20 Open Worlds: Globalization, Localization and Video Game Music

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Video games are an international phenomenon. That statement is true both in the colloquial sense – games are a tremendously popular media form enjoyed by more than a billion players around the globe – but also in the sense that they are profoundly *international*. Games on my phone, computer or shelf right now were created in countries including: Canada (*Assassin's Creed*), Germany (*Risen*), Japan (*Final Fantasy XV*), Poland (*The Witcher 3*), South Africa (*Desktop Dungeons*), South Korea (*Magna Carta*), the United Kingdom (*The Room*), the United States (*Fallout*) and Uruguay (*Kingdom Rush*) – amongst others. Despite this diversity, however, relatively few video games are overtly identified as products of any particular geographic region. Instead, developers often deliberately eliminate or minimize region-specific identifiers through a process called localization, in which aspects of a game are adapted to fit the perceived cultural norms and preferences of a target market.[1] This process most obviously includes translation of all game text into different languages, which can be in itself a fraught process. Yet localization also involves a wide range of minor, or possibly major, alterations to game content.[2] The

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[1] Localization is a multifaceted process, but following Keiran J. Dunne, I adopt a general definition as: 'The process by which digital content and products developed in one locale (defined in terms of geographical area, language and culture) are adapted for sale and use in another locale. Localization involves: (a) translation of textual content into the language and textual conventions of the target locale; and (b) adaptation of non-textual content (from colors, icons and bitmaps, to packaging, form factors, etc.) as well as input, output and delivery mechanisms to take into account the cultural, technical and regulatory requirements of that locale.' Keiran J. Dunne, 'A Copernican Revolution: Focusing on the Big Picture of Localization', in *Perspectives on Localization*, ed. Kieran J. Dunne (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2006), 1–11 at 4. For in-depth perspectives on the history and general principles of localization, see Minako O'Hagan and Carmen Mangiron, *Game Localization: Translation for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2013); and Miguel Ángel Bernal-Merino, 'The Localisation of Video Games' (PhD Dissertation, Imperial College London, 2013).

[2] The processes of translation and localization are creative and complicated enough that some scholars and practitioners prefer the term 'transcreation' rather than 'translation', and use 'culturization' to refer to the adaptation of games to suit local cultural practices and beliefs. For an overview of 'culturization', see for example O'Hagan and Mangiron, *Game Localization*, ch. 5, 201–41.

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economic allure of localization is immense, and well documented. As Rebecca Carlson and Jonathan Corliss have noted, the fundamental concept is that 'products must appear as if they were manufactured domestically, suggesting that consumers only want goods that feel familiar and "local"'.[3] Moreover, in some cases developers must localize games to accommodate legal restrictions, as in the case of Germany, where certain types of imagery and violence are restricted in games.

The localization process can also have a profound effect on video game music and how players perceive it.[4] At its best, localizing music can help a diverse range of players connect with games in a personally meaningful way; at its worst, it obscures the artistic achievements of composers and sound designers across the globe, and homogenizes musical culture in a potentially detrimental way. Localization is, at its core, an erasure of cultural difference – an erasure that can change gameplay, as well as audiovisual components.[5] Whether actively or passively, music always factors into that process of erasure. A given musical cue may be altered or swapped out entirely for each target market, composers might opt to write in a less regionally identifiable style, or players may simply understand the music in a different way because the context has changed.

My goals in this chapter are to begin building a framework for understanding how musical localization creates unique challenges and opportunities for the study of game music—and more generally to consider how and why scholars might approach game music as a product of place. To that end, I suggest ways in which we can adapt three broad categories of localization to the study of video game music:[6]

[3] Rebecca Carlson and Jonathan Corliss, 'Imagined Commodities: Video Game Localization and Mythologies of Cultural Difference', *Games and Culture* 6 (2011): 61–82 at 67.

[4] Previous studies of game music have not investigated the impact of localization in detail, although some have acknowledged its existence. Karen Collins's assessment is fairly typical: 'Localization is necessary to create a realistic game environment . . . and the audio must be as realistic and engaging as the original. . . . Different music may need to be selected for different target markets'. Karen Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 99.

[5] Carlson and Corliss, for example, note that 'Images, animations, and overall design aesthetics, game mechanics and interface, narrative, and even button mapping might be modified to accommodate the perceived differences between regional markets.' Carlson and Corliss, 'Imagined Commodities', 64. It is also worth noting that, while I focus on music here, localization often results in other significant audio changes, such as the necessity to record large amounts of voiced dialogue in a wide range of languages.

