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Reaganoludography: The 1980s Japanese Digital Games in the Service of the United States

Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon in the 1980s Japanese gaming industry, labeled “Reaganoludography” due to its strong reliance on themes directly borrowed from American action cinema, known in Polish film studies as “Reaganomatography.” Using discourse analysis, the article explores how the U.S. versions of Japanese games captured the iconography of Reaganite regressive sociopolitical propaganda and how they reinforced the neoconservative discourse that became a model for generations of players in the United States. This subtle alliance between American politics and Japanese gaming led to self-censorship within the latter. While the Japanese industry eventually emancipated from the U.S. industry, found its own topics, and became a core gaming culture itself, it is important to remember that Japanese Reaganoludography (the censored U.S. releases of Japanese games) perpetuated global capitalism and overshadowed more progressive—thematically and mechanically—attempts at experimenting with the medium in the 1980s.

Keywords: Ronald Reagan, digital games in Japan, Reaganoludography, neoconservatism, Nintendo

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Introduction

Digital games are political, just as the person who plays them is political. Even if they do not directly convey political content, they are connected to the discourse surrounding them. This also applies to action games, which in the 1980s provided casual entertainment while essentially promoting unfettered neoliberalism. Since the protagonists of these games were mostly Americans—fighting terrorists, aliens, or more veiled threats—one could say they directly implemented the political agenda of the then President of the United States, Ronald Reagan. However, it is intriguing that many popular action games from the 1980s were created by Japanese developers and became easily adapted to suit the needs of U.S. cultural industry.

This article is dedicated to the phenomenon of Japanese games transformed into the imitations of American B-class action movies. I refer to this phenomenon as “Reaganoludography,” in analogy to a similar film trend shaped by Michał Kobylarz (2008) and popularized in Polish film studies by Rafał Syska (2019) as “Reaganomatography.” Although the English-speaking film studies use rather the term of “Reaganite Cinema” (Needham, 2016), “Reaganomatography”—and likewise, “Reaganoludography”—better reflects the mechanical nature of the 1980s American entertainment industry, which, during Reagan’s administration, was oriented towards spreading conservative ideological content and establishing a clear boundary between imagined good and evil.

The period of Reaganomatography is frequently associated with family cinema under the banner of Steven Spielberg, “combining ideological conservatism with egalitarian tendencies, sentimental humanism developed by the post-war left, and warm idealism” (Syska, 2019, s. 108). However, this is only part of equation. The second one constituted the flourishing VHS market with low-budget action films,

a hybrid of police, war, espionage, martial arts, and science fiction films, characterized by dynamic editing, pyrotechnics, intensified violence, and verbal vulgarity. The protagonists were muscular, often used physical strength, and emerged from confrontations unscathed (Syska, 2019, p. 113).

Therefore, Reaganomatography had two faces: the first one associated with Spielberg-like cinematic evergreen for children, the second one closer to brutalized action cinema. These two trends were in fact inseparable and showed the ambiguities of the 1980s American cinema, as I would like to emphasize on the examples of the U.S. releases of Japanese games.

Of course, the question arises: what did the Japanese have to do with the Reagan-era digital game culture, and why did not Americans spread conservative ideals on their own, as they did with cinema? Unlike today, when Japanese games inspire creators from the

Euro-American sphere (Consalvo, 2016, p. 189), in the 1980s, Japanese game developers were in a much less culturally privileged position. To find audiences beyond their home country, the Japanese adapted to the rhetoric of their export markets. Although the first attempts to infiltrate the American entertainment industry were made in the 1970s, as evidenced by the great success of *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978), *Galaxian* (Namco, 1979), and *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), these productions contained rather cosmopolitan content, and their protagonists were non-anthropomorphic avatars. When Reagan came to power, the U.S. cultural industry imported the Japanese games for their needs, saving the gaming culture in the United States torn by the infamous crash in 1982 (Consalvo, 2016, p. 10)—and perpetuating the right-wing agenda on the fly.

An explanation is needed here. I do not intend to accuse Japanese game developers of the 1980s of directly promoting right-wing ideas. While conservative groups ruled Japan continuously after World War II, and Japan has its history of racial prejudices and maintaining the cultural status quo, the international distribution of these games, mostly through American distributors, stripped even the more progressive Japanese games of signifiers that were unfavorable to the conservative agenda. The trend toward Japanization in Western cultural countries became possible largely through American, often censored distribution that adapted Japanese games to the ideology served by the American cultural industry of the Reagan era.

