

# **The Orientalist Perspective: Cultural Imperialism in Gaming**

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## **Abstract:**

Japanese video game titles represent a significant portion of the U.S. video game market. With such widespread representation of Japanese made games in the video game market, this presentation asks 'What kinds of ideas are formulated by Western consumers of Japanese games?' More specifically, what does the consumption and digestion of this media reveal and conceal about Japan to Western consumers? These questions directly address Edward Said's conceptualization of Orientalism both in the Western consumption of Japanese games and in Japanese games' depictions of Japanese-ness in the games.

Even when not actively perpetuated, Orientalism persists as the default framework through which gaming depicts Eastern cultures. This presentation will cover three dominant forms of Orientalism found in gaming today. The first form is the exoticization of the East by the West, as from a fixed Orientalist perspective that can be found in *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, which tells a tale of the exoticized Middle Eastern Other through the Westernized Prince. The second form of Orientalism frequently found in games is the East's internalization of the Orientalist's fetish and its own production of Orientalism. Essentially, Orientalism acts as a two-way relationship in which the West consumes a fetishized version of the East and in which the East internalizes that fetishization and markets it to the West. Because the Oriental subject is founded on the exploitation of Otherness, the Oriental subject in turn allows an auto-exoticizing Japan to use cultural tropes and stereotyped icons to market themselves to a Western audience and to enforce a culturally imperialistic policy for Asia. Japan's continuance of the commodification of Japanese icons, specifically seen with the Samurai and Ninja figures, reveals the use of Orientalist perspective in selling games such as *Onimusha* and *Tenchu* that rely on distinctly Japanese archetypes. The third form of Orientalism found in gaming relies on both prior forms. This form is the imperialist and Orientalist stance that Japan takes in regard to other Asian nations. This form can be seen in the Japanese view of Chinese pseudo-history as represented in the *Dynasty Warriors* series. The series serves to illustrate the dominant position Japan establishes for itself within the Orientalist hierarchy.

After establishing a working framework for the types of Orientalism frequently found in gaming, this presentation will illustrate the role of Orientalist perspectives in the playing, marketing, and creation of current games on the international market. Working from an examination of the recursive Orientalism of fetishized Japanese stereotypes in games made in Japan, I also explore Orientalism as a force for subjugation and the implicit meaning this gives in regard to Imperialism, which highlights the privileged position Japan occupies vis-à-vis other Asian nations. As gaming continues to develop, the cultures which create, market, and consume games become increasingly important and this presentation will serve as one entry point into that discussion.

## **Text:**

The Orientalist Perspective: Cultural Imperialism in Gaming

Japanese video game titles represent a significant portion of the U.S. video game market. Games series, such as *Final Fantasy*, *Street Fighter*, and *Super Mario Brothers*, which originate in Japan, are common fixtures in gamer libraries. With such widespread representation of Japanese games in the American video game market, this presentation asks 'What kinds of ideas are formulated by Western consumers of Japanese games?' More specifically, what does the consumption and digestion of this media reveal and conceal about

Japan to Western consumers? These questions directly address Edward Said's conceptualization of Orientalism both in the Western consumption of Japanese games and in Japanese games' depictions of Japanese-ness.

Within the realm of console gaming, Japan produces many of the games which occupy the U.S. video game market. Japanese video game titles run the gamut of genre, cropping up in every category. Yet, despite the active hand that Japan has in our market, the average American consumer has formulated very few ideas about the culture which produces these works.

Many American consumers are confounded by certain works coming from Japan, giving rise to phrases such as 'Only in Japan' or 'Those crazy Japanese'. Among even veteran gamers, some of the cross cultural concepts are difficult to digest, as a Japanese gaming ideal is somewhat repackaged to serve the international market. Even within American games, there exists a certain stylistic give-and-take among the various producers who are finally beginning to understand the multinationally integrated market in which video games dwell. However, despite our rampant consumption of these various media, only a very few consumers have the necessary connoisseur relationship with them that allows analysis of games on a higher level than just game play, factoring in culture, current events, and market trends in order to fully evaluate a game. Perhaps due to our willing ignorance as gamers, we consume the game purely, without knowledge or understanding of the culture that produced the work, focusing instead on game play and gaming aesthetic. But such a simplistic view is unsatisfactory, in that despite our focus on game play, we pick up subconscious cultural cues latently while playing through games. In particular, as Japan serves a major portion of the U.S. market, what kinds of insight into Japan do we gain from playing these games?

