

# Joy Family: Japanese Board Games in the Post-War Shōwa Period

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## ABSTRACT

This paper draws on new archival and historical sources to survey the major developments in Japanese board games in the postwar Shōwa era (1945–89), including the import of American games, the emergence of Japan’s wargame culture, and the structural foundations of the ancient Japanese game of *sugoroku*. In particular, this paper identifies key cultural, economic, and design moments that led to Bandai’s unprecedented yet overlooked analog game output in the 1980s.

## Keywords

game history, board games, Japanese games, Bandai, localization, *sugoroku*

## INTRODUCTION

“A Brief History of BANDAI” is that peculiar kind of historical abridgement that only a corporation could produce. Bandai’s “genealogy of hit products” is an illuminated timeline of over six decades of toys, models, and amusements, bridging their origins as a “a wholesaler of celluloid toys and metal vehicle toys” to their present as the multinational conglomerate Bandai Namco (Bandai Co. Ltd. 2015). Connecting these endpoints are what Bandai calls their “Milestones” and “Signature Products,” a selective greatest hits list of licensed properties and cross-marketed merchandise: Kamen Rider belts, Ultraman soft vinyl figures, Gundam plastic models, Kinnikuman erasers, and Sailor Moon dolls. The image of history presented is of a multimedia toy giant that has touched many of Japan’s most prominent moments in popular culture.

We cannot expect much from such “histories.” Corporate timelines reduce the depth and texture of history to a series of footnotes along a linear path to market dominance. All context and culture is absent. Nonetheless, there is evidence in omission. After scanning “A Brief History,” it appears that Bandai largely ignores games in their six-decade history. Brief nods to *donjara* (a mahjong variant for children), the *Tamagotchi* “digital nursing game,” the *DATACARDASS* arcade/card game hybrid, and an inaccurate date for Bandai’s entry into the card game market (it was 1980, not 1988), are the scant evidence on display. But Bandai’s corporate timeline masks a hidden history. In the 1980s, Bandai produced an incomparable deluge of war, card, and board games, launching no fewer than twenty series comprising more than four hundred games. These games covered the gamut of genres and audiences, from tactical historical wargames marketed to adult players to portable fold-up games made for children to play at school. And like their toys and models, Bandai’s games would feature an impressive breadth of original and licensed characters.

What’s troubling for games history is that Bandai’s “Brief History” is the rule rather than the exception. The postwar 昭和 Shōwa period (1945–1989) is one of the most fertile periods of Japanese board game history. Following World War II, Japan

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emerged from a period of unprecedented economic and cultural devastation to be a world leader in the games industry. But contemporary games history foregrounds the major players in *videogames* without acknowledging how they were enmeshed in a network of analog games that preceded their emergence, impacted their design, and responded to their escalating influence. Companies like Bandai, Nintendo, Epoch, Takara, Hobby Japan, Enix, Namco, and Sega were all involved in the design and manufacture of analog games either prior to or during their tenures in the electronic and videogame industries. These analog games in turn reflected long-standing traditions in Japanese games while also responding to contemporary societal shifts, whether war or mass media.

Why, then, is this era of Japanese game design so poorly documented? The answer is a complex mixture of historical, cultural, economic, and design factors. Following Japan's occupation by Allied forces in the years following World War II, Japanese games were largely localized American games, so it's easy to conflate postwar Japanese board game history with American board game history and miss the nuanced cultural translations that took place. Conversely, as Japan gradually regained its economic and societal bearings, Japanese designers increasingly drew upon structural forms that were embedded in and informed by their own culture. Most prevalent was *e-sugoroku*, a centuries-old game that provided a knowable and malleable "platform" upon which multiple game styles and genres could be built.

Furthermore, as the postwar media mix of film, television, *manga*, *anime*, and videogames dominated popular culture, licensed properties became prevalent in Japanese games. Bandai in particular was the nexus of cross-media franchising, adapting properties like Kinnikuman, Fist of the North Star, and Super Deformed Gundam into endless variations of war, card, and board games. Bandai would likewise release more board game adaptations of videogames than any other publisher worldwide, including Milton Bradley, Ideal, Whitman, and Parker Bros. The result was twofold. First, licensed and adapted games rarely receive the same critical attention that original works do. They are inherently derivative, secondary works and therefore easy to disregard in the accepted canons of game history. Second, the procession of licensed properties was predominantly Japanese, and therefore unrecognizable, irrelevant, incomprehensible, or unsalable to non-native audiences. Combined with the language barriers that obstruct cross-cultural game studies, Japan's prodigious postwar output of board and card games slowly receded from historical view.

This paper draws on new archival sources to trace the key historical threads that led to Bandai's unprecedented analog game output at the end of the Shōwa era. Its aim is to situate postwar Japanese board game history as a complex aggregate of competing—and sometimes contradictory—cultural influences. Games by Takara, Nintendo, Epoch, and Bandai were highly influenced by American design, but these companies also worked for decades to re-center Japanese games as *Japanese* games, reflecting idiomatic expressions of play and culture that could only derive from Japan. And more than mere props for licensed properties, Japanese games in the 1980s marked a convergence of modern and traditional cultures that would both influence—and soon be eclipsed by—the emerging videogame industry.

## **AMERICAN GAMES**

War reshapes any culture, but the catastrophic conclusion of World War II and its aftermath had profound effects on the way Japanese people would live, work, and play. The United States' nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II seized surrender from a people that had been worn thin by nearly a decade of war efforts at home and abroad. But war did not end with surrender. The

(predominantly American) Allied forces that had advanced upon Japan near the war's conclusion would remain in the country for a nearly seven-year occupation, from September 1945 to April 1952.

Prior to World War II, Japan's toy industry, as Anne Allison describes in *Millennial Monsters*, "had been a vital part of the national economy, valued for its worldwide reputation as a top-ranked producer of children's playthings" (2006, p. 36). Japan's low-cost but meticulously-crafted metallic toys were the country's best-known export, due in part to Germany's need to divert resources from toy production during World War I. Modernization in the early twentieth century made another significant impact, as "onetime artisans of metal ornaments for temples and shrines...retooled their craft from religion to entertainment" (Allison 2006, p. 37).

