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**Intercultural application of cinematic techniques in arts marketing of video games for Japanese audiences: the case of the "Ghost of Tsushima" trailer**

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# Intercultural application of cinematic techniques in arts marketing of video games for Japanese audiences: the case of the "Ghost of Tsushima" trailer

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## Paper

The emergence of video games in the 1970s marked a major cultural shift in the entertainment sector, which spread rapidly worldwide and required innovative strategies to ensure global competitiveness (Bernal-Merino, 2016). Among these strategies, video game localisation and transcreation emerged as central methods for adapting video games to different cultural contexts while maintaining their original philosophy and feel. This research explores the complexities of localisation and transcreation through a case study of the special samurai film-style trailer for 'Ghost of Tsushima', an action/adventure video game with themes deeply rooted in Japanese history and culture but developed by Sucker Punch Productions, an American company. Set in feudal Japan during the Mongol invasion of Tsushima Island, players control Jin Sakai, a samurai warrior who becomes the "Ghost" to defend his homeland using stealth and unconventional tactics.

**Keywords:** *localisation, video game, arts marketing, social semiotics, Japan*

Drawing inspiration from the cinematic legacy of Akira Kurosawa, renowned for his exploration of themes such as honour, betrayal, nature, heroism, and the cyclical nature of violence, this study seeks to analyse how the trailer for "Ghost of Tsushima" incorporates elements of Kurosawa's storytelling and visual style. By examining parallels between Kurosawa's films and the trailer, this research aims to illuminate the deliberate efforts to pay homage to Kurosawa's cinematic legacy while crafting a compelling narrative for the video game. The research also delves into technical aspects, exploring similarities in the structure of the trailer and cinematographic promotion techniques. Using an interdisciplinary approach that links translation studies with social semiotics, the research uses Kress and Van Leeuwen's framework of visual grammar to analyse the linguistic, visual and audio elements of the trailer. Through Papadopoulou, Pagkourelia and Goria's (2015) 'video observation key', the trailer was analysed into ten scenes, and six themes emerged from the data. In addition, two snapshots of the trailer were selected as illustrative examples for each theme to showcase the contribution of the various semiotic modes to meaning-making as used strategically within the overall trailer. In addition, it considers the production modes and the specificities of the product when crossing cultural borders and its marketing techniques in specific cultural markets.

The findings reveal a deliberate alignment of these verbal, visual, and audio elements with Japanese cultural values, aesthetics, and storytelling preferences, demonstrating the strategic application of image, sound, and other semiotic resources to resonate with the target audience. Through the repetition of certain features throughout the scenes, it is evident that these elements are strategically used to create a cohesive and immersive experience so that the videogame appeals to Japanese male and female players.

More specifically, at least at the beginning, the trailer seems to have a linear narrative structure. Within the very first seconds, it becomes apparent that the plot of the story begins with the battle on Komoda Beach (0:16), where we learn that the main rival of the samurai is the Mongol army, introducing it as a ruthless enemy without mercy (0:21). Immediately after this pivotal moment, the characterisation of Jin begins. The viewer realises that this is the protagonist of the story because of the phrases that appear on the screen and learn that his house has been destroyed (0:23 - 0:26). The constant references to the violation of the samurai moral code and the shot of Jin holding his sword and closing his eyes (0:27 - 0:29), foreshadows the audience that he will transform into a ruthless assassin to save his country. This choice is the thematic core of the trailer. The multiple battle scenes that follow aptly place the game in the action and adventure category, while the looting scenes give it the serious tone it needs. During the trailer, Jin is presented as a fighter with a strong sense of dedication and commitment. The audience's interest is triggered to want to know even more about his story and future destiny as a samurai. As the trailer unfolds, it communicates the central theme of an epic story of honour, sacrifice, and the ongoing struggle between tradition and reinvention in the face of imminent danger.