### **Origins of Orientalism**

Orientalism may be defined as "A way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (p.1, *Orientalism*) In this fashion, the Orientalist perspective is nothing more than the collective conscious and unconscious evaluation and assimilation of the body of study by Western scholars into the geopolitical awareness of Eastern aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philosophical texts through the viewpoint of a collaborative West. This recognizing of the Orient leads to a fetishization of the Orient as a corollary of or an adversary to Western culture, rather than allowing it to stand on its own.

### **Ways in which the Orientalist perspective persists in gaming**

Even when not actively perpetuated, Orientalism persists as the default framework through which gaming depicts Eastern cultures. This presentation will cover three dominant forms of Orientalism found in gaming today. The first form is the exoticization of the East by the West, as from a fixed Orientalist perspective that can be found in *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, which tells a tale of the exoticized Middle Eastern Other through the Westernized Prince. The second form of Orientalism frequently found in games is the East's internalization of the Orientalist's fetish and its own production of Orientalism. Essentially, Orientalism acts as a two-way relationship in which the West consumes a fetishized version of the East and in which the East internalizes that fetishization and markets it to the West. Because the Oriental subject is founded on the exploitation of Otherness, the Oriental subject in turn allows an auto-exoticizing Japan to use cultural tropes and stereotyped icons to market itself to a Western audience. Japan's continuance of the commodification of Japanese icons, specifically seen with the Samurai and Ninja figures, reveals the use of Orientalist perspective in selling games such as *Onimusha* and *Tenchu* that rely on distinctly Japanese archetypes. The third form of Orientalism found in gaming relies on both prior forms. This form is the imperialist and Orientalist stance that Japan takes in regard to other Asian nations. This form can be seen in the Japanese view of Chinese pseudo-history as represented in the

*Dynasty Warriors* series. The series serves to illustrate the dominant position Japan establishes for itself within the Orientalist hierarchy.

### **Western Observer**

To begin with, the exoticization of the East by the West is the already persisting default framework for the Western player/observer in evaluating the object of the East. The framework was put into place and assembled over years of Western Imperialism, in which the ideas of the West attempted to encapsulate the East. This cultural Imperialism presents the ideas of the East as interpreted for the casual reader through a Western mediator. "My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness. . . . As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge" (Said, *Orientalism*, p. 204). Clearly, then, this assertion of Western over Eastern, the core of the dominance relationship, should be shown in modern Western depictions of the East, as it was in previous media; the paintings of Delacroix, Burton's translation of *One-Thousand and One Nights*, and a plethora of films and plays. If we are to believe that the Orientalist perspective is still perpetuated, evidence in today's media must exist. A recent example of such exoticization of the Eastern Other is Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, in which we follow the exploits of the Prince of Persia throughout his adventures in a mystical Persian palace, an expression of the enchantment and wonder of the Middle Eastern Orient. Yet, throughout *Prince of Persia*, we are constantly receiving the wonders of the Sultan's palace through the surprisingly Western eyes of the Prince. Whereas other characters in the game speak in a caricatured Middle Eastern accent, the Prince himself speaks in a Colonialized British accent, marking him as Westernized. The insertion of the Westernized character is a common theme in Orientalist works, as is shown with the manipulation of the Japanese film, *Gojira*, and the subsequent insertion of the Raymond Burr observer character in the American release of *Godzilla*. A similar role was played by the character of Blackthorne in *Shogun*, and recently by Tom Cruise in the film *The Last Samurai*. The insertion of the Western mediator serves as a basis for inserting our Westernized selves into the diegesis. Even in the partially latent observer role, we can only understand the action if presented with the Western character who inevitably remarks, 'It's so strange and/or wondrous!', an echo of the culturally imperialistic thoughts which separate the collective Western 'Us' from the exoticized alien Eastern 'Other'.