But the momentum gathered in the first half of the century ground to a halt during World War II. Japan followed Germany's footsteps in reallocating precious resources like paper and metal to wartime concerns. Following Japan's defeat, the situation remained dire—there were few resources left to fuel postwar industry, and among the Japanese people, "any energy that remained was spent in the search for work, for a roof, or for food" (Mason et al. 1997, p. 354). Pre-war toymakers like 増田屋 Masudaya (1724), 任天堂 Nintendo (1889), 富山/トミー Tomiyama/Tomy (1924), and 花山 Hanayama (1933) managed to survive wartime devastation by shuttering production, redirecting manufacture to wartime efforts, or adapting to the new market of Occupation consumers. Nintendo, for instance, began to manufacture Western-style トランプ ("trump," or playing cards) branded with American pop culture icons like Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck.

But most of the companies that would define the games market throughout the postwar Shōwa era emerged directly after Japan's post-war reconstruction—namely, バンダイ Bandai (1950), タカトクトイ Takatoku Toys (1953), タカラ Takara (1955), and エポック Epoch (1958).<sup>1</sup> The postwar toy boom was due, in part, to the Occupation's concerted efforts to revitalize Japan's economy by rebuilding its industrial infrastructure. But many toy companies were built from the refuse of war:

Lacking anything else, Japanese toy makers used the only substance they could find—discarded tin cans from SCAP [Supreme Command Allied Powers] food rations. Modeling these toys after the jeeps being driven by American soldiers, the Japanese toy industry recycled, both literally and figuratively, the U.S. occupation as fodder for its postwar reconstruction (Allison 2006, p. 37–8).

These Japanese toys, fashioned in the image of the nation's wartime enemies, created an odd symbiosis between occupier and occupied. Wartime resource scarcity had created a pent-up demand for toys among American (and Japanese) children. In 1947, "SCAP officially decreed that toys could now be legally exported as commodities," recognizing toys as "the first export, and primary impetus, for Japan's postwar economy" (Allison 2006, p. 38). The SCAP allowed the Japanese to recycle their scraps into toys under two conditions: first, they had to reserve a portion of their wares for American export, and second, they had to stamp the bottom of each toy with the words, "Made in Occupied Japan."

The imprint of American influence would continue in Japan's game production even after the Occupation lifted and the country regained its economic footing. Founded in 1955, Takara was among the first companies to produce board games in postwar Japan, but their first and most enduring series was a remarkable reversal of the

cultural exchange established during the Occupation. タカラのアメリカンゲームシリーズ or “Takara’s American Game Series” began as a licensing vehicle to import board games from two overseas publishers: Milton Bradley and Whitman Publishing (see Figure 1). Starting in the late 1960s, Takara flooded Japan with American games like *Battleship* (1931), *The Game of Life* (1960), and *Hi Ho! Cherry-O* (1960).



**Figure 1:** Two pages from Takara’s American Game Series catalog (c.1968), featuring Milton Bradley’s *The Game of Life*.

All of Takara’s imports required translation of some kind. But the quality and comprehensiveness of what we now call localization, wherein a game is adapted both linguistically and culturally from one country to another, varied greatly in the series’ first years.<sup>2</sup> Rules were always translated from English to Japanese, of course, but English remained in many aspects of the game’s visual design—e.g., cover art, marketing tags, logos, and game components. Some games looked identical to their American forebears save for a small, black Takara logo added to the covers. Others maintained the American box art but localized the name, sometimes to confusing ends. Takara’s localization of Whitman’s marble-placement strategy game *Split* (1966), for instance, used the English title on the box but named the game 宇宙ステーション *Space Station* in the rules. In cases where titles diverged, Takara wrapped a red-and-white-striped paper band around the box with the game’s Japanese name printed beneath the American Game Series’ logo—a quartered tulip shape—and English title. Other games hid their localizations inside. ラケットレース *Racket Race*, aka Whitman’s *Paddle Rally* (1964), used the American box cover and paddle mechanism, but the board itself was completely redesigned. The abstract network of colored nodes and lines used in the original was replaced by a colorful circular road system, cartoon characters, and Japanese text.

Over time, localization became more comprehensive and integrated. The “candy cane” paper band became part of the cover design, creating a distinctive vertical stripe on the box edge—a detail that was clearly indebted to Milton Bradley’s similar “gray band” branding. (In fact, Takara’s 人生ゲーム *The Game of Life* included both Milton Bradley’s gray band and their own candy cane band on opposing edges.) Variations and alterations of the box text and artwork also appeared. For Milton Bradley’s strategy game *Swahili* (1968), Takara replicated the original artwork and English title, but added the transliterated Japanese title スワヒリ at the bottom right side of the cover. And this time, Takara replaced Milton Bradley’s gray band with their own tulip and candy cane stripes.

Importing American games also meant importing games with a preponderance of white children and families depicted on the covers. Multiple successive releases of レーダー作戦ゲーム *Radar Strategy Game*, Takara’s localization of Milton Bradley’s

*Battleship*, portrayed illustrated variations of a stereotypical 1950s American domestic scene. Similarly, Takara’s ニューデートゲーム *New Date Game* localized Milton Bradley’s *Mystery Date* (1965) without any alteration to the coterie of white American girls, their suitors, their fashion, or their depicted hobbies. Evidence from other games suggests such design decisions were intentional. When localization needs demanded it, Takara would overhaul any necessary components, like *Paddle Rally*’s board artwork or *Life*’s comprehensive board text translation. But in other cases, American whiteness was used as an aspirational or exotic sign that helped ground the “authenticity” of the American Game brand. This is why, in an early catalog for the American Game Series, we see affluently-dressed white actors staged mid-play around Takara’s catalog of games (タカラ c.1968). *Racket Race*’s appearance among the actors is a strong clue that Takara—not Milton Bradley or Whitman—hired white actors to showcase their games.

As the American Game Series evolved, the games’ linguistic and representational connection to their namesake grew more tenuous. Takara never divested from their licensing partners—they still iterate on the highly lucrative *Game of Life* today—but they did begin to develop original games that nonetheless were marketed as “American Games.” Certain titles, like プロ野球ゲーム・巨人 VS 阪神 *Pro Baseball Game: Tokyo Giants VS Hanshin Tigers*, made sense as “American Games” in concept, since they adapted an American sport, while other titles maintained the American affinity through genre associations or mechanical similarities. 億万長者ゲーム *Billionaire Game*, for instance, was obviously inspired by *Life* and *Monopoly*, but the game was a Takara original, despite its American Game branding. Less defensible as American Games were titles that neither originated in nor shared any cultural relationship to America, like 大相撲ゲーム *The Sumo Game*, 妖怪ゲーム *Yōkai Game*, and 日本特急旅行ゲーム *Japan Limited Express Train Tour Game*. Over time, “American Games” signified brand affinity more than geographical lineage.