Regarding editing, it seems to progress steadily, presenting a linear narrative that follows Jin's emotional journey - from losing his home and his family to his defeat and evolution into the "Ghost". As the trailer progresses, the editing turns dynamic, enriching the narrative with sudden and intense battle scenes, imaginatively combining cinematic and

gameplay scenes. The term "gameplay" refers to the specific way in which players interact with a game, and more specifically with a video game. Among the fast-paced battle sequences, there is a transition to serene scenes, highlighted by the game's impressive graphics. The final shots of the trailer are distinguished by striking and fast-paced editing (1:55 - 2:01). Scenes from different periods, varied scenes, battle scenes, peaceful landscapes, and various characters appear together, complemented by intense contrasting colours and intense background music. This fast-paced editing style is reminiscent of the editing rhythm of Western Hollywood movie trailers while maintaining the characteristics of traditional samurai cinema. This is an interesting composition that embraces the game's diverse elements of narrative and visual attraction. The trailer also includes a stark contrast of the scenes' suspense and tranquillity. In particular, the trailer uses a dynamic interplay of images and music to evoke emotions, creating an intense experience for the audience.

During the battle scenes, the tension is palpable, enhanced by the reverberation of the violin and the loud beats of Japanese taiko drums (Meyer, 2020). Taiko drums are an integral part of Japanese culture, known for their powerful sound and rhythmic patterns. Immediately afterwards, the trailer smoothly transitions into scenes of tranquillity, highlighting the beauty of Tsushima. Accompanied by the ethereal sounds of the Japanese Shakuhachi flute (Meyer, 2020), these moments offer a respite from the chaos of battle, allowing the audience to appreciate the tranquillity and natural splendour of the island. The shakuhachi flute is a traditional Japanese bamboo flute known for its haunting and meditative sound. This strategic juxtaposition of serene scenes between the turbulent narrative enhances the emotional impact, creating a poignant contrast that underscores Jin Sakai's adventurous journey. The emotional juxtaposition intensifies as the trailer scenes alternate between these two contrasting atmospheres. The return to the battle scenes brings back the intense sound of violin and taiko drums, enhancing the sense of urgency and turmoil. This circular pattern reflects Jin's internal conflict as he struggles with his decision to break the samurai code, emphasising the emotional complexity of his character.

The research also unveils intriguing insights into the influence of camera angles within the trailer, adding a compelling dimension to the findings. The angle from which an object is photographed acts as a commentary by the creator. Different camera angles can add subtle emotional nuance or convey the main meaning of the image. The angle is determined by the camera's position, not by the object being photographed. Although there are high and low camera angles in the trailer, most appear to be at the viewer's eye level. Realistic filmmakers tend to avoid extreme angles. Typically, most scenes are shot from eye level, the way a real observer might view the scene. Usually, these directors try to capture the clearest view of a subject. Eye-level shots are rarely dramatic because they tend to be the norm. Almost all directors use eye-level shots, especially in everyday scenes (Giannetti, 2018). In social semiotics, an eye-level shot angle suggests a relationship of equality between the audience and the image producer, which means neither exercises power (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

It is also worth mentioning that the eye-level camera angle is mostly combined with a third-person perspective in the trailer. Extremely common in action and adventure games, the third-person perspective directly controls a character visible in front of the player. The third-person perspective is the best way to showcase the protagonist's movements and combat techniques. To enhance audience immersion, some third-person games use cinematic techniques, creating the experience of a film. The third-person perspective is heavily used as it is easier for Japanese gamers to identify with the character in this way (Ashcraft, 2008).

Additionally, the research examines the significance of the aspect ratio within the trailer. According to Louis Giannetti (2018), the "aspect ratio" is the "ratio between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the screen". Today, most films are shown in one of two aspect ratios: the 1.85:1 ratio (standard) and the 2.35:1 ratio (widescreen) (Giannetti, 2018). In the trailer, it was observed that during most cinematic scenes, the aspect ratio of 2.35:1 (or 21:9) is used, with black bars (letterboxing) at the top and bottom of the image to enhance the cinematic feeling. On the other hand, during gameplay scenes, the ratio is changed with the black bars disappearing to make it clear to the audience that they are watching a battle scene they can control. It is worth noting that, although there are a few seconds where the creators do not implement this stylistic choice, these moments are insignificantly few. The black bars seem to serve to separate cinematic and gameplay scenes.

