Introduction

Japan's media culture is local and global. What is Japan's media culture? The singular is deceptive. Media culture is far too complex to speak of one. And what is "Japan" in this context? If media culture is global, how do we justify singling out a specific place or territory for the inquiry? What is local; more specifically, what is global about "Japanese media culture"? Does this question even matter? Aren't the contours of the nation – and indeed of media – as such blurred under the influence of regionalization and globalization, and isn't everything increasingly connected, transregional, ecological? The chapters included in this book say yes, but. Each of them engages with a specific site or phenomenon constituted by and constitutive of concrete local and global relations. Instead of presenting one grand narrative of why the local or the global are relevant, this collection aims to provide insight into the diversity of issues and dimensions involved in considering particular phenomenon through the lens of this guiding theme. Likewise, the selection of texts is not based on such a coherent theoretical framework. The book has its origin in a series of workshops about Japan's videogames and digital media between local and global, organized as part of an exchange between Leipzig University in Germany and Ritsumeikan University in Japan between 2017–2020, for which we received generous support from the German Foreign Exchange Service (DAAD) and the PaJaKo (Partnership with Japan and South Korea) programme.

While primarily meant to bring the group participating in the exchange together, the workshops quickly became a site of exchange between a much broader group of scholars interested in its theme. The rich interactions we had during the workshop, as well as the experience of a community of researchers emerging from them, inspired us to continue our collaboration in written form, even after the project had ended. Precisely because they were embedded within an exchange between graduate students, many of whom had not been to the respective partner institution or country, the workshops and the exchange more generally also became sites for discovering, negotiating, and reflecting on the different positions from which we research media. At times, common themes turned out to be not so common at all, while at other times, surprising

connections could be drawn. Summarizing this in terms of positionality does not do justice to the individual and collaborative effort that went into such explorations up to the point of writing the chapters included here. The experience certainly emphasized the difficulty of and the rich rewards awaiting us in such engagement. And it reminded us of the importance of reflecting on and communicating our position. If anything, we have come to understand labels like "Japan" or "local and global" as invitations or – to put it in more urgent terms demanded by the generalization and homogenization implied by these labels – prompts for open-ended discussions.

Many of the contributions to this volume have grown out of such discussions or have been discussed within our network on multiple occasions. All chapters underwent a rigorous double review by the editors. Moreover, we have asked the group to comment openly on each other's final product. Inspired by the First Person book project (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004), you will find that these additional comments at the end of each chapter are not just a footnote. They are essential to our aim of advancing discussions about the phenomena, dimensions, perspectives, and processes considered in this volume within our network, with colleagues and, we dare say, friends scattered across the globe, even in such challenging times as these, when meetings and "on site" workshops are difficult. The comments have sparked further discussion during the editorial process. In some cases, the authors would have liked to expand on their argument or respond in order to clarify their position. We hope this edited volume advances such continuous discussion amidst the difficult circumstances we find ourselves in today. The book does not compensate for in-person discussions (and drinks afterwards), but it does incorporate the idea that we can help each other in finding answers to our research questions and aims if we work together across disciplines, cultural and language barriers. Working together in this way, however, requires non-trivial effort, or to adopt a term from game studies, "ergodic play" (Aarseth 1997). This book is the result of such ergodic research play – which we believe to be the only way of situating our research about Japan's media between local and global contexts, and of creating awareness about our individual positions.

The wide range of inquiries and perspectives included in this volume document the complexity of questions of location, position, and flow, as they consider local, transnational, and transregional aspects of Japan's media culture. A first set of chapters in this collection considers particular media, art forms, genre, or services that have emerged locally, in Japan, in specific ways. In doing so, they also relate their inquiry to the work of Japanese theorists and cultural critics such as Hiroki Azuma or Gō Itō, who have contemplated the popular and subcultural media landscape of manga, anime, light novels, and

novel games in Japan from a specific, local position, and who figure prominently in several of these chapters.