Takara was not the only company importing Western games and licenses for Japanese players. In the early- to mid-1960s, Nintendo released over a dozen game adaptations of Disney films and attractions, including Whitman-licensed games like *Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color Game* (ディズニーのすばらしい色の世界ゲーム), Popeye-branded playing cards (ポパイ・トランプ), and original creations like *Walt Disney’s Bambi Game* (ディズニーのバンビゲーム). Nintendo also struck their own licensing deal with Takara’s American partners, most notably releasing Milton Bradley’s hit 1966 party game *Twister* in Japan as ツイスターゲーム that same year. And, like Takara, Nintendo had to localize games for domestic tastes and standards. A risqué American game like *Twister* required a subtler touch in a more socially conservative Japan. As Erik Voskuil describes on the *Before Mario* blog, *Twister*’s original illustration of a mixed co-ed group gathered around a young man and woman playing the game had two of its onlookers replaced by young children, transforming a potentially unseemly party scene into a benign domestic scene (2012c).

Nintendo likewise recognized the effectiveness of brand uniformity. They too adapted Milton Bradley’s “gray band” and spun out more than a dozen games using their own gray (and eventually color) band branding (Voskuil 2012b). But unlike Takara, Nintendo did not fully commit to the “American Game” format. Their games cycled regularly between foreign and domestic influences. Nintendo licensed games from Whitman, Milton Bradley, and Disney, but they also had games featuring characters from popular television and manga series, like Ultraman (ウルトラマンゲーム),

Osomatsu-kun (おそ松くんゲーム), and Little Ghost Q-Taro (オバケのQ太郎ゲーム) (Voskuil 2012a). Two late-era Nintendo board games, 平家物語ゲーム *Heike Monogatari Game* (1972) and 国盗り合戦ゲーム *Kokutouri Kassen Game* (1973), were based on familiar scenarios from Japanese history and used a traditional *e-sugoroku* format for the games' rules and structure. And while white faces were still prevalent in Nintendo products, many of their games and toys depicted Japanese children or families at play, introducing a shift in cultural representation that would continue into the 1980s.

## THE RETURN OF WAR

While companies like Takara and Nintendo paved the way for American games in post-war Japan, in the 1970s, a new and unlikely American influence arrived that would redefine the audience for board games and inadvertently alter the future of postwar Japanese games.

In 1954 and 1958, U.S. infantryman Charles S. Roberts designed and published, respectively, *Tactics* and *Tactics II*, first from his garage then later from his newly-founded imprint, Avalon Hill Games. So-called “wargames” had long been a part of military strategic exercises, and even a form of amusement for some European nobility, but Roberts was the first to miniaturize and commercialize “realistic” board wargames for play at home. Roberts also had a different audience in mind. As one version of the *Tactics II* box would explain, the game was designed to help players “make the switch from traditional games to simulation games” (Avalon Hill 1958). By “traditional games,” Roberts meant children’s or family games that relied on chance mechanisms to determine their outcome. Avalon Hill, the self-proclaimed “pioneer in adult game concepts,” assured its players that “strategy alone determines the outcome of every game. TACTICS II contains no chance cards, spinners, or random luck elements.” *Tactics* was for players who demanded more than *Life* or *Monopoly* could offer—it was “military chess” (Avalon Hill 1958).

Narrowing wargames’ audience to strategic-minded adults guaranteed that they would never reach the same commercial success as the games they claimed to surpass. But over several decades, niche but dedicated communities grew to support this new form of play. The abstract warfare between two invented nations in *Tactics* and *Tactics II* quickly evolved into increasingly more sophisticated simulations of historical conflicts that allowed players to command entire armies, handle complex logistics, or even manage individual soldiers. Avalon Hill helped expand both its business interests and the wargaming culture by publishing *The Avalon Hill General*, what they described as “the first step in creating a broadly based permanent market of ‘hard core’ wargamers and a means via which persons, interested in the hobby, could contact one another” (Avalon Hill 1971). Rival companies like SPI, which grew out of *General’s* competitor magazine *Strategy & Tactics*, expanded the hobby beyond historic simulation, fusing wargame mechanics with fantasy, science fiction, and even sports combat. By the early 1970s, a generation raised in the wake of the World Wars was now simulating those wars—and new, invented wars—with hexes, combat tables, and counters.

In Japan, the cultivation of wargames, even as a hobby, seemed preposterous in the wake of World War II. When the United States wrote their *Initial Post-Surrender Policy* in September 1945, they were unambiguous about the intent of the impending Occupation: “Japan will be completely disarmed and demilitarized. The authority of the militarists and the influence of militarism will be totally eliminated from her political, economic, and social life” (U.S. Dept. of State 1945). The censorship of Japanese militarism had real consequences in the postwar Occupation, but the

standards were unevenly applied. War films and other propaganda thought to promote militarism or “superpatriotism” were burned (High 2003, p. 505). Meanwhile, the Occupation allowed Japanese toymakers to build machines of war at a miniature scale, so long as they represented the Allied forces and bore an inscription that reminded them of their defeat.



**Figure 2:** A 1980 Japanese catalog featuring imports of Avalon Hill “simulation war games.”

As with all cultural traumas, the sands of time began to wear away past wounds. Once the Occupation lifted, so too did some of its censorship and propaganda. A postwar generation was coming of age in Japan, and for them, war was now fodder for play. A telling 1981 report in *The Nihon Keizai Shinbun* titled 私が戦闘司令官 (“I Am the War General”) captured the disconnect between the old and new generations’ attitude toward wargames:

It’s a bit old fashioned to say that the wartime experience has been fading away, but to the youth ignorant of war, [wargames] appear to be games that say even actual gruesome battles are fun...“The Allies won the Battle of Normandy, but the fact that the Germans could win in this game is where the fun comes in,” a college student says. “What’s the difference between this and having fun building plastic war machine figures?”

According to the toy-making industry, war games have been the centerpiece of competition since this autumn. “I’m trying my best to sell my products here, but I just can’t seem to bring myself to hype up wars where a lot of Japanese blood was spilled, like the Battle of Okinawa,” says a middle-aged toy store owner. “Although everyone’s a post-war child, the youngsters these days seem to be completely different from the likes of us, don’t they?” (1981)



Model mechs and cardboard Nazis were of a similar piece—fair game for a new generation of Japanese players.