Methods and materials

To accurately capture the phenomenon of “Reaganoludography,” I applied the discourse analysis. Discussing only the ludic aspects of the widely revered 1980s Japanese games, whose audiences are mainly driven by unreflective nostalgia, can distract us from recognizing questionable values beyond the feeling of immersion. We already know that 1980s Japanese games became part of the ludic canon; the less obvious question is why they were integrated into this canon and what political circumstances accompanied them. Here, discourse analysis finds its use. Its advocate Gerald Voorhees posits that “digital games not only tell stories, they make arguments” (Voorhees, 2012, p. 6). Games are not simply the entirely play-based entertainment; they convey multimodally complex meanings and engage in vital social discourses (Voorhees, 2012, p. 7). It is easy to consider Japanese games from the 1980s as innocent, casual entertainment; it is more challenging to recognize that they were by no means ideologically neutral and, due to the need to reach beyond the domestic market, they seamlessly adapted to the conservative Reagan-era discourse. And since this was not a common practice in all countries, one can point to French *contestataire* games (Blanchet, 2021; Jankowski, 2021), works representative of so-called British surrealism (Donovan, 2010, p. 117), and Czechoslovak games supporting the Velvet Revolution against communist regimes of terror (Švelch, 2018). Therefore, I did not

focus on the mechanics of the games studied, but rather on examining their visual elements, analyzing them in the context of the specificities of the export country, which was primarily the United States. I also considered their convergence with works of Reaganomatography from the 1980s, without which it would be difficult to explain the great success of Japanese ludography on the other side of the Pacific.

In the table below I attach a list of 1980s Japanese games referenced throughout the rest of this article.

Manufacturer	Games
Nintendo	<i>Donkey Kong</i> (Nintendo, 1982), <i>Mario Bros</i> (Nintendo, 1983), <i>Super Mario Bros.</i> (Nintendo, 1984), <i>Metroid</i> (Nintendo, 1986a), <i>The Legend of Zelda</i> (Nintendo, 1986b)
Chunsoft	<i>Dragon Quest</i> (Chunsoft, 1986), <i>Dragon Quest III</i> (Chunsoft, 1988)
Konami	<i>Castlevania</i> (Konami, 1986), <i>Contra</i> (Konami, 1987)
Taito	<i>Operation Wolf</i> (Taito, 1988)
Technōs Japan	<i>Double Dragon</i> (Technōs Japan, 1987)
Capcom	<i>Bionic Commando</i> (Capcom, 1988)

Results

Case 1: Between Spielberg and Scott

We should begin by noting that Japanese digital games could not have flourished internationally without the “Americanization” of a key pop culture gaming figure. The carpenter who later became a plumber was originally called Ossan during *Donkey Kong*’s development, meaning “middle-aged guy” (Iwata, n.d.). The hero’s name went through several changes—Mr. Video and Jumpman—before he finally became Mario in *Mario Bros.* (Iwata, n.d.) While the story that Mario was based on a New York pizza delivery man is questionable (Nintendo of America was based in Seattle at the time), what matters most is that Nintendo of America marketed the character outside Japan as an Italian New Yorker. This backstory became less relevant in *Super Mario Bros.*, which took place in the fantasy world of the Mushroom Kingdom, but adapting Mario’s

character for American audiences certainly helped the franchise achieve commercial success outside Japan; it is *Super Mario Bros.* that is somewhat idealistically credited with single-handedly rescuing the American gaming industry from the abyss (Cohen, 2020). As Williams & Simenson (2018) suggest, the interpretation of Mario as a representative of the working class, alternating between being a hero and an outsider, was possible and contributed to the positive reception of *Mario* games in the United States (pp. 211, 221)¹.

Still, aside from the working-class trope, as well as possible queer readings (Ruberg, 2019, pp. 191–198), *Mario* games demonstrate the ideological ambiguities of the gaming industry. *Mario* games in fact codified the well-known ludic trope of damsels in distress (Saarkesian, 2013)—the trope acceptable both for traditionally patriarchal Japanese society and conservatively aligned Americans. The main female protagonist, Princess Toadstool (later renamed as Princess Peach), turns out to be an object in the grand duel between Mario and Bowser; a similar role is played by Princess Zelda in *The Legend of Zelda*, invented by Mario's originator Shigeru Miyamoto. American feminist Anita Saarkesian sarcastically remarked in 2013 that “over the course of more than a dozen games, spanning a quarter century, all of the incarnations of Princess Zelda have been kidnapped, cursed, possessed, turned to stone or otherwise disempowered at some point” (Saarkesian, 2013).