[6] Although the terminology related to game localization is highly fluid, my three categories here are based on those briefly outlined in Alexander Thayer and Beth E. Kolko, 'Localization of Digital Games: The Process of Blending for the Global Games Market', *Technical Communication* 51 (2004): 477–88.

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1. **Basic localization**. Only essential information is localized for target markets (e.g., subtitles), with few or no musical changes. This choice can result from budget constraints, but can also occur when developers intend for particular products to *emphasize* (rather than downplay) cultural origins. As a result, music may play into specific cultural tropes or regional styles.
2. **Complex localization**. Culture-specific musical markers are removed or altered, typically with the goal of making a game seem internationalized, or perhaps universal. Musically, this could involve minor changes to music to suit target demographics, or composers adopting 'stateless' compositional styles.
3. **Blending**. The music is significantly or completely altered for international release, typically to strip the game of markers of cultural identification and replace those markers with those of the target demographic's culture. This can include composing, rewriting, removing and/or replacing a significant amount of in-game audio.[7]

In the sections that follow, I offer a brief case study of each type, using long-running games series to illustrate sustained models for musical localization. Although I intend for this framework to be widely applicable, for the sake of continuity, I will focus on one very common localization path: the adaptation of Japanese games for the North American market.[8]

Japanese games make an ideal case study for this kind of cultural transfer, as they have long occupied a central position in the North American market both economically and aesthetically. Yet as Mia Consalvo notes in her thoughtful book, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*: 'in the early days of arcades and Nintendo, many Western players did not recognize that Japanese games were coming from Japan. They were simply new and interesting games to

[7] For a brief overview of blending and the impact of localization on game audio in general, see Karen Collins, *Game Sound*, 97–9. O'Hagan and Mangiron note that whether voice-over acting is rerecorded is the major distinction between whether an international release is considered a 'full localization' or 'partial localization'. O'Hagan and Mangiron, *Game Localization*, 17.

[8] O'Hagan and Mangiron, for example, note the 'well-recognized trade imbalance' that results in a tremendous number of Japanese games being successfully exported to the rest of the world, with a relatively small number of games making the opposite journey. O'Hagan and Mangiron, *Game Localization*, 18. For clarity, I should also note that in this chapter I am concerned with 'official' processes of game localization – those undertaken by the developers and publishers themselves – as opposed to 'unofficial' fan localizations.

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play.'[9] As Consalvo demonstrates, Japanese developers have for decades vacillated on the extent to which the 'Japaneseness' of their products should be erased or emphasized, and the musical efforts in both directions make for intriguing case studies. Finally, it is worth noting that localization is an economic imperative for most Japanese developers, as their share of the global market declined markedly after 2000, such that 'Japanese companies have become more aggressive and experimental in their [localization] strategies.'[10] I argue that music plays a significant role in those strategies, variously obscuring and reinforcing games' cultural context.

Basic Localization: The Katamari Series

Localization is usually about maximizing accessibility (and thus sales) by making games feel 'local' to each target region. On occasion, however, developers (often their marketing teams) may choose instead to actively reinforce a game's origins – emphasizing, rather than minimizing, its 'Otherness'. As Carlson and Corliss point out, building on the work of Koichi Iwabuchi:

> some products develop 'cultural odor' – the association of (stereotypical) images or ideas of a culture with a product when it is consumed. . . . When the international appeal of a video game, a video game franchise, or even the success of a particular developer, is linked with perceptions of the product's foreignness, as is increasingly often the case, localization can no longer be oversimplified as a purely domesticating endeavor.[11]

One relatively straightforward example might be the Yakuza series of action-adventure games (2005–2018), which emphasize their Japanese settings and plots through a relative lack of localization (including, with one exception, a lack of English voice acting). In the case of Yakuza, limiting localization to the bare necessities reinforces the game's setting, helping players immerse themselves in the contemporary Japanese criminal underworld – a setting that can, as in my case, feel extremely foreign to

[9] Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 4.

[10] Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda*, 122.

[11] Carlson and Corliss, 'Imagined Commodities', 73. See also the work of Koichi Iwabuchi, in particular *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

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the player. The music – often diegetic – likewise reinforces the geographical and chronological setting.

Music has, of course, long been a part of establishing setting in video games in precisely this way, just as it has in film and other multimedia forms.[12] In some cases, however, the music becomes less about identifying the diegetic setting and more about identifying the game itself as being an exotic product. Consider, for example, Nintendo's marketing of *Tetris* as an explicitly 'Russian' product in the 1980s – an effort that involved visual elements, marketing ('From Russia With Fun!'), and the inclusion of Russian music on the soundtracks of the Nintendo Entertainment System and Game Boy versions.[13] There is nothing fundamentally Russian about *Tetris*, aside from its creator, Alexey Pajitnov – yet the game was specifically designed and marketed that way.