American-style wargames made their auspicious debut in Japan nearly a decade prior to the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* report, due mostly to a single company: ホビージャパン Hobby Japan. Launched in 1969, 月刊ホビージャパン *Monthly Hobby Japan* focused on hobbyist interests like building miniature cars and painting model robots (Hobby Japan 2019). Such hobbies had affinities with a variant of miniatures-based wargaming that incorporated scale-model maps, realistic buildings and terrain, and model soldiers. *Hobby Japan* introduced Japanese players to so-called “English” wargaming in 1972 with a continuing series of articles titled 「ミニチュア模型によるウォー・ゲーム」 ”War Games with Miniature Models.” The series caused such a stir among hobbyists that it prompted Hobby Japan to host an open demonstration of miniature wargaming in Tokyo in July of that same year (Tamura 2016a). In 1974, Hobby Japan introduced SPI’s *Strategy & Tactics* and the concept of board wargames played with cardboard counters instead of model miniatures. To mark this distinction, they called SPI-style board wargames シミュレーションゲーム “simulation games.” In June 1975, Hobby Japan closed the loop between Japanese players and American wargames by advertising and selling Avalon Hill imports. Five years later, Hobby Japan would add SPI titles as well (Tamura 2016b) (see Figure 2).

Hobby Japan imports were less “invasive” than Takara’s localizations. There was no re-branding or revision—Hobby Japan simply added catalogs and rules translations to the game boxes. A subtler localization was happening at the community level. Much like Avalon Hill’s *General*, *Monthly Hobby Japan* helped engender a wargame culture by publishing articles on new games, rules interpretations, strategies, and historical context. Likewise, the gradual influx of Avalon Hill and SPI titles meant that the mechanics, style, and vocabulary of these games—e.g., the “adult games” moniker, “zones of control,” cardboard units, scenario-based combat, and so on—seeped into the Japanese game lexicon. By the end of the 70s, a niche wargaming culture was thriving in Japan, and many players were creating their own rule variations shared through meetups and hobbyist magazines.

Just as the fledgling wargame import business was hitting its stride, the dollar-yen exchange rate, artificially fixed at 1:360 after World War II in order to help stabilize Japan’s economic recovery, was set afloat. By 1978, the exchange rate had dropped to around 1:210 (Macrotrends LLC 2019). As the yen continued to plunge, Hobby Japan’s import business became increasingly untenable. Shipping board games from the U.S. to Japan left little margin for profit, so Hobby Japan was forced to raise prices. Between 1979 and 1980, advertised prices for many Avalon Hill imports like *D-Day* and *Waterloo* jumped from 4800 to 5800 yen (Tamura 2016a). Hobby Japan continued their import business, but many of Japan’s emerging game and toy makers, including Takara, Epoch, Bandai, Tsukuda—and even Hobby Japan themselves—saw the exchange downturn as an opportunity to start producing wargames domestically.

Bandai had had less experience in board games prior to 1980 than any of their competitors. The company debuted its first ボードゲームシリーズ Board Game Series in 1973, but the odd mishmash of Western-inspired titles apparently failed to resonate with Japanese audiences and was soon abandoned. Recognizing a new market opportunity in the exchange rate collapse, Bandai rebooted their board game efforts under the アダルトゲーム Adult Game moniker, aiming to capitalize on the wargame demographic of (mostly male) teens and college students. The name was meant to evoke, in part, the same strategic seriousness that Roberts had described in *Tactics II*, but they were also coyly playing with what a young man’s conception of a



“Game for ADULT” (as they would awkwardly name their game line) might imply. A 1981 *BANDAI ADULT* catalog, for instance, interspersed conventional product shots with evocative photos of candlelit tables, a bathrobe cast across a steel-framed chair, and bed sheets bunched (rather disturbingly) around a human form. Tortured prose introduced each series in the Adult product line, like this text from the “PLAYBOY series” of bunny-adorned executive desktop games: “We’ve always been taught to treasure our playfulness. Here, as a symbolic game world for men, the Playboy series was born” (Bandai Group 1981).

Nestled amidst similarly inexplicable copy were two key series in the Game for ADULT line. The *CARD GAME* series (1980–1) was the first to exhibit a number of marketing and design features that would soon become Bandai game hallmarks. The *CARD GAME* series was distinctively branded, priced affordably, designed for portability, and numbered in a collectible series—a savvy marketing ploy that Bandai poached from their own model figure lines. They also diverged from the earlier Board Game Series by featuring more culturally-relevant themes, like sumo wrestling (*千秋楽 Tournament Final*) and parodies of Japanese magazines (*ウィークリーマガジン Weekly Magazine*).



**Figure 3:** A 1981 Bandai toy fair catalog featuring two titles from their *SIMULATION if* wargame series.

Bandai’s wargame series, *SIMULATION if*, debuted shortly after, in 1981, with four eclectic titles: *連合艦隊 United Fleet*, representing the Japanese naval efforts in the Pacific; *関ヶ原 Sekigahara*, a famous battle from Japanese history; *二百三高地 Hill*

203, a conflict from the Russo-Japanese war; and 日本列島沈没 *Sinking of the Japanese Archipelago*, a wargame adaptation of a popular Japanese sci-fi novel (see Figure 3). The series name combined the “simulation game” term introduced in *Hobby Japan* with the seemingly cryptic English word “if,” which was simply a compact means to brand wargames’ scenario-based conflicts (as a Bandai flyer explained, “What if...at that time, it was you?”) (Bandai Group c.1983). Bandai’s designers were clearly indebted to Avalon Hill and SPI, but the range of titles on display reflected an interest in steering Japanese wargames away from the “Allied-centric” scenarios that were prevalent in American wargames toward more culturally-significant conflicts, eras, and personalities from Japanese and East Asian histories. Likewise, including sci-fi and fantasy alongside historical simulation showed Japanese designers’ willingness to diverge from or blur genre conventions. As Bandai demonstrated, wargame rules functioned equally well for Germany, Genpei, Gundam, and Godzilla.

