

Arcade Soldiers: Early Japanese Shooters in Dialogue with Hollywood Militarism

Shan Mu Zhao

Thompson River University
Department of Communications and Visual Arts
805 TRU Way
Kamloops, BC, Canada
V2C 0C8

szhao@tru.ca

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Japanese developers are often credited with introducing human protagonists to arcade games of the 1970s and 80s, which had predominantly taken the form of space and tank shooters (Kohler 2004). However, the frequent use of Hollywood action heroes as character references such as Rambo, and the use of jungles and tropics as settings, has gone unconsidered. It is possible to view these video games as *mukokuseki*, products stripped of Japanese cultural references designed to sell well on the international market (Consalvo 2016). However, the *mukokuseki* framework over-emphasize financial considerations rather than ideological ones, and perpetuates the portrayal of western or American cultural tropes as culturally neutral and unmarked. This paper argues that rather than reflecting financial motivations, early Japanese shooters were in dialogue with an American social imaginary of the Cold War period, especially with Hollywood films after Vietnam marked by ambivalence towards militarism and state authority. To this end, this paper will examine arcade and early home computer games developed in Japan, such as *Front Line* (Taito 1982), *Commando* (Capcom 1985), *Ikari Warriors* (SNK 1986), *Contra* (Konami 1987), *Metal Gear* (Konami 1987) and attempts to pay homage to or officially license the Rambo franchise, as well as marketing materials, interviews with game developers, and online fandoms.

When commercial games began developing in the 1970s, American military-themed games could draw upon aesthetics and tropes firmly established by decades of domestic Hollywood war films, and the pleasure of these games are tied to narratives of American victories. In contrast, Japanese games representing war and soldiering could not draw upon their own domestic cultural and media production; due to Japan's defeat at the end of WWII and subsequent demilitarization (Hutchinson 2019), mass culture tended to portray war and soldiering through a tragic lens (eg. The film series *The Human Condition* (1959-1961)). However, numerous films expounding

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American values and military heroism were shown in Japan from the American Occupation onwards as a means of demilitarizing and democratizing the country, leading to generations of Japanese game developers familiar with Hollywood tropes.

Rather than an ideologically neutral calculation of *mukokuseki* designed to sell, the Hollywood tropes in Japanese arcade shooters in the 1970s and 1980s represent the rootedness of the American global imaginary in Japan. Hollywood released a number of war, action, or political thriller films set in Southeast Asia and Central America, reflecting the US's military interventions in those regions (such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *Romancing the Stone*). Japanese games such as *Contra* and *Commando* reflect these tropes, where the game characters are white, special forces personnel who are dropped into jungles or other "exotic" locations, and gameplay comprises of shooting enemies.

However, Japanese games did not always adopt these aesthetics because they came from the culture of the "winning" side. Hollywood action films of the 1980s uniquely reckoned with the effects of the Vietnam War on American soldiers by featuring heroes such as Rambo who are disillusioned with military command and seek retribution for their own suffering. Film scholars argue that in the US, the critical potential of these films went unfulfilled, as the protagonist's fury tend to be redirected against America's foreign enemies (Dittmar & Michaud, 1990). However, in a Japanese context, they proved popular with audiences since they were models for grappling with the aftermath of a "bad" war, where flawed heroes who were victimized by their governments could fight back. Importantly, these models could be transferred across to video games, where players can enact this retribution. For example, game designer Iju Keiko has stated that Rambo's popularity prompted her to design similar characters for *Ikari Warriors* (in Szczepaniak, 2018).

Arguably, Japanese games based on American narratives of violent retribution functioned as displacement, as they reinforced Japanese understandings of themselves as victims rather than encourage reflections of how they victimized others. However, I argue that using tropes and aesthetics from American films of the 1970s-80s set Japanese games up for their divergent portrayals of American military interventions in subsequent decades. Even when Japanese developers made changes to their games for the American market, they may retain their oppositional sensibilities. For example, while the Japanese game *Guevara* was localized as *Guerilla War* in the US, with its characters of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro renamed, the game stands out for protagonists who are local rebels rather than foreign agents. In addition, while American first-person shooters matured in the post-9/11 decade, featuring heroic American agents and drawing upon American military funding, Japanese games that showed American military figures exhibited a range of ambivalent positions. The *Metal Gear Solid* series (Konami) continued to be critical of state control, while games such as *Metal Wolf Chaos* (FromSoftware 2004) parodied American military heroics.

By examining 1980s arcade shooters, this paper aim to contribute to a historical examination of video games; situate video games in the wider cultural exchange between the US and Japan, specifically highlighting the ambivalent pleasures on the part of Japanese developers as consumers and fans of American media; and challenge the appropriateness of *mukokuseki* as a framework for explaining media which sit at the intersections between national cultures as well as intersections of games and other popular media.

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