Another influence that originates from the world of cinema and can be seen in the trailer is the technique of "billing". Specifically, it is the appearance of the actors' names, usually starting with the leading role. The billing technique here aims to intensify the cinematic feel of the trailer, which was, after all, made for this very purpose. Beyond that, however, it is also added for cultural reasons. In Japan, voice actors are highly popular and beloved, with people following their lives just as they do in the West with Hollywood movie actors. This is because anime is an important part of Japanese culture and everyday life. Therefore, adding the voice actors' names is another ploy to persuade the Japanese audience to buy the video game. The text that appears during the seconds 1:30-1:31 is linked to the billing technique.

In particular, the Japanese text "境井仁 中井和哉" [Sakai Jin Nakai Kazuya] has been translated as "Kazuya Nakai as Jin Sakai". By doing this, the audience watching the trailer is informed that Kazuya Nakai has given his voice to the lead role in the game. This choice is considered highly strategic. Kazuya Nakai is an extremely well-known voice actor in Japan, having voiced the character of "Zoro" in the anime "One Piece", popular both in Japan and worldwide. The emphasis on his name is a major motive for Japanese audiences to buy the product.

When it comes to incorporating recurring themes from the movies of Akira Kurosawa, the trailer seems to capture and integrate them effectively. One of the first themes shown in the trailer is the master-disciple relationship. According to Mellen (2002), "the salutary image of an older person instructing the young always evokes in Kurosawa's films high moments of pathos". The complexities involving this relationship, where an older man serves as the master and a younger man serves as the disciple, are repetitively shown in Kurosawa's movies. During the last seconds of the trailer (1:32-1:33), viewers can see Lord Shimura, Jin Sakai's maternal uncle and the lord of Tsushima. Lord Shimura is shaking Jin

vigorously while telling him "誉ある戦いを忘れるな" [homare aru tatakai o wasureruna], meaning "Do not forget to fight with honour". The phrase clearly references the fact that Jin has now adopted new tactics and fighting styles by breaking the samurai code, which his uncle opposes. He, therefore, reminds him that he must fight like a proper samurai and not dishonour his kind using sneaky tactics. Of particular interest is the original English phrase of this dialogue, which was "I trained you to fight with honour!". The English phrase and its Japanese counterpart convey a strong frustration at the departure from traditional samurai ideals. The English phrase is unambiguous, perhaps placing more emphasis on Lord Shimura, as opposed to the Japanese, which uses an imperative structure ("忘れるな" [wasureruna], i.e. "Do not forget") referring to Jin. While both versions convey a similar message, the language choices and cultural references offer distinct nuances that reflect the expressive potential of each language.

Nature and weather, especially the wind, also played a central role in Kurosawa's movies. The director was deeply sensitive to the nuances and beauty of seasons and scenery (Prince, 1999). Specifically, the wind served as a metaphor in Kurosawa's movies, symbolising change, fortune, and adversity (Mellen, 2002). Strong wind is evident in various works of Akira Kurosawa, like Sanshiro Sugata (1943), Yojimbo (1961), and Seven Samurai (1954), to the point that it becomes an active participant in the story while enhancing the movie's impact and moving beyond naturalism and realism. Indeed, the wind is evident in many scenes of the trailer, serving as a guide to the protagonist so that the island of Tsushima can be discovered and the final goal can be reached. To its entirety, the trailer showcases moments of Jin Sakai riding his horse in vast fields full of blooming flowers or fighting Mongol soldiers while the strong wind is blowing.