The back-to-back introduction of the CARD GAME and SIMULATION if series marked a confluence of design priorities that would define Bandai’s games for the coming decade. The former series’ focus on portability, affordability, and collectability would help shift Bandai’s adult-focused games to a younger target audience who were keen to carry cheap collectible games to school. The if series likewise defied wargame conventions, both by expanding the palette of available themes and by using cards, rather than dice, as the combat chance mechanic. While this mechanical dispensation lost Bandai respect among traditional wargaming audiences, it fit their mandate to make their games easier to pick up and play, “so everyone from beginners to experts” could fully enjoy wargames.<sup>3</sup>

Bandai’s Game for ADULT line was prolific but short-lived. Between the CARD GAME, SIMULATION if, and the IMAGE PLAY GAME DO series (a brief foray into a wargame/RPG hybrid), Bandai would release nearly fifty titles, ranging from business management simulators like 株式入門 *Introduction to Stocks* to the *kaiju* combat wargame ズモスラ対ゴジラ *Mothra vs. Godzilla*. But by the beginning of 1984, the Game for ADULT line bowed out to more successful competitor lines from Epoch, Tsukuda, and Hobby Japan. However, Game for ADULT’s sibling series, Joy Family, would kick-start Bandai’s most prolific period of board game development, eventually spawning one of the longest-running series in board game history and establishing the model for Japanese board games in the 1980s.

### **LIFE AND SUGOROKU**

Amidst Takara’s extensive and long-running American Game Series, one of its first imports would also be one of the most influential for Japanese board games: 人生ゲーム *The Game of Life* (1968). Takara’s *Life* was a direct localization of Milton Bradley’s original *The Game of Life*, which had been released in the U.S. eight years prior. Marketed as a “family game,” the premise of Milton Bradley’s *Life* was simple: “You too can be a billionaire in this game of Life. That’s the object of the game” (Milton Bradley 1960). Directly reflecting, as Tristan Donovan writes, “the optimism and consumerism of white America at the dawn of the 1960s” (2017, p. 60), *Life* started you out, according to the rulebook, “on Life’s highway, just out of high school, with a car and \$2,000.” As players wended their plastic vehicles through impressive three-dimensional landscapes, they would experience fortunes and misfortunes, from marriage and parenthood to taxes and poverty. *Life* was a highway, and fortunes were gained or lost according to the spin of the Wheel of Fate.

*Life* was a smash hit both in the United States and Japan (so much so that Milton Bradley and Takara have continued to release regular iterations and variations of the

game every few years since the 1960s). But why did it appeal so strongly to Japanese players when other successful American games with similar themes of aspirational wealth—most notably, Parker Brothers’ *Monopoly* (1933)—did not? Perhaps the model of American life depicted on the board spoke to a nation of players still emerging from the shadow of its previous occupiers? That’s likely part of the cause, but a more compelling link exists in the structural affinities between *Life* and the game of *sugoroku*.

*Sugoroku* is largely unfamiliar in the West, despite being one of the world’s oldest games. *Sugoroku* (commonly rendered as すごろく, but whose *kanji* form is 双六) translates as “double sixes,” denoting its origins as a dice-throwing game related to (and likely derived from) backgammon (Masukawa 2004a, p. 105). The term’s connotations are somewhat ambiguous, because *sugoroku* now describes two different styles and formats for play—one of which, 盤双六 *ban-sugoroku* or “board sugoroku,” is the older, aforementioned sibling of backgammon, while the other, 絵双六 *e-sugoroku* or “picture sugoroku,” is a later (c. 15th century) dice-based racing game played on intricately illustrated boards.



**Figure 4:** 世界第一双六, (*World Number Ones Sugoroku*) a typical *e-sugoroku* featuring world travel. *Image Source:* Princeton University Digital Library. Cotsen Children’s Library.

*Ban-sugoroku* is Japan’s earliest documented board game, dating to at least the seventh century CE. It shares its setup and rules with Western backgammon, though its exact derivation is unclear. *Ban-sugoroku* boards likely found their way to Japan via China or Korea during “a period when the island nation was open to contact with China, which in turn received foreign influence through commerce and travel along the Silk Road” (Masukawa 2004a, p. 105). Japanese variants were played on a plain or lacquered wooden box inlaid with opposing rows of twelve rectangular spaces. The pieces, typically black and white stones, were moved according to the throw of two dice shaken from small boxes.

Despite their common etymology, no historical evidence suggests that *ban-sugoroku* and *e-sugoroku* share a lineage. Historians originally thought *e-sugoroku* arrived from China or India in the seventeenth century, but more recent evidence indicates that the game is natively Japanese and dates to at least the fifteenth century (Masukawa 2004b, p. 77). Beyond *ban-* and *e-sugoroku*'s shared chance mechanism—throwing dice—their resemblance is superficial. In lieu of *ban-sugoroku*'s abstract gridded spaces, *e-sugoroku*, true to its name, divides the game board into vibrant pictorial spaces (see Figure 4). These ranged from multiple adjacent vignettes that resemble modern-day *manga* to maps of tourist destinations in Japan to ornate depictions of stage plays or home interiors. Movement through these spaces could be metaphorical, similar to the slides into moral turpitude in snakes 'n' ladders, or representational and literal, for instance, by moving one's piece from point to point on a map.

Whether literally or metaphorically, in *e-sugoroku*, players competed to move their pawns from a designated start (ふりだし, meaning both “starting point” and a “throw of the dice”) to an end goal (上がり “ascent”) in as few moves as possible. A chance mechanism (typically a die) determined how many cells a player moved in a given turn. While this basic formal structure defined thousands of so-called “race-to-the-finish” games common to many cultures and eras, from *Game of Goose* (c. 16th century) to *Candyland* (1949), *sugoroku* contained movement variations that diverged from this common archetype. 飛び “Jumping” *sugoroku*, for instance, did not lead players along a linear path from start to finish (Formanek 2005, p. 77–8). Instead, each space contained a set of numbers (or die faces) that corresponded to other spaces on the board. If the player rolled that number, they “jumped” to the designated space. Players could thus fall into ordinally-connected “loops,” a mechanism that had metaphorical overtones when *e-sugoroku* depicted cyclical themes of religious suffering or moral hardship. A space might also omit certain numbers, leaving players trapped in that space until they rolled differently, like a rudimentary “lock and key” mechanism. Another sub-type called 振分 “parted” *e-sugoroku* split players' movements via multiple paths and branches that could cross or converge at various points during play.