### **Dual-nature of Orientalism**

However, the persistence of this framework is not a simple method of perception by the West of the East. In addition, the very existence of this framework is enabled by its self-reflexive nature. That is to say, Japanese recognition and continued propagation of this viewpoint allow it to remain. Why does Japan indulge the West in this stereotyped viewpoint? Simply put, as Japan recognizes our fetishizations of its culture, it is able to accentuate interest in these cultural tropes, and then disseminate a self-exploitive representation in order to export more cultural 'cool', resulting in an increase in cultural consumption of an exploitive non-authentic Asian Other. As the cultural stereotypes of Samurai and Ninja are enveloped by a Western audience, the Japanese may cater to this existing desire of the Ninja and Samurai fetishists and therefore profit off of the proliferation of cultural tropes.

An example of this fetishist consumption would be the Real Ultimate Power Website – [www.realultimatepower.net](http://www.realultimatepower.net). The creation of this website, with its obsession on an ideally conceptualized ninja icon, sparked interest in Ninja to an unbelievable degree, creating internet Ninja-fever. (17 million hits). Ninja and Samurai exploitation has created a cultural feeding frenzy for these archetypes, and their continued popularity has allowed several games to be marketed to a hype crazy American audience. Examples of this exploitation include the *Tenchu* series, the *Shinobi* series, and *Onimusha*. Within the *Tenchu* series, players take the role of various ninja assassins, and attempt missions based on stealth, stalking targets and

destroying them from the shadows. *Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven*, incorporated mystical abilities attributed to ninja such as invisibility, water walking, and passing through walls. *Onimusha* performs a similar act with the archetype of the samurai, attempting to draw players into a highly stylized world set in mid 1500s Japan, allowing the characters to take on the role of various samurai fighting to overthrow Oda Nobunaga, a real-world warlord of the period. By internalizing and catering to the Western audience's fetish, Japan is able to commodify their cool, and use the marketing power of their cultural archetypes in the capturing of the electronic gaming market.

### **Japan's Orient**

By extensive culture exports, Japan presents itself in a dominant position to the rest of Asia, in what I term Auto-extricating Orientalism. By establishing a cultural hegemony over the rest of Asia, Japan claims the privileged role of cultural oppressor, removing itself from classical conceptions of the Orient, and instead, re-establishing itself in a fashion similar to Western Imperialists. This is due to Japan's Imperialist policies, and attempts to integrate other Asiatic nations into its sphere of cultural influence. In respect to Japan's Imperialist doctrines, Japan has set itself up as the leader of the East Asian alliance, and has depicted itself as above the other members. Much of the war time propaganda used by Japan shows the Japanese in a Caucasian style depiction, while simultaneously depicting other Asian peoples in a style similar to British and American depictions of Asian. This distancing of self from other Asian nations, still noting a very defined subjugation environment, creates a cultural gap, which Japan seeks to employ in order to set itself up as culturally dominant.

This manifests itself in video games by means of exerting cultural authority over other Asian nations. The simple act of telling another culture's stories in a different fashion can almost belittle that culture, elevating one's own by taking the culturally superior position of power. In *Dynasty Warriors*, for example, a highly idealized Chinese history of the Three Kingdoms period is presented by Japanese producer, Koei. This adaptation of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms epic of course presents the history in a certain way, displaying a Japanese adaptation of a Chinese classical work. This therefore seeks to assert Japanese cultural superiority by telling the Japanese version of the story, elevating Japan to a higher status than China via retelling of their own stories. By elevating themselves above other Asiatic nations, Japan attempts to place itself in the 'conquering' position in the Orientalist perspective, proving its power to Western peers by showing its superiority vis-à-vis other Asian cultures.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Orientalist perspective still persists, even in today's internationalized video game market. The framework by which the West views the East has only been reinforced by game models designed to cater to these preconceptions. As gaming continues to develop, the intermingling of cultures which create, market, and consume games becomes increasingly important, and the power of video games in disseminating and delineating cultural difference is becoming more and more evident. Consequently, until perceptions of Eastern Otherness change, we will be forced to rely on the default framework of Orientalist discourse to internalize Eastern cultures and methods.

### **Works Cited:**

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1978.

### **Gameology**

<http://www.gameology.org/>