This specific trailer for "Ghost of Tsushima" also captures the enduring theme of the heroic champion, echoing the timeless motifs explored in the cinematic legacy of Akira Kurosawa. After Japan's defeat in WW2, Kurosawa portrayed through his films the need of each individual to find the meaning of life through suffering and not by what the state would dictate (Sato, 1987). In "Ghost of Tsushima", the theme of suffering and the search for life's meaning is central to the protagonist's journey amidst the backdrop of war and devastation caused by the Mongol invasion. Like Kurosawa's characters, the hero in the game grapples with personal suffering and the quest for individual purpose beyond the dictates of external forces. Specifically, during seconds 0:23-0:26, viewers can see Jin falling to the ground and struggling for his life after he has been attacked with the enemy's arrows. In his effort to recover his sword, which is a key element of his identity as a samurai, Jin crawls onto the ground and tries to stand up but cannot do so. Thus, he throws himself completely to the ground and closes his eyes, clearly exhausted. The close-up of his bloody face emphasises exactly the emotionally weak state he is in at that moment. The text that appears on the screen is «故郷を蹂躪された境井 仁» [furusato wo juurin sareta SAKAI Jin] ("A man whose home has been destroyed: Jin Sakai"), further explains to the viewers the tragic situation he is into.

Other traits of Kurosawa's heroic champion involve the desertion of family and class background for a greater cause, perseverance in the face of adversity, assumption of responsibility and leadership, and existential loneliness and self-reliance (Prince, 1999). His heroine, Yukie Yagihara, first incorporated these traits in the film "No Regrets for Our Youth" (1946). Similarly, Jin Sakai embodies the hallmark traits of Kurosawa's heroic champion. Once having lost his family, Jin decides to break the samurai code (bushidou) and leave behind societal expectations. He transforms into the "Ghost", a ruthless assassin who wants to avenge his family and his people through immoral fighting tactics that do not align with the war style of the samurai class. This is depicted through seconds 0:27-0:29 when Jin can be seen wearing his old samurai armour before he transforms into the "Ghost" and holds his sword with both hands after he has taken it out of its sheath. His closed eyes and calm expression suggest a mental retreat into his thoughts, a feeling of fatigue and intense reflection. The phrase "武士の名誉す" [bushi no meiyo sute] ("throws away his honour as a samurai") helps viewers interpret the meaning of the visual image. Jin's decision to leave bushidou behind is pivotal in the story, representing his departure from traditional values and his willingness to adapt to new challenges. Despite encountering significant obstacles and struggles, Jin demonstrates unwavering determination to achieve his goals and kill the enemy, even if he has to do it alone. Throughout the trailer, he is depicted as a lone wolf, fighting intensely for his own life and the well-being of the people of Tsushima. Even when he experiences existential loneliness, he maintains self-reliance and fortitude in navigating his journey.

Another homage to Kurosawa in "Ghost of Tsushima" is the inclusion of "Kurosawa Mode" within the game. This is also shown in the trailer, where some shots are in black and white. They reference the "Kurosawa mode", which game creators Jason Connell and Nate Fox decided to add to the game to increase its sales. Specifically, it is influenced by the cinematic films of the great Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. The term "mode" in video games refers to a distinct set of rules or conditions that shape the gaming experience, providing players with specific challenges or objectives. In this case, the image of the game picture is changed to black and white with a grain effect, while the sound is "distorted", reminiscent of the television sets of the 1950s. For example, during seconds 1:09 - 1:11, the viewer is informed that the game has a special black and white film mode with the phrase "モノクロ映画の再現 モード 搭載" [monokuro eiga no saigen moudo tousai]. That phrase was translated in the subtitles as "Monochromatic KUROSAWA mode included!". The phrase conveys the purpose and effect of the function, enhancing the player's in-game understanding of it. However, if one performs a literal translation of the Japanese phrase, one will find that Akira Kurosawa's name is nowhere mentioned. Specifically, the phrase's literal translation in English would be "Black-and-white movie reproduction mode". The first difference in meaning is that the Japanese phrase is descriptive, whereas the English phrase is "evocative". The Japanese phrase refers directly to the purpose of the function, which converts the image's colour to black and white with a grain effect. Using descriptive