The Legend of Zelda is notable for one more reason. It was released at the same time when film director Ridley Scott finished his work on *Legend* (Scott, 1985), featuring Tom Cruise. Fan interpretations of *The Legend of Zelda* suggest that Miyamoto drew at least the basic narrative framework from Scott's film: a brave hero, a princess in need of rescue, and the personification of ancient evil (McCoy, 2023). Of course, this hypothesis seems simplistic (it could just as well be applied to the *Mario* series), but it perfectly places the game within the Reaganomatography trend, of which *The Legend*—described by Syska as “a classic tale of the universal clash between good and evil” (Syska, 2019, p. 145)—was one manifestation. The mutual convergence of American film industry and Japanese games is also emphasized in *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986a) by Satoru Okada. Although the game's designer insisted that his primary inspiration was the British-American horror SF film *Alien* (1979) directed by Ridley Scott—even the

¹ A valuable example of adapting Japanese motifs for international distribution is the change in cover design and character naming. Marco Benoît Carbone (2022) writes: “Nintendo removed the manga-looking artwork from the booklet in the US version of the game, emphasising the stylish sleekness of in-game sprites, and framing the branding along the lines of the pixel aesthetics of former US games giant Atari. Mario's antagonistic mushrooms, called kabuki in the Japanese game, became goombas in the American manual. A moniker derived from gumbà or cumpà, a corruption of Italian regional forms compari or cumpari, this Italian-American slang word related to Italian-American family culture and, by extension and ironically, to mobster jargon in media cultures” (p. 134).

main, cynical, and unlikable antagonist is named Ridley (Byrd, 2019)—it is hard not to notice that the release of *Metroid* actually correlated with James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986) from the same year, which was much more action-oriented than its predecessor (Feinberg, 2024; Parrill, 2011, pp. 41–42). Indeed, little beyond aesthetics remained of the carefully crafted atmosphere of the first part of the *Alien* series; Okada's game, just as Cameron's film, was all about mass monster extermination for its own sake. The anti-capitalist message of Scott's work also perished (Egan, 2021).

Case 2: Japanese action games turned into American propaganda

However, perhaps the most direct adaptations of Reaganomatography into Japanese digital games were shooting games and brawlers, set in contemporary times. Especially *Contra* (Konami, 1987) and *Operation Wolf* (Taito, 1988), featuring stories of muscular men who shoot everything and everyone in their path, appealed to American audiences accustomed to the direct propaganda of war films like *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1988), starring Sylvester Stallone in the lead role. Much like John Rambo in the film, who was sent into the Vietnamese jungle to rescue American prisoners of war tortured by the Vietcong, the heroes of *Contra* and *Operation Wolf* were one-man armies. However, the games differed in perspective: *Contra* was a side-scroller, while *Operation Wolf* was a first-person rail shooter. Regardless of their form, the political Left—quite understandably—viewed these games as direct manifestations of (Reaganite) American rather than Japanese propaganda.

In *Operation Wolf*, and its numerous clones, the player guns down countless foes (and innocents if careless), slowly sustaining ever greater damage from enemy bullets and grenades, as if this were mere work, sapping energy. When the player finally succumbs, he finds himself in jail!... with the option to continue for another coin [...] Similarly for that children's politician Reagan (in propaganda at least) the arms race was something that could be won and even survived by acquiring enough 'hit points' and special shielding (Stallabrass, 1993, p. 91).

A similar perspective is offered by a journalist from *The Washington Post*, who compares the heroes of *Contra*, Lance and Bill, to icons of Reaganomatography: "*Contra* strongly resembles the jungle warfare plot of some recent movies. Lance could be Rambo. Bill could be Chuck Norris" (Sanchez, 1987). The journalist also notes that the game sparked outrage among Central American students, for whom the title referred to the Contras, a real-life right-wing partisan group fighting against the left-wing Sandinista government in Nicaragua (Sanchez, 1987). Of course, the ideology of *Contra* could be perceived as neutral, as one of the student interviewees puts it: "I hear Ronald Reagan talkin' about contra this, contra that all the time [...] but I never listen. This is just a game. [...]. It's like Rambo. It's fun" (cf. Sanchez, 1987). However, as Nick

Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter warn us, “interactivity does not mean virtual play is free from ideology; rather, it intensifies the sense of free will necessary for ideology to work really well” (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009, p. 192). Players in the United States might perceive *Contra* as “neutral” because they were already so immersed in Reagan’s ideology that suggesting otherwise would result in cognitive dissonance. Seemingly neutral Japanese games served the purposes of Reaganite ideology.

