing and development of each product.

With 23.5% market share, Sony is the major player in the games industry, followed by Gamestop Corporation (21%), Nintendo (13.5%), Microsoft (12.1%) and Electronic Arts (9.4%). Others vie for the remaining 20.0% in this highly concentrated, high barrier-to-entry industry. Smaller developers that do become successful are often quickly absorbed into one of the larger companies listed above.

The video games industry is segmented into hardware, software (the video games themselves), online subscriptions and accessories (controllers, memory cards, etc.), as well as the retailing, manufacturing, development and publishing of each product. Hardware refers to a personal computer (PC), game consoles or handheld devices. Game consoles, which are roughly the size of a VCR or DVD player, include systems that plug into the living room TV like the Nintendo Wii, Microsoft Xbox 360, Sony PlayStation 3 and their predecessors. Handhelds refer to Gameboy-like devices, including the Nintendo DS and Sony PlayStation Portable (PSP), and are usually a little larger than a wallet, making them portable and easy to carry around.

These game consoles and handhelds are used to play the video games themselves, or software. Not all video games are published for all platforms or game systems. For instance, a game might come out on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 but not the Nintendo DS. Or a game could be published for the Wii and the DS but not for the Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3. Many factors go into determining whether a specific game will be published on a specific platform, says Dave Riley, NDP Group, in an interview for this chapter. The two most important factors are a platform's install base (or units sold) and the success of

previous games from a particular franchise or genre.

Video games were originally thought to be a 1980s' fad belonging to teenage boys, who unexpectedly held on to their controllers rather than letting games pass as a phase and continue to make up a large sector of the industry's audience nearly 30 years later. The female audience has increased over 2008, especially as heavy or portable game users, and accounts for about 40% of gamers (Riley, 2009).

Among consumers, 43% have purchased or plan to purchase one or more video games in 2009. To reach consumers, video game companies spend significant amounts on traditional advertising, especially within the first few years of a product's launch. Once the product is more established, companies rely on word-of-mouth and viral marketing, which is more effective with male gamers (Mintel, 2009). For retailers and publishers attempting to corner specific niches of the gaming market, understanding the genre of the game produced and sold is crucial.

Regarding the specific anime game niche, the process starts with a healthy dose of market research that tests the general public's interest. Anime-based games tend to succeed in America due to this research conducted in multiple focus groups, says John Boveldyk, Namco-Bandai Games, in an interview for this chapter. If the anime in question already has an established franchise, such as action figures, trading card games and, more important, a TV series, those can also be used as an indicator to test the waters of not just popularity, but financial viability. If the anime franchise passes the market research test, then it moves to the actual licensing and development: the companies establish a contract, share assets of the anime and game and keep each other updated throughout development.

But anime games seem to lie in the viscosly practical force that drives most forms of entertainment media: if they weren't "successful," they wouldn't exist, says Dave Riley. Game companies understand the anime-based title is not going to sell well but know it will sell well enough to flesh out their bottom line. Every year, 25% of video games are licensed titles, and this percentage aligns with the number of licensed games sold.

Despite the multitude of anime-based video games available, we have yet to see *the* anime video game that rises above mediocrity and merits praise of being a strong, widely likeable game. Licensed games have had a reputation for being notoriously subpar with only a few diamonds in the rough (most memorably, "GoldenEye 007" released in 1997 for the Nintendo 64; most recently, "Batman: Arkham Asylum" in 2009). But quality is forthcoming—reviews of recent anime games often praise certain games' graphics, music, control scheme and integration of anime character's abilities. Yet even after declaring that the game offers decent gameplay with a few pitfalls, it's typical for the

review to end with the disclaimer of "only for the fans of the anime series." Whether an anime-based game can reach the same "mainstream," must-have status as games like "Mario," "Halo" or "Final Fantasy" game is still questionable. But for now, it seems like they'll remain exactly what their reviews label them as—for the fans.

ACADEMIA

Ah, the fans, the age cohort with whom teachers at various levels have constant contact. Most teachers are at least dimly aware of the school and university anime clubs in their midst. One professor, Susan Napier (2007, p. 186) attributes to manga and anime fans "a high degree of agency" such that they learn about Japan to discover "what kind of culture could create something like this."

But does teenagers' interest in anime translate to serious study of the Japanese language? For a few highly motivated otaku such as Adam Wisecarver (see his presentation at the end of Chapter 5), the answer is "yes." However, as Dr. Christopher Thompson, an associate professor of linguistics at Ohio University, puts it, the Japanese language as spoken in anime "is hardly authentic. Often American students have a hard time understanding this and making the transition from anime-style speech and social relationships to culturally appropriate language use and interaction patterns."

One must remember, also, that at large universities, many students who study Japanese come from China and have the advantage of already knowing how to write the *kanji* characters. Still, a teacher of Japanese told this author that a shift in motivation has occurred in the last few years—the same shift Bouissou (2006, p. 149) observed in France: "Manga has replaced martial arts as the main reason why young people choose to study things Japanese at university."

If not the daunting task of language fluency, the growing number of university courses can tap into otaku enthusiasm. Maureen Donovan's Arts and Sciences 138, "Analyzing the Appeal of Manga," at Ohio State University "is a one-credit course, so the students don't need to do much in the way of research. I am thinking of developing a full five-credit course," she wrote to this author. Ohio State has one of the largest