Throughout its history, *sugoroku* was popular mass media, collected and played by nobility, celebrities, samurai, gamblers, artists, farmers, women, and children alike. As historian Anthony Bryant explains, *sugoroku* was “popular among the common townsfolk” because the “‘playing board’ was a printed piece of paper which was cheap, and could be folded up and carried about,” and “the playing pieces could be anything from a distinctive pebble to a coin” (2014). In its most common form, *sugoroku* was “mobile gaming” *avant la lettre*—portable, low-cost, quick to pick up an play, and tied to themes reflecting Japanese culture, from religion and history to sports and travel.

A key factor in *e-sugoroku*'s appeal was thematic variance. Any subject that could be represented with images was fodder for play. The earliest forms, for instance, were “Pure Land,” “travel,” and “actor” *sugoroku*. Pure Land *e-sugoroku* taught religion and morality, and they likely derived both their content and metaphorical mechanics—i.e., moving one's pieces from low to high—from Buddhist hanging scrolls depicting one's spiritual journey from Hell to the Pure Land. Travel *sugoroku* “featured specific itineraries, illustrating scenic places, local specialties, and inns,” and among its most popular subjects was the Tokaido pilgrimage spanning from Edo to Kyoto (Masukawa 2004b p. 79). Here, *e-sugoroku* functioned simultaneously as game, map, and spectacle. Likewise, actor *e-sugoroku* were an early form of celebrity mass media, depicting popular theater stars and, later, beautiful women.



As *e-sugoroku*'s popularity expanded, so too did its range of themes. By the early nineteenth century, there were *e-sugoroku* depicting “daily life, festivals, Kabuki actors, sumo wrestlers, narrative stories, *waka* poems (the traditional verse form), and famous samurai warriors” (Masukawa 2004b, p. 79). In the twentieth century, *e-sugoroku*'s themes developed further “in response to an increasingly modernized way of life,” including:

The department store, the railroad, scenic places in Tokyo, the life of wage workers, and travel around the world. The newly founded monthly magazines for boys, girls, and women were accompanied by *e-sugoroku* as supplements, and these magazines helped popularize the new forms of the game. As magazine circulations rose, *e-sugoroku* became an indoor game popular among children...Altogether, several million boys and girls played identical *e-sugoroku* games nationwide—indeed, an unusual phenomenon in any board game's history. This second *e-sugoroku* boom decidedly transformed the game into a “children's game.” (Masukawa 2004b, p. 86)

That same flexibility of theme and structure would prove crucial for Bandai's adoption of *e-sugoroku* in their late-Shōwa board games.

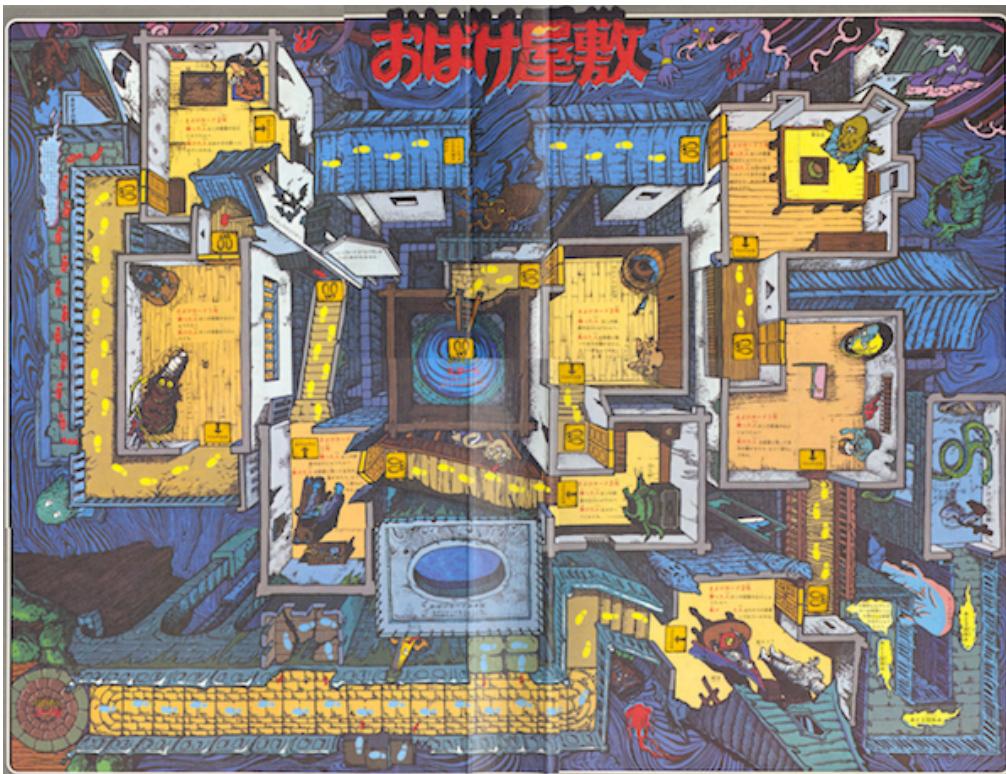
### THE JOY FAMILY

The disparate through lines comprising *sugoroku*, war games, American Games, and Japan's postwar media landscape reached their nexus in Bandai's ジョイファミリー Joy Family, launched concurrently with their Game for ADULT line in 1980. The series began, fittingly, with JALPAK 世界一周ゲーム, or *JALPAK Around the World Game*, a game that combined elements of traditional travel *e-sugoroku*, the capitalist-oriented fortunes and misfortunes of *Life*, and an odd cross-promotional partnership with Japan Airlines (see Figure 5). Clearly taking cues from Takara and Nintendo's branding strategies, Bandai packaged the Joy Family series in identical white boxes, each with a prominent vertical sidebar featuring the series logo, game title, components photograph, and a short tagline describing the game (in *JALPAK*'s case, “A family game where you can study the world while playing!!”).



**Figure 5:** Bandai's *JALPAK Around the World Game* (1980), the first Joy Family series game.

Like traditional *e-sugoroku*, Joy Family supported an eclectic range of genres, themes, and licensed properties and strongly foregrounded the spectacular imagery of its subjects with full-color illustrations and oversized boards and boxes. In its first five years, the series would host science fiction (タイムマシン *Time Machine*), popular *manga* characters (Dr.スランプ・アラレちゃん ゲーム *Dr. Slump: Arale-chan Game*), racing (ターボ村のシティレースゲーム *Turbo Village City Race*), wrestling (キン肉マン・スペシャルゲーム *Kinnikuman Special Game*), the first known commercial board game adaptation of a videogame (クレイジークライマー *Crazy Climber*), game shows (なるほど!ザ・ワールドゲーム *Naruhodo! The World Game*), a “Life-like” (波乱万丈ゲーム *A Game of Ups and Downs*), and a dating game (たのきんのゲーム DE デート *Tanokin’s Dating Game*). But the most notable early Joy Family title was the horror game おばけ屋敷ゲーム *Haunted House Game*.