The same trend is evident on a larger scale in the developer Namco's Katamari series, which began with the PlayStation 2 title *Katamari Damacy* (2004). The game's simplicity of play, unique aesthetics and broad appeal across demographic lines garnered a significant fan base and widespread critical approval, and the eight years after *Katamari Damacy* saw the near-annual release of a new Katamari game (see Table 20.1).[14] The series has recently come full circle: after a lull in the mid-2010s, Namco released *Katamari Damacy Reroll*, a remake of the original 2004 *Katamari Damacy* for PC and the Nintendo Switch console.

The details of the Katamari games vary somewhat, but in nearly all cases the player takes on the role of the Prince of All Cosmos, who must create a series of ever-larger clumps (*katamaris*) by rolling up whatever happens to be around, starting with tiny objects and ending with entire countries, or even planets. Although there is nothing specifically Japanese about this narrative,

[12] Kiri Miller, for example, has pointed to the use of popular music in the Grand Theft Auto series as a key part of establishing the setting of each game, and Dana Plank has identified the exoticized musical representation of ancient Egypt in an NES game. Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Dana Plank, 'The Penultimate Fantasy: Nobuo Uematsu's score for *Cleopatra no Ma Takara*', in *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes & Harmonies*, ed. William Gibbons and Steven Reale (New York: Routledge, 2019), 76–96.

[13] On the branding of *Tetris* as a Russian product, see Dana Plank-Blasko, '"From Russia with Fun!" *Tetris*, Korobeiniki and the Ludic Soviet', *The Soundtrack* 8 (2015): 7–24; and William Gibbons, *Unlimited Replays: Video Games and Classical Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23–6.

[14] In a testament to the game's beloved status, in 2012, *Katamari Damacy* was part of a group of games added to the permanent collection of the New York Museum of Modern Art. See the item description at Museum of Modern Art, www.moma.org/collection/works/164919, accessed 15 October 2020.

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Table 20.1 Main Katamari series releases, 2004–2018

Title (North American)	Release Date (Japan/North America)
Katamari Damacy	2004
We Love Katamari	2005
Me & My Katamari	2005/2006
Beautiful Katamari	2007
I Love Katamari	2008
Katamari Forever	2009
Katamari Amore	2011
Touch My Katamari	2011/2012
Katamari Damacy Reroll (remake of *Katamari Damacy*)	2018

Steven Jones and Mia Consalvo have both suggested that 'the central activity of the game – collecting things – is a commentary on the somewhat obsessive collecting activities of *otaku*[15] in Japan (and likely elsewhere), thus drawing from Japanese culture again for a central gameplay mechanic'.[16] Indeed, the first level of *Katamari Damacy* begins in a small Japanese home before progressing to a larger neighbourhood. Everything else about the game, from its aesthetic to its marketing to its music, likewise exudes Japaneseness. Even the title resists translation. A transliteration of *katamari* ('clump') *tamashii* ('soul'), the two *kanji* characters of the title are displayed prominently even on the North American box art, which also depicts a rainbow above a giant *katamari*, a large city (presumably Tokyo), and Mount Fuji. And although the game's text-only dialogue is translated into English, the unusual speech patterns of the King character seem reminiscent of the quirky Japanese-to-English translations of 1980s titles. In short, the game was presented to North American audiences as a product intentionally redolent with the 'fragrance' of Japaneseness, to use the sociologist Koichi Iwabuchi's preferred term.

The soundtracks of the Katamari games are equally indicative of their Japanese origins. As Steven Reale has argued persuasively in a study of

[15] An otaku is a person who is obsessed with a specific aspect of popular culture (such as manga, anime, computer games). The term can be used as an equivalent to geek or nerd, but over its history it has also caught a negative connotation due to the case of the 'Otaku Murderer' Tsutomu Miyazaki, who murdered young girls in 1988 and 1989 and was obsessed with anime and horror videos.

[16] Consalvo, *From Atari to Zelda*, 29. See also Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2008), ch. 2, 47–68.

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Katamari Damacy's music, the Japanese culture of naïve cuteness, or *kawaii*, is the game's prevailing visual and sonic aesthetic.[17] In a trend continued by the later Katamari games, *Katamari Damacy*'s soundtrack – identical, to the best of my knowledge, in the Japanese and North American releases – is an eclectic compilation of popular songs contributed by various Japanese artists, loosely united by the frequent incorporation of the series' main theme.[18] The musical style varies wildly from stage to stage, touching on everything from big band jazz to J-pop to electronica. Uncommonly, even in the North American releases the (surreal) lyrics to these levels remain in Japanese – or in a combination of Japanese and English that could feel equally foreign to speakers of both languages.