language, the Japanese phrase creates a simple and informative tone, focusing on communicating the element's functionality to the audience. It does not explicitly reference a specific filmmaker, maintaining a neutral stance. This approach aims to provide clear instructions to Japanese audiences without relying on external cultural references. On the other hand, the English phrase does not merely describe the function but links it to the name of the well-known director, giving it a strong cinematic connotation. One might wonder why Akira Kurosawa's name is missing from the Japanese phrase. This is probably because Japanese audiences are familiar with the director's work and will have no difficulty recognising it. The tone of the Japanese text is more informative, unlike the English translation, which seems to want to reach Western audiences to a greater extent.

The research also delved into the linguistic aspects of the trailer, employing a scholarly approach to analyse its language components. It is important to mention the enormous importance of language in the field of advertising and product promotion. Industries and businesses need people to buy their products. This is why they try to make their advertisements as professional and convincing as possible. In *Rhetoric of the Image* (1977), Roland Barthes - who believed that text and language are the dominant forms of communication in society - stresses the great importance of text in advertising and characterises it as a medium that helps the audience to concretise the meaning of the image. In *Decoding Advertisements* (1978), Judith Williamson stresses that the ease of understanding the written text instead of the difficulty of understanding the visual image creates tension and pressure on the audience. This tension between the two semiotic systems challenges the viewer to decipher the visual system. Therefore, language has a catalytic role, complementing and enhancing the visual field and adding to the meaning. Research showed that the phrases appearing during the trailer mainly relate to 1. The graphics and the contents of the game, 2. The modes of the game, 3. The player's freedom of choice in the game and 4. Breaking the samurai code (bushidou). The consistent use of font and how it works to attract the Japanese audience by enhancing the product's success was also examined. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), typography is a distinctive way of representing meaning that is not linked to that of words. After implementing automatic visual recognition and thorough research, it was found that the font used in the trailer is not random but serves specific promotional purposes of the video game through its cultural background. Specifically, it is the font "Kokuryusou" (i.e. black dragon), created by Japanese calligrapher Eisen Tsunanori (real name: Tsunanori Sakaguchi) and founder of the Showashotai font company (Adobe Fonts: online & FONT PLUS): online). As a company, Showashotai is committed to producing high-quality brush-based digital fonts while maintaining the spirit of traditional Japanese calligraphy. According to Gennifer Weisenfeld (2011), calligraphy is a visual mode of communication that functions as an aesthetic "meta-level". This means that Japanese designers use calligraphy and fonts not just to convey verbal meaning but to impart meaning, symbolism, and aesthetics. It is an important visual element with additional "layers" of meaning with the ultimate aim of attracting the viewer's attention.