Martin Picard's contribution uncovers, or rediscovers, the origins of game cultures in Japan. Readers will soon notice that the author's perspective is immediately apparent by the fact that the words in the title, "origins" and "cultures", are in the plural. Through his archaeological survey with extensive materials and resources, the author unravels the complex and identifies *gēmu* (the Japanese word for game) as a historical intersection of the four distinct domains in the Japanese post-war popular culture: game arcade; home entertainment; personal computer; and mobile phone. These four domains not only have different roots in the tradition of Japanese entertainment culture, as the author shows, they are also connected to particular technological backgrounds and social contexts in their respective ways. Moreover, by tracing the formation and development of a peculiar notion of *gēmu*, this chapter arouses our general interest in the process of how a country in East Asia adapted, translated, and finally completely appropriated concepts and technologies imported from Western culture. Yasuo Kawasaki's column on the diversity of game centres in Japan complements this inquiry with a detailed account of the diverse shapes such spaces of play have assumed over time. Explaining the view far beyond the field of games, Dorothea Mladenova offers a nuanced analysis of the recent shift towards platform-based services in the local Japanese funeral industry. Drawing on a wide range of theoretical and empirical research, she shows how platformization contributes to rationalization and outsourcing on a large scale. What makes this analysis particularly compelling and informative is that Mladenova develops her argument against the background of a well-structured historical overview of modern funeral practices in Japan. The established structures and practices are not replaced by contemporary platform-based routines, but rather assimilated in a particular way. While examining the shift of Japanese funeral culture towards digital platforms, the chapter thus urges us not to forget the material infrastructures such platforms and the related lean business models depend on.

Masako Hashimoto considers the popular phenomenon of *bungō manga* from a literature studies perspective. Taking prominent considerations on contemporary popular culture and the function of characters into account, Hashimoto draws attention to the ways in which one of these manga, *Can't be howling at the moon*, takes up the otherwise largely avoided topic of wartime poetry in an accessible, entertaining way, and adapts it in its critical consideration of the act of literary creation. Manga, she argues, may provide new pathways for considering complex and uncomfortable questions about past and present Japan, and for confronting new generations of readers with them. Considering the popularity of manga outside of Japan, it would be interesting

to see whether such engagements with Japanese history also travel beyond Japan, or whether they remain confined to the local – we may wonder in what ways manga are being used as a space of critical inquiry by manga artists in other parts of the world. **Tani Levy** introduces us to the recent genre of *isekai*, stories about protagonists who find themselves propelled into another world, which has been highly popular in the otaku subculture in recent few years. Coming mostly from online amateur productions of light novels, the author analyses two of its most popular proponents in order to explore the ritualistic functions of participatory culture among Japanese youth, drawing in large part on classical theories of genre, audience reception, and otaku culture, from Azuma to Lamarre.

Alongside others, Itō's and Azuma's contribution to understanding Japan's media culture has certainly had a strong impact on the global academic perception of Japan's media culture. As such, finding these concepts in several of the chapters is not surprising. In sum, however, the chapters in this book express the need to move beyond these foundational theories, and towards more granular discussions of the media and media practices in question. In fact, several chapters employ data-driven methods in order to critically revisit and refine some of the conclusions by the abovementioned theorists.

Zoltan Kacsuk draws on his work in the Japanese Visual Media Graph (JVMG) project, using metadata collected from anime, manga, and video game fan communities to revisit Azuma's classic, now twenty years old, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Kacsuk focuses on two main theses from Azuma's work, but specifically the one in which Azuma noted a significant shift in the production of manga, anime, and video game characters towards a database-based production and consumption. The chapter suggests instead that this type of production seems to have always operated in this template, instead of being a distinct characteristic of the so-called otaku subculture, in which Azuma has positioned it. **Luca Bruno** brings us a systematic understanding of the genre of visual novel games, based on data-driven examinations, through data gathered by fan-curated databases like the Japanese Visual Media Graph project. While Japanese visual novel games have attracted a great number of fans and, indeed, a global audience since the 1990s, an overall picture of its production, reception, and practice remains understudied. The author explores the underlying affordances of the environment in which Japanese visual novel games are produced and received, and demonstrates how the particular agencies – character design, plots, player interaction, etc. – are closely interconnected in that environment. Through these analyses, the author also responds to and opens a new stage at the debate on "database consumption" proposed by Azuma in the 2000s.