The choice to export the Katamari games with only basic localization – and with no musical alterations to fit the target demographic – has a few possible interpretations. On one level, it might reflect budgetary concerns, or, after *Katamari Damacy*'s unexpected North American success, a desire for later games to adhere as closely as possible to its aggressively quirky aesthetic. Alternatively, we can understand the games as part of the 'Cool Japan' soft-power strategy of the 2000s.[19] As Christine Yano notes, since the early 2000s, Japanese government and industry have chosen 'to capitalize on cuteness as a new, youth-oriented way to brand Japan – relinquishing images of samurai warriors and dark-suited bureaucrats for a newer, frankly commercial, overtly playful aesthetic'.[20] The Katamari games, and their music, certainly fit that

[17] Steven Reale, 'Chaos in the Cosmos: The Play of Contradictions in the Music of *Katamari Damacy*', *ACT: Zeitschrift für Musik & Performance* 2 (2011): 2.

[18] The Katamari series' lead sound designer, Yuu Miyake, has indicated that although the music went in some unexpected directions in later games, they originally intended for an increasing globalization of the music: in his words, 'I originally had plans for up to two *Katamari* sequels. The first game would feature all Japanese artists, the second game would feature artists from around the world (unfortunately we didn't have enough experience in English negotiations for this to happen), and the third game's soundtrack would feature remixes from producers around the world.' Jayson Napolitano, 'Katamari Music Maestro: Yu Miyake Interview', *Original Sound Version* (December 15, 2009), accessed 10 April 2020, www.originalsoundversion.com/katamari-music-maestro-yu-miyake-interview/.

[19] On the complexities and contractions of 'Cool Japan', see for example Koichi Iwabuchi, 'Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding and the Question of "International Cultural Exchange"', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21 (2015): 419–32; and Christine R. Yano, 'Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68 (2009): 681–8.

[20] Yano, 'Wink on Pink', 684. Yano points to this *kawaii* movement as a demasculinisation of Japanese culture, and a playful embrace of 'femininity' – an element also visible in the vibrant rainbow visuals and dominant female vocals of the Katamari games.

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description. In either case, the music is a central part of situating the series as an explicitly Japanese cultural product. The next case study is more complex, in that this Japaneseness is simultaneously emphasized and minimized, as the games are presented as both regional and universal products.

Complex Localization: The Tales Series

Video game genres are typically identified by narrative content and gameplay style, not by geographic origin. In one case, however, these concepts overlap: the Japanese role-playing game (or JRPG). JRPGs trace their origins back to the 1980s, with early examples such as *Dragon Quest* (1986), *Phantasy Star* (1987) and *Final Fantasy* (1987). The genre has since diversified in a number of directions, but calling a title a JRPG nonetheless generates several expectations.[21] The player will likely control a party of adventurers who set off to prevent some kind of global disaster, for example, and the gameplay will likely reward exploration, levelling up characters and strategy versus the player's technical skill. Despite their original indebtedness to Western computer RPG series like *Wizardry* (1980) and *Ultima* (1981), JRPGs quickly developed into a distinct genre. Indeed, as Douglas Schules points out, 'for fans, the genre is typically framed as a foil to Western role-playing games (WRPGs), locating the differences between the two in some alchemical arrangement of narrative (story engagement), aesthetic (visuals), and ludic (sandbox vs. confinement) properties'.[22] Similarly, there are likewise a range of musical expectations for JRPGs, typically in terms of the function and placement of music; following in the steps of early genre games like *Dragon Quest*, JRPGs very often feature non-dynamic, looped musical cues designated for specific locations (towns, dungeons, etc.).

There also remains a core expectation of Japaneseness in JRPGs – a sense that some part of the games' authenticity rests in their country of origin.[23] Yet as narrative- and text-heavy JRPGs have become increasingly popular

[21] For an overview of the JRPG and its generic expectations, see William Gibbons, 'Music, Genre, and Nationality in the Postmillennial Fantasy Role-Playing Game', in *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, ed. Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff and Ben Winters (New York: Routledge, 2017), 412–27.

[22] Douglas Schules, '*Kawaii* Japan: Defining JRPGs through the Cultural Media Mix', *Kinephanos* 5 (2015): 53–76 at 54.

[23] As with the Katamari games, Schules locates part of the cultural authenticity of JRPGs in their incorporation of *kawaii* aesthetics. Schules, '*Kawaii* Japan.'

