

Frontier of Gender Studies – ジェンダー学の最前線

International symposium at Kanazawa University, Japan

October 1 – October 2, 2019

Experiencing Queerness in Video Games: The Case of SWERY's 'The Missing'

Sebastian Sabas, lecturer & research associate at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf

Abstract

Video game design both in and outside of Japan is still dominated by concepts of gender binaries and heterosexuality. While concepts of queerness are present in some Japanese games, these narrow spaces often go unnoticed: As most of the scientific literature mainly focuses on representations of queerness in Japanese video game *characters*, it often fails to recognize instances of queer disruptive *gaming experience*. The full scope of the disruptive potential of a video game cannot reveal itself to an analysis of queerness that only focuses on the representational level. This observation is particularly illustrated by Suehiro “SWERY” Hidetaka’s *The Missing: J. J. Macfield and the Island of Memories* (White Owls Inc., 2018): Its complex character relationships and its depiction of main character J. J.’s life as a trans woman certainly constitute examples of queerness on the level of character representation, but its true queer potential lies in its disruptive game mechanics.

A close reading of both the representation of queerness and the game’s disruptive design shows that *The Missing* not only narrates and represents issues of transgender identity, but also actively queers the way in which players expect games to work. Arguing for the scientific value of the theoretical framework of Queer Game Studies, which conceptualizes queerness in games in terms of both representation and affect, it demonstrates how the disruptive representational *content* of a game is translated into disrupted player experience through *design*. Bringing the interplay between *The Missing*’s representation of trans issues and its disruptive design into focus, this presentation also problematizes the game’s insensitive dealing with issues of self-hurt and suicide, and concludes that it ultimately fails to fulfill its radically queer potential.