It is worth noting that Japanese digital games produced during the American Reaganite era—even if they did not convey a clear right-wing message in their original versions—were carefully aligned with a right-wing agenda in the United States. Nintendo, the main distributor of Japanese games during that decade and a conservative software company, was aware of the risks associated with potential international distribution. Potentially iconoclastic elements in certain games’ international releases were preemptively censored. The US division of the company, Nintendo of America, followed the policy regarding religious content in digital games that has been known as the ‘No Religion’ policy. As *The Escapist Magazine*’s journalist explains, the policy forbade

symbols that are related to any type of racial, religious, nationalistic, or ethnic group, such as crosses, pentagrams, God, Gods (Roman mythological gods are acceptable), Satan, hell, Buddha (Markley, 2015).

We can see here that Nintendo of America’s ‘No Religion’ policy constituted a kind of self-industrial censorship that echoed the infamous cinematographic Production Code from the early 1930s. One of the games that faced the especially hurtful censorship was *Castlevania* (Konami, 1986). The main character of its game, Simon, fights the minions of the Transylvanian Count Dracula. In *Castlevania*, “crosses were removed from tombstones, coffins, places of worship, and clothing or equipment” (Markley, 2015). The game’s developer Konami, pressed by Nintendo, “had to remove crosses from *Castlevania*, even though vampires and Christianity are inexorably linked” (Normandin, 2022). In the American version of *Dragon Quest III* (Chunsoft, 1988) coffins containing fallen party members were replaced with ghosts.

Even more curious example of self-censorship, highly indicative of the right-wing double standards characteristic of the Reagan era, was *Bionic Commando* (Capcom, 1988). *Bionic Commando* features a generic science-fiction commando named Ladd, who is tasked with rescuing a hostage named Super Joe from a faction known as the Empire. At first glance, one might compare *Bionic Commando* to the wave of space opera films such *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977/2015). However, the American version of *Bionic Commando* removed any references to Nazism present in the Japanese edition. In Japan, the Empire’s rulers were based on “Nazz” (a clear reference to Nazis); in the USA, they were replaced by the more neutral “Badds”. In the Japanese edition,

the Empire attempts to resurrect none other than Adolf Hitler himself, whereas the American version changed Hitler to the more abstract Mister-D. Similarly, omnipresent swastikas were replaced by Albatross symbols (Kalata, 2017a).

One might ask why Reaganite America was particularly bothered by the release of the original version of the game, in which the enemies were Nazis. The answer could be complex: while Hitler hated Jews, Reagan's main adversaries (beside the Communists) were African Americans. As governor of California, Reagan persecuted the Black minority—he was responsible for the imprisonment of Angela Y. Davis, an influential Afrofeminist (Boomer, n.d.)—and as President of the USA, he created the image of African American women as “welfare queens” greedy for benefits (Ruíz & Berenstain, 2018, p. 221). Although Reagan was by no means a genocidal figure, his persecution of racial minorities was carried out through covert methods. Therefore, the censorship of Japanese games in the United States served as a clear example of political soft power; especially the case of *Bionic Commando* reminds us that references to Nazism were not warmly received by the U.S. administration, especially since Reagan himself maintained friendly relations with the racist Nationalist Party ruling the Republic of South Africa (Lucks, loc. 367/708).

Yoshihisa Kishimoto's *Double Dragon* (Technōs Japan, 1987), derived from the Japanese semi-autobiographical brawler series *Kunio-kun* (drastically altered in appearance and plot to meet the expectations of American users), constitutes a direct example of such understood Reaganoludography in action. It became a major hit in the United States—to the point that it is still uncritically received by Anglo-Saxon commentators, even if they have recognized its ideological message. Let us give an example:

Taking their cues from Hollywood, the arcade brawling games of the Reagan era packed as much camp villainy, swift justice, and superhuman muscle into their action as a few thousand pixels would allow. *Double Dragon* has all the key ingredients: the hard-working American heroes, the invasion of home soil by a predatory force, and a winsome civilian caught in the crossfire (Harris, 2011).

Significantly, the author of this note associates *Double Dragon* with the American, not Japanese, underworld. Furthermore, he euphemistically refers to this “predatory force” as an organization called the Black Warriors. This is not about any satanic or neo-Nazi symbolism. Most members of this sinister gang, which the player must fight against, are simply muscular African Americans. Moreover, the first boss the player encounters is a muscular Black warrior named Jack. Importantly, *Double Dragon* was envisioned as a spiritual successor of *Nekketsu Kōha Kunio-kun* (Technōs Japan, 1986) but destined for the international audience; *Nekketsu Kōha Kunio-kun* featured no Black enemy characters.