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outside Japan, localization has become a crucial part of their worldwide distribution. Schules has pointed out, for example, how bad or insufficient localization of JRPGs can adversely affect player experience, and consequently sales.[24] This localization is more than just translation (although that is also important); it involves making the aspects of Japanese culture that are embedded in JRPGs accessible to the widest possible audience by rendering them innocuous. Iwabuchi identifies Japan by its 'peculiar position in the global audiovisual market as an exporter of what may be called "culturally odourless" products, that is, products which . . . do not immediately conjure images of the country of origin in the minds of consumers'.[25] In other words, JRPGs must be somehow both Japanese and not-Japanese, regional and universal.

As a result, JRPGs can get entangled in a liminal space during the localization process – or even before, if developers take a game's eventual worldwide distribution into account from the beginning of its creation. As O'Hagan and Mangiron put it, 'When games become objects of translation, they come under a complex array of forces: on the one hand pressure for international uniformity for ease of localization, on the other, the obligation to retain the distinctive flavor of the original.'[26] The end result is often a 'complex localization', where some aspects of games *beyond* those essential to playability may be altered for international audiences. Again, music reflects this position. Seldom is anything in the musical language coded as 'Japanese' or even 'non-Western'. In fact, quite the opposite – the music often seems to intentionally eschew Japaneseness, and is in some cases altered for international distribution.

Consider, for example, the Tales series of JRPGs. This perennial franchise may fall short of the massive international success of *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest*, but it has a number of localized games with a dedicated fan base in North American markets (see Table 20.2). When a Tales game is released in North America (and, to be clear, not all have been), the localization process typically takes at least six to eight months, and sometimes significantly longer; several games have left Japan only after two or more years. These are lengthy, narrative-heavy games, often requiring

[24] Douglas Schules, 'When Language Goes Bad: Localization's Effect on the Gameplay of Japanese RPGs', in *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game*, ed. Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call and Katie Whitlock (New York: Continuum, 2012), 88–112.

[25] Koichi Iwabuchi, 'From Western Gaze to Global Gaze: Japanese Cultural Presence in Asia', in *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization*, ed. Diana Crane, Nobuko Kawashima and Kenichi Kawasaki (New York: Routledge, 2002), 256–74 at 232.

[26] O'Hagan and Mangiron, *Game Localization,* 91.

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Table 20.2 Tales games released in North America (NA)

Title (NA)	Release Date (JP/NA)
Tales of Phantasia	1995/2006
Tales of Destiny	1997/1998
Tales of Eternia	2000/2001
Tales of Symphonia	2003/2004
Tales of Legendia	2005/2006
Tales of the Abyss	2005/2006
Tales of Vesperia	2008/2014
Tales of Hearts	2008
Tales of Graces	2009/2012
Tales of Xillia	2011/2013
Tales of Xillia 2	2012/2014
Tales of Zestiria	2015
Tales of Berseria	2016/2017

80–100 hours to complete. Consequently, they require a great deal of translation work, followed by rerecording of voice-over tracks for international release.[27] With regard to music, I argue that there are, broadly speaking, two forms of localization at work: one obvious, and one much subtler.

The composer Motoi Sakuraba (joined by various collaborators) has contributed the score for each game except *Tales of Legendia*, marking the series with an idiosyncratic style that, like its visual aesthetic, is highly influenced by anime. One of the most prominent and consistent features of Tales games is a lengthy title cutscene in the manner of an anime television programme. In Japanese Tales games, the music for this sequence has typically been a pre-existing song by a popular J-pop musician or group. *Tales of Graces*, for example, made use of the song 'Mamoritai (White Wishes)' from the South Korean singer BoA, whose music is also popular in Japan. For the first several games in the series, however, in the North American versions these songs were replaced by new music from Sakuraba, composed in a style more in keeping with the in-game music. Although this change does not affect gameplay (or the visuals), it is nonetheless

[27] *Tales of Symphonia*, for example – far from the largest title in the series, although the first to gain a large North American audience – required the translation of over 500,000 words and rerecording of 7 hours of voice-over work, according to a 2004 interview. 'Pre-E3 2004: *Tales of Symphonia* Interview', *IGN* (30 April 2004), accessed 10 April 2020, www.ign.com/articles/2004/04/30/pre-e3-2004-tales-of-symphonia-interview?page=3.

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a significant alternation; these sequences introduce the game's characters, and more generally provide a framing device that establishes players' expectations and immerses them in the experience.