Another set of chapters makes positionality a central theme of the inquiry, often in conjunction with transnational phenomena or questions. **Kyōhei Itō** develops a theoretical perspective on the ways in which we perceive the world through mirrors. His exploration of the mystery of plane symmetry sheds light on a variety of mechanisms at work in our perception. Ito suggests that we may describe our surroundings by either imposing our internal frame of reference, meaning our relation to an object onto how we describe relations between objects, or might transfer our viewpoint to resemble the viewpoint of another. Likewise, he suggests that we may either apply a common frame of reference to all objects, including ourselves, or separate frames of reference depending on the state in which we perceive an object. All this happens continuously in our daily life, without us thinking much about it. If this is the case, we may wonder about the extent to which our perspective on global and local are also reflections of our internal frame of reference. To what extent does the way in which we, as individual researchers, make sense of the world and its objects and phenomena reflect our own relation to these objects? To be sure, theories and concepts are supposed to provide a frame of reference that is not just commonly applied to all objects, but shared by those applying it. But insofar as theories and concepts are also abstractions, their interpretation has much to do with our individual position. The exchange between researchers that serves as the basis for this collection of texts, and the discussion distilled in these texts, testify to such positionality. **Stevie Suan** focuses on Virtual YouTubers, examining how they are performed through two modes of acting utilized in concert with certain technologies: embodied acting in the usage of motion-capture, and figurative acting in the facial expressions from anime performed on a digital avatar after getting filtered through facial recognition technology. Analysing the varying tendencies of embodied and figurative acting of Vtubers, this chapter concentrates on the popular Vtuber Kizuna Ai, who is an "official cultural diplomat" for Japan, but also has an official Chinese "version" of herself on BiliBili. Through her existence across platforms, nations, and languages, Kizuna Ai raises questions about the contemporary intersection between digital, national, and cultural boundaries, and how we perform ourselves in digital media, at the intersection of different modes of selfhood. **Melanie Fritsch** presents an overview on the field of ludomusicology, and points out the still existent manifold blank spaces in the academic study of game music created by Japanese composers as well as the music of games produced by Japanese companies. The author makes us sensitive to some missing pieces in this field by proposing that aspects of the cultural context, such as the situation in the game industry in Japan, corporate culture, as well as doujin games and fan culture, touch points between game music and other dominant trends on the Japanese music market at the time, among other topics, are also yet to

be more thoroughly investigated and added to the landscape. The author also encourages further collaboration and exchanges within the several subfields of Game Studies, and invites scholars from other fields to include Japanese game music, game music culture, and the interrelationships with broader culture into their studies. **Juhyung Shin's** column complements these considerations of location and locality by considering how different gaming places in Korea offer diverse gaming experiences, and, while doing so, also influence the perception society has about gaming culture. Her case in point are serious games, the educational deployment of which depends on detaching them from the largely negatively perceived gaming culture.

A final set of chapters in this collection explores transregional phenomena, which render the distinction between local and global particularly elusive. Contemporary media contents and digital platforms are very much transregional, and so are their related practices. **Fanny Barnabé** takes a closer look at the phenomenon of speedruns in order to understand the transformative and subversive character of this particular form of "play." By analysing two *Pokémon* speedruns, the author proposes new rhetorical figures of play, marked by a deconstructiveness and a re-formalization of videogame practice. **Konstantin Freybe** offers a close analysis of the videogame *Metal Gear Solid 3* to expose the historical ambiguities set up by Hideo Kojima in his work. Drawing on historical video game studies, Freybe is particularly interested in the figure of the scientist in the game, as well as the scientific developments of rocket technologies and weapons of war, to criticize Kojima's framing of these aspects, which seems to obscure a problematic past, from Nazi Germany to the Cold War. **Peter Mühleder and Martin Roth** consider player practices in and outside of the *Dark Souls* games and show how such practices contribute to the emergence of communities. Their analysis suggests that the *Dark Souls* series has become a space for a variety of communities on different levels, ranging from the vaguely defined, broader Souls community to niche groups with particular interests. Considering how their attempt to locate similar common practices and codes in the English- and Japanese-language space fails, the analysis suggests that the ways in which players and communities engage with a game series in different languages may vary significantly, with only little overlap between actors and issues. The global distribution of the series notwithstanding, its appropriation is in many ways local – specific to language spaces, in this case. While limited in range, Mühleder and Roth's chapter proposes a series of methods for identifying such variation in an increasingly interconnected platform-based media space.

The fact that this final set of contributions focuses on videogames should not suggest that the blurring of local and global is reserved to digital play. However, this coincidence is also not entirely surprising, considering that, as

Picard shows in his chapter, videogames have emerged as a local and transregional project from the start. Finally, the term "global" is used only scarcely in this volume. Just as many of the chapters are not content with solely focusing on "the local", this absence of "the global" speaks to the necessity of moving beyond generalizing arguments about media cultures and media phenomena.

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Martin Roth, Hiroshi Yoshida, Martin Picard

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