**Figure 6:** The board artwork for Bandai’s *Haunted House* (1980).

Released shortly after the series debut in 1980, *Haunted House* was Bandai’s *Game of Life*, the breakout hit that the company claims sold more than 800,000 copies in Japan (Bandai Namco Group 2012). Evoking the complex interiors of famous *e-sugoroku*, *Haunted House* placed players in its titular space, a multi-roomed Japanese castle infested with monsters, ghosts, and demons. Players began in a well at the center of the board and, by drawing from a hand of numbered movement cards (Joy Family games were initially marketed as カードゲーム “card games” rather than board games), worked their way outward in a spiral pattern of connected hallways, rooms, and rooftops until they faced their final challenge: sneaking past 死神 the God of Death in a long passageway leading to the final goal. Along the way, players faced 対決 (“confrontations”) with a panoply of creatures drawn from Eastern and Western folklore, mass media, and pop culture—Frankenstein, *oni*, skeletons, the Invisible

Man, and Rokurokubi were all inhabitants of the haunted house. But the whole experience had a comic, self-referential tone that catered to its target audience: families.<sup>4</sup>

*Haunted House* adapted the formal conventions of *e-sugoroku* to structure play. Along the board path there were locked doors that granted players access to rooms where they would engage in a showdown with a creature drawn from the おぼけ “monster” deck. Players were forced to stop when they reached the room’s threshold and produce a key card to gain entry. Although cards were used in lieu of dice, this rule mimicked the “lock-and-key” mechanism common in jumping sugoroku. Similarly, certain card effects or confrontation outcomes could force the player to jump to distant board spaces, breaking the linear flow of movement through the house. Certain negative outcomes could also trap unlucky players in a loop that they could only break by drawing the proper movement card. And visually, the connected chambers of a sprawling haunted house mapped well to the illustrated spatial divisions that were prominent in *e-sugoroku*. Packed from edge to edge with monsters and printed in full color on both sides (as all Bandai boards were), the board was made both for play and visual delight. Children could pore over *Haunted House*’s illustrated spaces like an oversized *manga*.

Buoyed by Joy Family’s success, Bandai launched another affiliated series, called パーティジョイ Party Joy, in 1983. Unlike the large-scale boxes that housed its parent series, Party Joy games were distinctively compact—roughly the size of B5 paper. For a Japanese child in the 1980s, a Party Joy game would have traveled conveniently alongside their ジャポニカ学習帳 Japonica learning books or the latest *manga* digest. To speed production and ground the games in cultural familiarity, most Party Joy games used *e-sugoroku* for their mechanical foundation. With few exceptions, cards, die rolls, or spinners directed player movement through vividly illustrated *e-sugoroku*-like spaces, supplemented by other accessories that offered additional chance or strategy mechanics. Owing to the series’ target audience, Bandai’s design focused on simple setup and play, eye-catching artwork, and novel toy-like constructions. Like the *e-sugoroku* of decades past, Party Joy game were designed for simplicity, portability, and visual appeal.

Conversely, as commodities, they were designed for collection, display, and licensing appeal. Priced at a uniform ¥1,000 (approximately \$7), a half or third cheaper than Joy Family games, the Party Joy series squarely targeted the allowances of its primary school demographic. Any TV series mainstay, *manga* character, or pop culture trend that might attract children—whether Ultraman or Tom & Jerry—was promptly licensed for adaptation as a game. Each Party Joy box had a prominent logo mark that echoed the red, tripartite brand of its Joy Family sibling. But instead of a fanned hand of cards, the logo resembled a folded map, referencing the play board tucked within its diminutive box. The logo also included a small yellow circle with the series number beneath the パーティジョイ text, a sly marketing tactic that compelled children to collect as many as they could. Survey cards, newsletters, and fan clubs ensured that Party Joy’s consumers felt like they were part of an ongoing media phenomenon.





**Figure 7:** PJ 49 ケーキがいっぱいゲーム (“Fuuuuull of Cakes Game”) illustrates the series’ scale, sliding tray, board, and components.

To aid storage and portability, Party Joy games had an inner tray that slid out from the right edge of the outer cardboard box (see Figure 7). The tray was initially printed cardboard that duplicated the box artwork in monotone and had a small adhesive pull tab to help grasp the inner box. In 1985, Bandai replaced the crush-prone cardboard with molded plastic trays (in kid-friendly pastel hues of green, blue, yellow) that were rugged, easy to grip, and snapped shut easily. The tray’s bottom had six recessed posts, four at the corners and two at the center of each longer side, as well as a small center hole. This clever design feature converted the box into a platform for game accessories. The same plastic standees that held players’ cardboard pawns would fit into the recessed holes in order to hold, for example, cardboard walls for a 3D diorama. Similarly, the center hole could be used to fix a through-hole spinner mechanism, converting an unused storage tray into a game component.

The Party Joy box became a key affordance for Bandai’s designers. All components necessary for play, from the rule book to the game board, had to fit within the small sliding compartment. As their logo denoted, the series’ double-sided game boards were printed on card stock that could be folded and stored within the tray. To further save space and manufacturing costs, playing cards were printed on perforated sheets that players would separate during setup. These printed sheets allowed Bandai to deviate from standard playing card size, so a single game could have myriad card types and shapes. Another key affordance was price. Since every Party Joy game retailed for a uniform ¥1,000, designers faced a hard limit on, for instance, the quantity of paper used or the number of components.

Between 1983 and 1992, Bandai released 135 Party Joy games covering a remarkable range of genres, including horror, sports, travel, mystery, and comedy. At the series’ peak, Bandai was releasing multiple games per month, so their stable of contract

designers were expected to churn out game prototypes at a breakneck pace. In a 2015 interview, game designer Ikuo Nomura explained that he was among several contractors that Bandai hired to create their Joy-affiliated games (Tokusha 2015). Due to limitations on copyright terms for licensed properties, game production had a limited life span. No matter how well a particular game sold, after six months, it was taken out of production. As a result, Nomura explains, he had to focus on game designs that, inspired by *e-sugoroku*, did not require complex rules or components. Conversely, speedy turnarounds gave the designers license to experiment with multiple mechanics and styles, because failures and successes alike would be short-lived (Tokusha 2015).