The reasoning behind the differences in the Japanese and North American versions boiled down to demographic targeting. *Tales of Symphonia* was amongst the first Tales games marketed to North American audience in particular, and its musical strategies are revealing. In an interview with the online game magazine *IGN*, *Symphonia*'s Localization Producer, Nao Higo, noted that: 'one of the things I changed for the US was the opening theme song. The Japanese version had a song done by a pop group, but for the US we changed it so that we have the in-game music composer do the opening theme and I think he did a fantastic job. I think the US market will like it a lot.'[28] An FAQ article on *IGN* a few months later made the point even more explicit:

Q: What's changed for the US build?

A: In an effort to make *Tales of Symphonia* appeal to a US audience, [game developer] Namco has taken several steps to 'make' it a US product. The J-Pop opening theme song has been replaced by an orchestral anthem. . . .

Q: Why did they change the opening theme?

A: Namco felt that the *Tales of Symphonia's* presentation was 'too Japanese'. During the localization process, it made several changes to help make *TOS* appeal to a US audience. The first thing changed was the opening theme, which featured 'Starry Heavens' by Day After Tomorrow. The new anthem was created by Motoi Sakuraba, who composed *TOS*'s score.[29]

Assuming this FAQ article gets its facts correct, swapping out the theme song was more than a musical afterthought – it was the first thing the localization team changed to make the game more appealing to a North American audience. Intriguingly, *Tales of Symphonia* was released in the same year – and even by the same developer (Namco) – as *Katamari Damacy*. Yet the approaches to localization could not be more different. *Katamari*'s basic localization emphasized the Japanese 'Otherness' of the soundtrack, while *Symphonia*'s complex localization minimized the same elements.

More recent games in the Tales series, such as *Tales of Zestiria* and its prequel *Tales of Berseria*, have kept the music the same between the

[28] 'Pre-E3 2004: *Tales of Symphonia* Interview.'

[29] Staff, '*Tales of Symphonia* FAQ', *IGN* (18 June 2004), accessed 10 April 2020, www.ign.com/articles/2004/06/18/tales-of-symphonia-faq?page=4.

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Japanese and North American versions of the intro video, but made changes to the lyrics. The former game removes the Japanese lyrics entirely for the North American release, resulting in an instrumental-only track, in keeping with previous North American Tales games. *Zestiria*, however, features a separate English-language version of the song. In both cases, however, it is a shift in musical style for the series – hard rock instead of J-pop – that makes it possible for the two versions to musically co-exist. This stylistic change reflects the second large-scale musical strategy in complex localization: the avoidance of geographically specific musical styles in the first place, which developers sometimes call 'internationalization'. In the words of O'Hagan and Mangiron, 'developers strive through the internationalization process to design games with an international appeal that do not require much modification for different territories' – and the way developers often limit the amount of *ex post facto* localization is by 'keeping cultural references to a minimum and developing games in as culturally neutral a way as possible'.[30]

As regards character design, for example, Japanese game developers (and, relatedly, animators) often adhere to a principle of *mukokuseki*, or 'statelessness,' meaning that characters' ethnic identities are obscured. Many JRPG characters, including in the Tales series, fall into this category, sporting bright blue hair or ambiguous facial features that avoid lending the characters any specific ethnic or cultural markers. This ideology of cultural erasure has a broader impact on the reception and understanding of Japanese products and their localization. As Iwabuchi observes, 'the international spread of mukokuseki popular culture from Japan simultaneously articulates the universal appeal of Japanese cultural products and the disappearance of any perceptible "Japaneseness", which . . . is subtly incorporated into the "localization" strategies of the media industries'.[31]

Applying *mukokuseki* to the music of the Tales series suggests some significant parallels. The title music is a clear example – the culturally fragrant J-pop of earlier games has been jettisoned for a comparatively odourless rock style. Or, one could alternatively make a persuasive argument that the music has become increasingly Westernized, which North American audiences might simply perceive as universal. Sakuraba's scores present a somewhat more complex case. As I noted above, in the case of many of the earlier Tales games, he composed new title music to replace the title

[30] O'Hagan and Mangiron, *Game Localization*, 208. Localization of a game after it has been officially released is also called 'post-gold' localization.

[31] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 33.