Double Dragon perhaps would not be so popular in the United States without links to the 1980s American martial arts cinema, directly borrowed from Hong Kong kung-fu films. Personalities like Jean-Claude Van Damme and Chuck Norris captivated audiences, instilling in the young VHS-raised viewers a fascination with hand-to-hand combat “for a righteous cause,” driven by the brutalization of social life during that decade (Massey, 2014). Cinematic examples of such fascination include *The Karate Kid* (Avildsen, 1984), which was an uplifting cinematic hit about training in self-defense (Frymus, 2024, p. 22). Thus, the mutual convergence of American action films and Japanese games, just as in the case of Rambo-inspired *Contra*, affected the U.S.-destined counterpart of *Kunio-kun*.

Conclusion

The discourse analysis above by no means exhausts the actual number of Japanese digital games entangled in the phenomenon of Reaganoludography. Still, it demonstrates that American Reaganomatography deeply affected the shape and themes of internationally distributed Japanese games from the 1980s. Japanese studios achieved great commercial successes abroad and dominated the imagination of Western players because their games were tailored to the needs of international audience—which precisely meant the interference of American censorship. Reaganoludography imposed its censored versions of Japanese games to the rest of the world.

Obviously, just as Reagan’s end of term did not halt the tendencies observed in Reaganomatography, Japanese games were censored to be aimed at conservative American audiences. A curious example from the next decade is *Die Hard Arcade* (Sega, 1996), loosely adapted from the 1988 film *Die Hard* (McTiernan, 1988), where the lone cop John McClane dealt with terrorists occupying a skyscraper in Los Angeles. The game version of John McTiernan’s film had little to do with the original plot; while it adopted the beat ‘em up genre to suit adaptation purposes, the bosses encountered—such as a sumo wrestler and a grenade-throwing army general—suggested a far-fetched parody of the franchise. The goal—much like in *Double Dragon*—was to rescue a damsel in distress, this time the American President’s daughter. Perhaps the reason for such a bizarre plot was that the game originated in Japan. The Japanese original, unlike the licensed American version, was titled *Dynamite Deka* and did not reference the *Die Hard* franchise at all (Kalata, 2017b).

The case of *Die Hard Arcade* demonstrates a slow but steady process of the Japanese game industry gaining independence. In the 1980s, Japanese ludography began transforming from a semi-peripheral part of the global gaming industry—balancing between imitating themes from other cultures and maintaining some semiotic independence—to becoming a core industry, heavily independent from other cultural ludic sectors (compare Schweiger, 2015; Wallerstein, 2004, p. 82). Japanese

compromises with the American industry, contributing to the development of Reaganoludography, were undoubtedly a step toward the further emancipation of *Pac-Man*'s homeland (Picard, 2013), especially considering the global successes of anime and manga in the 1990s, which cemented the popularity of Japanese popular culture abroad (Otmazgin, 2014, p. 63). Nevertheless, Reaganoludography also promoted the neoconservative cult of brute force and/or cute infantilism, regardless of perspective, thus hindering the development of digital games as a higher form of popular culture. Distorted by the American censorship, it perpetuated anti-Black racism and advanced a right-wing agenda, censoring all examples of anti-Nazi rhetoric (as in the case of *Bionic Commando*).

One thing is certain: the recent decades demonstrated that by serving the United States' ideology, Japanese game developers paradoxically had a chance to export their own culture abroad—and they succeeded doing so. For example, Japanese RPGs (jRPGs) were inspired by the high fantasy American RPGs; the first notable success of the genre in Japanese ludography, Yuji Horii's *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft, 1986), borrowed its imagery from American predecessors like *Ultima* (Origin Systems, 1981) and *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech, 1981), and its mechanics (e.g., certain elements of player's freedom in shaping their avatar) were closer to the aforementioned Western classics (Koyama, 2022, p. 30). However, the game placed greater emphasis on tactics, character development, and anime aesthetics, which distinguished *Dragon Quest* from American cRPGs (Wada, 2017, pp. 143–144).

Nowadays, developers worldwide frequently incorporate mechanics or aesthetics borrowed from Japanese Reaganoludography (see Consalvo, 2009, pp. 140–141). Genres like jRPGs and Metroidvania, along with the anime style, have been imitated by many spiritual successors from the United States and Europe, driven by nostalgia for 1980s gaming (Crofts, 2023, p. 37; Schules, 2015, p. 62). While the effects of such inspiration have been fruitful, we must remember that Japanese Reaganoludography we know from the American versions of known classics was paired with a political agenda that resonates with the recent rise of the New Right, not only in the United States but also in Europe. Every childhood joy is inherently political.

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