Beyond its embedded material and economic constraints, Party Joy also faced challenges from a new, but related media form: videogames. By historical coincidence both Party and Nintendo's Family Computer arrived in the same year, though the latter's impact was not immediate. Japan already had vibrant arcade and PC cultures, so digital games were not wholly new. Bandai themselves had participated in the burgeoning console, computer, electronic, and handheld game businesses since their inception. Still, videogames had had little influence on Japanese board games before the Family Computer. Apart from Bandai's own *Crazy Climber* in 1981, no other Japanese game publisher had adapted a videogame for board game play.<sup>5</sup>

Due to hardware failures and a lack of third-party support, Family Computer's initial impact was modest. But in 1985, Nintendo released スーパーマリオブラザーズ *Super Mario Bros.* and irrevocably altered Japan's videogame landscape. The game marked a shift in the style and complexity of console games, and increasingly, players would spend more time playing games at home than they would at arcades. Console play clearly posed a threat to other domestic leisure activities, and board game manufacturers quickly tried to assimilate videogames into the analog domain. Bandai hopped on the licensing bandwagon almost immediately. Party Joy #51, *Super Mario Bros.*, released the same year as the Famicom cartridge (and used the same cover artwork). In the year following, the Party Joy series was almost exclusively dedicated to videogame licenses, including games like ツインビーゲーム *TwinBee* (#56), グラディウス *Gradius* (#60), and *Wolf of the Battlefield* (#64). Likewise, Epoch, Takahashi, Tsukuda, Konami, Hanayama, Sega, Hobby Japan, Enix, Tomy, and Namco began releasing their own videogame adaptations, though none did so at Bandai's pace or scale.

What first appeared to be a simple marketing maneuver had surprisingly more nuance. The structural form of *e-sugoroku*, which formed the foundation of Bandai's board games, proved uniquely suited to adapt its sibling media. When console games like *Super Mario Bros.* helped make scrolling games the norm, videogame spaces became videogame worlds. And videogame worlds could be mapped. The all-over print format of Bandai game boards proved to be conducive material supports for mapped videogame spaces. The Party Joy version of *Legend of Zelda* (1986), for instance, used an exact recreation of the in-game overworld for its board. And Bandai marketed this as a value-add—the board game was not only its own game, but a strategy guide as well. Mastery of the board game could translate to mastery of the digital game. Similarly, the formal structures of *e-sugoroku* easily supported videogames' use of lock-and-key mechanics, looping structures, and spatial warping. The Joy Family adaptation of 魔界村 *Makaimura* (1986), for instance, used a jumping *sugoroku* structure to make players feel like they were “lost” in the game's forest stage. Only a specific sequence of die rolls would allow them to progress.

Similarly, board game boss fights were simply mechanisms like those seen previously in *Haunted House*, whose locked rooms contained their own “boss” monsters.<sup>6</sup>

Despite their structural affinities, Bandai’s board game series were ultimately eclipsed by the looming videogame monolith. But during their respective runs, Joy Family, Party Joy, and their numerous spin-off series left a significant imprint on Japanese games. Every aspect of the look, feel, style, and marketing of Bandai’s games were imitated and iterated by their competitors. Epoch’s Junior Board Game series matched Party Joy games in size, format, and price. Namcot released a short-lived series of portable games they called “Handy Board,” an ostensibly odd bit of branding until you realize how similar ハンディ “handy” and パーティ “party” looked in Japanese. Even Takara, ironically, launched their own Family Game series, closing the circle of influence that traced through Bandai back to their own American Games series.

Of course, Bandai neither represents nor defines the breadth of postwar Japanese board and card games, nor does the company’s output encompass the scope of what Japanese games are, were, or how they were played. But Bandai is an emblematic and unrecognized fulcrum in the history of games. By the sheer breadth of their catalog, any serious history of games, either analog or digital, should account for their impact. Read through the influential work of Takara, Nintendo, Epoch, Hobby Japan, Tsukuda, and others, Bandai forms a center of gravity in a complex constellation of economic, social, and cultural forces. Bandai is a historical site where *sugoroku* abutted with *Super Mario Bros.*, *yokai* mingled with Dracula, Kinnikuman wrestled in cardboard, and mechs shared the same battle hexes as the Desert Fox.

But this is only a provisional survey, a first attempt to mortar the gaps of Bandai’s “Brief History.” A deeper history is still to be written. Grouping games by brands provides categorical waypoints from which we can track shifts in marketing, design, commerce, and distribution. But what is a “Bandai game” exactly? Is it a coherent aggregate of cultural practices, or is it simply a brand signifier? How is it different than a Nintendo, an Epoch, or a Takara game? These companies comprise tens of thousands of individuals distributed across multiple decades. A future history of Japanese board games needs to surface the artists, marketers, designers, distributors, vendors, players, and the countless other unacknowledged actors that made and played these games. But for now, at least, we have our start and a path—let’s roll the dice and move forward.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> There’s an important linguistic distinction between Japanese pre- and post-WWII

<sup>2</sup> For more on Japanese videogame localization, see cf. O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013 or Consalvo 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For Japanese wargamers’ perspective on Bandai games, see Shin 2007. The quoted text is translated from Bandai Group c.1983.

<sup>4</sup> Dracula’s card text, for instance, describes him as, “A well-known figure even among vampires. Doesn’t even have time to take afternoon naps after his quick rise to fame from appearing in movies and games.”

<sup>5</sup> The situation was quite different in the United States. Between 1982–84, Milton Bradley, Enix, Parker Bros., and Ideal collectively released over forty board game adaptations of arcade games. However, there is no historical evidence that these games were available or known in Japan.

<sup>6</sup> Videogames also appear to have internalized some of *e-sugoroku*’s visual and formal language. Overworld maps like those seen in *Makaimura*, *Castlevania*, *Bionic Commando*, and *Super Mario Bros. 3* strongly resemble maps used in travel *sugoroku*. And non-Euclidean spatial puzzles like the Lost Forest in *The Legend of Zelda* function similarly to the non-linear branching structures in “jumping” and “parted” *sugoroku*.