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sequence. We might, then, wonder why his music was not 'too Japanese', as Namco evidently considered the J-pop song to be. Were Sakuraba – and, by extension, other JRPG composers with similar musical styles – composing in a form of musical *mukokuseki*, designed to avoid markers of its own Japaneseness? Given the interconnectedness of Japanese media (film, anime, games) and Western cinematic traditions, that question is difficult to answer with any certainty. Yet Sakuraba's musical style and orchestration (predominantly piano and Western orchestra) seems for the most part calculated to avoid overt Japanese musical markers, and JRPGs as a genre have long borrowed from Western classical and cinematic music history.[32]

Viewed from this angle, in some cases complex musical localization of this kind takes on a more troubling dimension. Players may associate JRPG music with being 'Japanese' – indeed, for many North American players it may be their only exposure to Japanese music. Yet we can also understand that music as intentionally 'stateless', or even as a rejection of Japanese musical identity. The situation is again analogous to *mukokuseki* character design; as Iwabuchi astutely notes, 'If it is indeed the case that the Japaneseness of Japanese animation derives . . . from its erasure of physical signs of Japaneseness, is not the Japan that Western audiences are at long last coming to appreciate . . . an animated, race-less and culture-less, virtual version of "Japan"?'[33] That is to say, the kinds of approaches composers like Sakuraba employ in anticipating the preferences of North American audiences are part of a larger pattern of cultural erasure. In my final example, that erasure becomes almost complete, as the Japanese score is either entirely or in large part replaced by different music for North American audiences.

Blending: The Gran Turismo series

Blending is the most complex and sweeping type of localization game developers employ. While complex localization may entail a series of

[32] Significantly, while composers like Sakuraba and Nobuo Uematsu had more significant backgrounds in Japanese prog rock, the classical training of Koichi Sugiyama (composer of the Dragon Quest games) likely influenced the tone of subsequent JRPGs. Moreover, I have argued elsewhere that a number of games for the Nintendo Entertainment System (including early JRPGs such as the Dragon Quest series) employed musical styles derived from eighteenth-century Western counterpoint. See William Gibbons, 'Little Harmonic Labyrinths: Baroque Musical Style on the Nintendo Entertainment System', in *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen*, ed. James Cook, Alexander Kolassa and Adam Whittaker (New York: Routledge, 2018): 139–52.

[33] Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 33.

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relatively minor adjustments to audio, visual and narrative elements to 'internationalize' a title, blending requires major alterations. Entire narrative arcs may be scrapped, added or rewritten; a character's design may be completely transformed; or, most interestingly for this chapter, an entirely new soundtrack may be provided.[34] Blending for narrative and visual reasons often results from adapting games to divergent cultural expectations, or to accommodate various international rating systems. For example, in the 1990s, animations featuring blood or references to alcoholic beverages were routinely excised from Japanese exports to North America. This type of reasoning is less likely to result in changes to game music – although there have indeed been instances in which games were negatively affected by their inclusion of music that could be perceived as culturally offensive.[35]

Although never common, musical blending most often occurs when there is a need to replace an entire soundtrack to appeal to a target demographic. That need may result from practical or aesthetic concerns – or possibly both. For example, Sony Computer Entertainment's SingStar series of karaoke-based games often featured radically different track lists depending on the country of release, for obvious reasons. Audiences had to be familiar enough with the pop songs on the soundtracks to sing along with them, or the game would be both much less appealing and much more difficult. On the other hand, Sega's *Sonic CD* (1993) received a new soundtrack for its North American release, apparently because developers were concerned about the Japanese soundtrack's ability to appeal to North American audiences. To the chagrin of a number of fans, Sega removed the majority of the techno-influenced original music by Naofumi Hataya and Masafumi Ogata, and replaced it with an eclectic, predominantly prog rock score from Spencer Nilsen and David Young.

The purpose of musical blending is not always entirely clear, beyond a vague attempt to anticipate (correctly or incorrectly) the preferences of a given regional audience. The most obvious example of such a practice is the Gran Turismo series of racing simulators (see Table 20.3), all of which have been released on Sony PlayStation consoles. As Tim Summers explains regarding the first game in the series:

[34] For a brief overview of blending, see Thayer and Kolko, 'Localization of Digital Games', 481.

[35] In perhaps the best-known example, though not directly related to localization, the Fire Temple music of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) originally contained an Islamic prayer chant, which Nintendo quietly removed from subsequent versions of the game. Likewise, the Microsoft-developed fighting game *Kakuto Chojin* (2002) was removed from shelves in both the United States and Japan for including Islamic prayer chant in its soundtrack.

