

At Your Service: Event-Based Design in Japanese Mobile Games

Bryan Hikari Hartzheim

Waseda University
School of International Liberal Studies
bhartz@aoni.waseda.jp

Keywords

Mobile games, design, games-as-services, developers, industry

INTRODUCTION

The explosion of smartphones and the F2P model has resulted in an industry-wide push towards perpetual mobile game production. This is possibly most pronounced in Japan's video games industry. Developing first through feature phones and platforms like iMode around 2006, mobile games have become the dominant mode of game development in Japan in roughly nine years (Shin, 2015). According to the annual Famitsu White Paper report, the domestic market for online mobile games grew from \$800 million to \$5.8 billion from 2010 to 2014, comprising – by far – the largest portion of Japan's gaming industry (Famitsu, 2014). The industry shift to mobile is also borne out by developer data. A survey conducted by the Computer Entertainment Developer's Conference found that a whopping 62% of developers worked on smartphone games in 2016, as opposed to 39% who worked on console games (CESA, 2016). In short, the vast majority of studios and developers making games in Japan are making them for mobile platforms that were largely irrelevant a dozen years ago.

Mobile Ops and Event-Based Design

This project will examine the developers in the mobile games market in order to see how their views towards their work and audiences impacts the creative nature of mobile games currently being produced in Japan. This new form of creative work is primarily centered in the “operations” portion of commercial mobile game development (Toto, 2017). With more games now made with long-term monetization in mind, development teams are required to run a single game for months and, in successful scenarios, even years. With the move to massive mobile game production, operations is now the third stage beyond the preproduction and production phases of game development. Developers in operations (*unnei*) are responsible for managing a mobile game's performance and experience once the game has gone live via regularly scheduled “events,” or in-game campaigns designed to drive steady engagement. Mobile ops are, in a sense, the “post-production team.”

Continuing with the film industry analogies, operations teams are often staffed with the equivalent of “below-the-line” workers in film and television production: employed increasingly on contract, responsible for a great deal of the audiovisual experience but rarely in the larger project's planning and conception, and infrequently credited for their creative work (Meyer, 3). This project will examine this new role of operations in Japan's mobile gaming industry through ethnographic analysis of the artists, designers/planners, programmers, and localizers at various studios who are responsible for creating the assets and events that keep games

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

© 2019 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

running. The information will be drawn from semi-structured interviews, conducted in Japanese and English, with different mobile game developers working at separate mobile game companies based in the central Tokyo area, some of which also concurrently produce console games. The key focus for this project is in seeing how mobile game developers view the work that they do, the games that they produce, and the audiences who they produce them for, and how this new industry resembles or differs from the larger games industry in Japan.

The Design of “Games as Services”

Central to this project is in observing how developers for mobile tend to view their products as “services” rather than “games.” While recent research and reports have described this approach to game design as a recent trend (see Cai, Chen, and Leung, 2015), many Japanese developers have long described their work in light of the players, providing whatever it was that was needed as determined by “users,” who voice their opinion through in-game purchases, message boards, and customer support. Service, in other words, was intended to provide pleasure to users frequently and immediately via in-game events. One designer used the word *kimochii*, a word that translates to “pleasant feeling” or “feel-good” to describe what he believed he was to provide for users, using contemporary expressions of hospitality (*omotenashi*) to describe this emotional feeling of “service.” Part of this attitude stems from the fact that many such game companies began as IT firms, with game development studios emerging as a key extension of other services. Developers view their role as catering to the tastes of the user base, altering rules, art, and designs in events based on the needs or wants of the most frequently playing players, many of whom end up inevitably being the most highly paying players.

The creator of *Pac-Man*, Toru Iwatani, has used a similar word of hospitality (*itareritsukuseri*) to describe his approach to making games as well, though it was one of many other game design components he listed (Wolf, iv). Service for users is a dominant mode of thought among developers, who believe that mobile games are forums of immediate feedback, and that Japanese players in particular expect excellent “service” from their mobile game experiences. In the view of many mobile game developers, though the mobile games industry might offer opportunities for interesting games in the future, it has nevertheless created an industry more focused on providing immediate pleasures and alternative considerations for both producers and players. As the mobile gaming industry enters its second decade of existence, and the industry consolidates and matures, it will be important to see if these experiences are indicators of the limits of commercially produced mobile games themselves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cai, W., Chen, M. and Leung, V. C. 2014. "[Toward Gaming as a Service](#)" (PDF). *IEEE Internet Computing*. 12–18.

CESA. 2016. *2016 CESA Ippan seikatsusha chōsa hōkokusho: nihon geemu yūzaa & hiyūzaa chōsa* (2016 CESA Report on Investigations into Everyday Consumers: Users and Non-Users of Japanese Games). Tokyo: Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association.

Famitsu. 2014. *2014 Famitsu Game Report*. Tokyo: GZBrain.

Meyer, V. 2011. *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Shin K. 2015. "Smartphones Bring New Golden Age for Japan's Games Industry." *Nippon.com*. 9 April. <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a04102/>.
- Toto, S. 2017. "Japan Has a Secondary Market – For Servicing Mobile Games." *Kantan Games*, 2 May. <https://www.serkantoto.com/2017/02/22/japan-secondary-market-mobile-games-2/>.
- Wolf, M. 2015. *Video Games Around the World*. Boston, MA: The MIT Press.