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Playing with Uncertainty – Role-Playing Games and the Construction and Crossing of Boundaries between Japan, Germany and the U.S. [completed]

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This is a study about the way in which an assemblage of practices called role-playing games (RPG) circulates across borders and simultaneously becomes the locus of boundary negotiations in a highly digitised and interconnected world. Instead of discussing a supposedly distinct culture of RPGs, this study plays with contested, and thus uncertain definitions of this practice: A practice that uses the everyday playing of a role and mixes it with the fantastic, the extra-ordinary. Departing from discourses about functions or dysfunctions of RPGs, this study's main concern is the question how scholars produce the object of their study, be it the "Japaneseness" of certain games or the alleged misrepresentations brought against their players.

Japan's country marketing produces the image of a science fictional manga heaven. Further, Japan is attributed with pioneering styles of game play influential in digital RPGs today. However, below this digital surface analog role-playing, that is, narrative-gaming with dice, pencil and imagination, has strong connections to the world of Japanese-language popular novels and just recently began to interact with the international scene of live-action role-playing that in Europe draws thousands to engage in week-long fantasy re-enactments and where teachers play with gaming for civic education.

Analog role-playing in Japan combines elements of Prussian war-gaming, American sword & sorcery, horror, and science fiction narratives with manga-esque dramatization and pacing; on the positive level of knowledge, this study traces such crossings of national borders, showing how RPGs draw together various practices, concepts and cultural elements, which are assembled in different ways each time players come together. A single definition of this practice becomes increasingly difficult the more instances of playing are observed. Similarly uncertain is what makes Japanese role-playing games so specifically "Japanese," that they warrant a special category, J-RPG. This study illustrates how translations of J-RPGs into "Western" languages make them "Japanese" in the first place. Increasingly facilitated by Internet technologies and laymen activities these translations make the very boundaries they seek to overcome.

By tracing how players, game designers, and translators contest and make the boundaries around their practice, this study unearths disagreements and uncertainties but also shows who and what bridges borders. With their elaborate diegetic settings and extensive consumption of time, RPGs found themselves at the centre of controversies about the distinction between a "real" world and its others, especially social withdrawal and occultism. Such discourses in Japan, Germany and the U.S. have produced a shared "mode of ordering:" local rejections of escapist stereotypes that become globally linked in their continuous disclaiming of representations. From the 1980s until today also scholarly work contributes to this mode, indefinitely sustaining an object of inquiry, which has to remain uncertain so that "certainties" can be produced.

Coming from the margins of "play," this study unearths transcultural relations alongside the politics that make nations as well as the up-and-coming discipline of RPG studies.