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Table 20.3 Gran Turismo primary titles

Title	Year of Release (JP/NA)
Gran Turismo	1997/1998
Gran Turismo 2	1999
Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec	2001
Gran Turismo 4	2004
Gran Turismo 5	2010
Gran Turismo 6	2013
Gran Turismo Sport	2017

In Japan, the game features a newly commissioned score in a generic rock style, while the game heard in North American, Australasia and Europe includes pre-existing rock, electronica and pop songs from well-known artists. A definitive reason for this difference is elusive, but plausible factors include the commercial potential for Western pop music in those regions and that the original Japanese soundtrack, in a 1980s rock style, sounded unfashionably dated for a Western audience.[36]

In contrast to the SingStar example, the rejection of the original Japanese soundtrack (by composers Masahiro Andoh and Isamu Ohira) was not a practical concern; there is no gameplay-related requirement for familiar music. Yet clearly the developers believed an entirely new soundtrack geared to Western tastes was important enough to license an expensive track list featuring artists including David Bowie, Blur and The Dandy Warhols. *Gran Turismo 2* followed a similar pattern to the first game, with a separate soundtrack for the Japanese and North American releases of the game.

Beginning with *Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec*, however, the series adopted a more ecumenical approach to music, including both licensed popular music and an original score by a range of Japanese composers. There are a few practical reasons for a shared, rather than blended, soundtrack. For one thing, the enhanced storage of the PlayStation 2 and later consoles allowed for more music; perhaps this change prompted the developers to allow players to choose. For another, using the same soundtrack allowed for a near-simultaneous release of the game in all geographic regions, with very little necessity for localization. On the other hand, there remain some significant musical differences. Most notably, the Japanese and North

[36] Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 26.

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American (and European) versions feature different music for the opening video. In the case of *Gran Turismo 3*, the Japanese version features, as usual, a new version of 'Moon Over the Castle' (the Gran Turismo theme song); the North American release, by contrast, features a remix of Lenny Kravitz's 'Are You Gonna Go My Way' (1993). Later Gran Turismo games follow this trend – a 'universal' soundtrack mixing original Japanese game music with Western (predominantly North American) popular music, and demographically targeted intro videos.

Gran Turismo's shift away from fully blended soundtracks – while still remaining a globally popular franchise – reveals a change in perception about the necessity of musical blending in order to appeal to global audiences. As Carlson and Corliss point out regarding gameplay alterations, often the assumptions underlying localization choices rely on cultural stereotypes, and 'misleading generalizations often reveal more about distributors' motives or preconceptions than the tastes of international game audiences'.[37] Perhaps owing to concerns over these cultural stereotypes – and of course avoiding the expense of creating two or more soundtracks – blended musical scores seem to be giving way to complex localization and composers aiming for musical 'statelessness' (although those techniques are not free from their own cultural challenges, as we have already seen). Yet whenever present, blended scores present particular challenges to the study of game music. When multiple soundtracks exist for a game, which is the 'real' one? Is it fair for scholars to give primacy to 'their' versions of games, or does that choice itself reinforce cultural hegemony? And, as a practical consideration, how can researchers even ascertain what differences exist between games in the first place, when it is often difficult or impossible to obtain and play all regional versions?

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As these final questions make clear, the localization of video game music is a multifaceted topic, and this essay only begins to scratch its surface. On a basic level, the very existence of multiple, equally 'official' versions of a game eradicates the notion of any stable text for analysis.[38] Indeed, the state of localization can be far more complex and multidirectional than

[37] Carlson and Corliss, 'Imagined Commodities', 69.

[38] Tim Summers identifies localization as one of a set of ontological challenges posed by studying games in *Understanding Video Game Music*, 25–6. For more on music's role in the destabilization of the video game text, see Steven Reale, 'Barriers to Listening in *World of Warcraft*', in *Music in the Role-Playing Game: Heroes & Harmonies*, ed. William Gibbons and Steven Reale (New York: Routledge, 2019): 197–215; see also Reale's contribution to this volume (Chapter 12).

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these case studies have indicated. In some cases, for example, Japanese games even receive a 'recursive import' – a reverse localization of the North American version of an originally Japanese title, as in the Japan-only 'International' versions of several *Final Fantasy* games in the 2000s.[39] In those cases, a Japanese audience might consume – or indeed prefer – music that was specifically altered from a Japanese soundtrack in order to appeal to an entirely *different* regional demographic. Despite its challenging and occasionally frustrating nature, however, engaging meaningfully with musical localization is crucial, and my intention here has been to begin moving in that direction rather than to provide concrete answers. All musical works are products of place, and considering video game music as a cultural rather than 'universal' product provides significant new insights into how game music affects audiences (and vice versa). Localization inevitably shapes how players (including scholars) understand and interpret games and their music, and recognizing its impact helps situate game music, its creators and its audiences as part of an expansive open world.

[39] On recursive imports, see for example Minako O'Hagan, 'Putting Pleasure First: Localizing Japanese Video Games', *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* 22 (2009): 147–65.

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