As for the font, it tries to evoke a dragon flying wildly in a sky full of dark clouds. The heavy and light strokes, as opposed to those that are fast and slow, reflect the dragon's feelings of rage in a highly successful way. Although the form of the letters may appear unbalanced and unintelligible at first glance, a seamless and harmonious image is achieved once their synthesis is completed into words and phrases. Therefore, the font in question gives a particularly dynamic character to the trailer, which is consistent with the protagonist's personality, further enhancing it. At the same time, the traditional element is also evident. Moreover, it is a font whose calligrapher is extremely popular and beloved by the Japanese public and worldwide. In particular, the font became very popular when it was used in the well-known anime "Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba". One of the most prominent representatives of shounen anime (i.e. anime intended for the entertainment and amusement of young boys), Demon Slayer tells the story of Tanjiro, a teenage boy who seeks revenge by killing demons who wiped out his family. Subconsciously, a parallel is drawn between Tanjiro and Jin since both try to avenge and eliminate the enemy through their bravery and loyalty to their family as a basic principle. In this way, the chances of Japanese audiences feeling already familiar with the product increases, as do the chances of them buying it. Another feature of this trailer is that it creates meaning in unique ways, combining colours and shapes and making in this way images with a particular cultural background for Japanese audiences. Such an element conveys important information to the viewer, raising the quality of the trailer. During seconds 0:51-0:52, a crimson background appears with soft pink spatters all over the screen and a vertical sword-shaped line at the centre. A wind-like figure is "wrapped" around the sword. This shot appears after Jin has attacked a soldier by suddenly jumping off his horse and killing him with his sword. This shot has many symbolic elements that are associated with Japanese culture. A typical symbol of Japan, the deep red colour is used in many religious ceremonies to ward off evil spirits, but outside of that, it is a symbol of strength, self-sacrifice, and blood. The shape of the vertical pink line is reminiscent of a traditional Japanese sword. At the same time, the white curve surrounding it symbolises wind, an essential element not only in Kurosawa's works but also in the game. It could even be a reference to Jin's quick movements. The pink splatters in the image probably symbolise the enemy's blood, while their shape also recalls that of sakura flowers, a symbol of rebirth and beauty in Japanese culture. Such an interpretation could also justify the use of the pink colour. Of course, the trailer consists of a tribute to the legacy of Akira Kurosawa. After further research, it was found that similar colour and shape designs are used in the new movie "Seven Samurai" trailers.

The analysis of this trailer for "Ghost of Tsushima" reveals interesting insights into the differentiated localisation and transcreation strategies developed. Initially, the use of a multitude of cinematic techniques confirms their increasing use in the video game industry (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2013), which has led to the emergence of the term "cinematic games" (Newman, 2009). The camera angle is almost always at eye level to achieve an equal relationship between the viewer and the seller. The third-person perspective is heavily used as it is easier for Japanese gamers to identify with the character in this way (Ashcraft, 2008). In a 2009 survey, O'Hagan found several differences between Japanese and non-

Japanese gamers. The research found that non-Japanese audiences are not as familiar with freedom of choice in video games and may have difficulty understanding a game if different narrative techniques are applied. On the other hand, the Japanese audience prefers open-world games rather than sandbox games, which set specific limits while enjoying the many cutscenes to constantly receive new information about the characters that appear and their story. This justifies the multiple cinematic scenes that appear in the trailer, as well as the phrases of the player's freedom of choice in the game and those relating to the graphics and the general functions of the game. Many cultural elements are also used to attract the Japanese audience further. In particular, the existence of "Kurosawa mode" and the appearance of the voice actors' names through the cinematic technique of "billing" increase the chances of buying the product while contributing to the transcreation of the trailer to resemble that of a classic samurai film. Furthermore, the font is used as a subliminal means of attraction by adding a new meta-level. The careful use of traditional Japanese instruments (taiko drums and shakuhachi flute) and the sound effects create a coherent and authentic experience, while linked to the religions of Shinto and Buddhism. Another element of the intercultural approach is the fast-paced editing present at certain points in the trailer, which is reminiscent of Hollywood productions, as well as the presence of English subtitles. Furthermore, the norm that Japanese video games are expected to limit scenes of violence (Kent, 2004) significantly is not adhered to, as the trailer contains plenty of such scenes, perhaps to enhance the sense of realism and the nature of the game.

In summary, the Japanese cinematic trailer for "Ghost of Tsushima" demonstrates the power of localisation and transcreation in arts marketing, particularly within the video game industry. The trailer effectively conveys the game's essence to diverse global audiences through tailored integration of linguistic, visual, and auditory elements. This approach highlights the importance of cultural adaptation in arts marketing, fostering cross-cultural engagement and appreciation. Leveraging techniques like localisation and transcreation, arts marketers can bridge cultural gaps, making content more accessible and appealing worldwide. Moving forward, continued innovation in arts marketing will be essential for engaging diverse audiences in the industry's dynamic landscape.

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