

Right-wing nationalism or just plain fun?

Japanese history in the game *Kantai Collection* and its audience interpretation

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The right-wingification of Japanese media has been a topic of discussion in Japan. The online game *Kantai Collection*, in which the player controls a fleet of humanised Imperial Navy ships and other warships, has been cited as an example of such a trend. Yet Japanese media theorists, such as Eiji Ōtsuka, have claimed that presumed ideological content in games, animated series and similar media is not seen by their players/viewers in relation to reality, but rather it is seen as artefacts of the fictional worlds of these works. In this article, I investigate the presence of ‘nationalist’ discourses in the *Kantai Collection* media franchise. Furthermore, I analyse a set of fan-fiction works based on the said franchise to determine how or whether fans recreate such discourses in their derivative works. I demonstrate that while fan-producers largely interpret historical references strictly in the context of the original works, they also consistently omit certain discourses that are present in the original, such as those related to the Japanese imperial expansion. My findings provide qualified empirical support for the claim by Ōtsuka and others that *ideological* elements are not interpreted in relation to reality. However, even though fan-authors comment very little on such elements in explicit terms, the elements they pick for their derivative works are seldom those that could be described as right-wing and often display oppositional readings of the original works.

Keywords: Media studies; fan fiction; digital games; Pacific War; digital games

The question of whether the media in Japan – including both news and fictional movies, television series and so forth – is ‘turning to the right’ (*ukeika*) has been a matter of debate in the country in recent years (e.g. Tsukada, 2017; Nishizawa, 2015). Non-academic commentators have come forward with specific accusations of such a turn with regard to the popular online naval war-game-cum-pretty-girl-game, *Kantai Collection*. The Korean newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* decried *Kantai Collection* as a sign of the “resurgence of right-wing nationalism in Japan” (Kim, 2013), while a blogger criticized the “appropriation” of warships which participated in “war crimes” during Japan’s colonial era for entertainment purposes (Aquagaze, 2014).

In this article, I analyse discourses related to Japanese history that are present in the franchise in light of the aforementioned claims. Furthermore, I analyse fan-fiction works based on the franchise to find out how they reproduce or comment on these discourses. Both are analysed in terms of a theory by Eiji Ōtsuka (2012), which proposes that audiences seek to actively expand the narratives within those works in subsequent works of popular culture. Furthermore, he proposes that even though the original works may, for example, present a historical fact in a manner associated with a certain political orientation, the audience does not *perceive* that presentation as pertaining to the real world but only to the world of the fictional narrative.

Games depicting the Pacific War are far from uncommon, but *Kantai Collection* is not marketed as being related to the Pacific War or to any other historical event. To the contrary, in an interview, the game’s producer Tanaka Kensuke stated that the game does not have a story, but that the producers “wanted to emphasize the individuality of the characters we [the producers] developed and the relationships between the characters and create the [story] together with all the Admirals” (Famitsu, 2013). Nevertheless, the majority of the ships available to players are in fact those of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Furthermore, the game features a logic of

territorial expansion, where the player starts out on the Japanese home islands and gradually expands their sphere of influence throughout the Pacific.

The overarching questions that this paper addresses are: How does the Japanese target audience see the political aspects of *Kantai Collection*? While one interpretation that sees *Kantai Collection* as right-wing is clearly possible, is this interpretation favoured by its fans?

Otaku cultural theory and ideologies in popular culture

The question of whether popular culture content is perceived as ideological by audiences in general as well as the often obsessive target audience (commonly entitled *otaku*) has most famously been discussed in Japan by the cultural critic and academic Eiji Ōtsuka (2012), whose theories are also commonly cited outside Japan (see for example Steinberg, 2012; Galbraith, Kam, & Kamm, 2016).

Ōtsuka’s theories largely revolve around his idea of *grand narratives*, which can be described as consistent stories about how fictional worlds that are constructed by fan-audiences using disparate fragments work. His original example was the so-called *Bikkuriman* stickers that were included with a series of chocolate snacks, each of which contained a short story fragment. It was not the producer’s goal with these stickers to construct any particularly consistent narrative, but Ōtsuka argues that their audience *did* attempt to construct such a grand narrative, that is, a coherent storyline from the exciting fragments anyway. To this end, those who purchased the snacks would keep buying more to gain more knowledge of the story (Ōtsuka, 2012, pp. 286–290). A similar logic applies to fans of computer games and animated series, where aspects of the same world or storyline are depicted from various viewpoints in different media and the never-ending instalments of the series.

Ōtsuka (2012) likens these diffuse fact-based quasi-narratives to the way history has been taught in schools in post-war Japan: as an endless series of

years and names, without an overarching narrative of what happened or why. The audience is already familiar with having to come up with their own understanding of history from disparate facts from their schooldays. Thus, when the media industry produced computer games, television series, manga and similar works with similar series of disparate years and names with little explicit connections, the audience was ready to construct narratives based on them (Ōtsuka, 2012, pp. 297–300); and, as the historical facts remembered from school were structurally similar to the fictional facts, the audience included the historical facts into their fake-historical narratives. Thus, actual historical events gave a taste of reality to fiction (Ōtsuka, 2012, pp. 87–88, 96–98).

As an example, Ōtsuka cites the animated movie and television series *Space Battleship Yamato* (1974–1975), where the former Imperial Navy battleship Yamato is resurrected as a spaceship on a mission to save Earth. As a result of its references to the Imperial Japan, the franchise tends to be labelled *nationalistic* or *right-wing*. However, Ōtsuka claims that whatever references to Japanese history were included, they were not seen by the fan-audiences as political or as making normative statements about the past or future actions of the state, but their purpose was to transmit concepts such as *dedication* and *purity* to the audience (Ōtsuka, 2012, pp. 141–145, 155–156).

More generally, the primary theoretical framework of this paper is that the audience is the site of the production of the meaning of media messages, as opposed to the producers of those messages. Furthermore, these produced meanings do not need to align with any intent, presumed or otherwise, of the original producers but can be more or less opposed to it (see for example Fiske, 2011, pp. 64–67).

Finally, although the theoretical focus of this paper is on media theory, it also deals with issues of post-war Japanese history. This history is approached from the viewpoint of *collective memory*, which refers to the “various versions of national history created by historians, officials,

schools, mass media, [...] and the like” (Gluck, 1993, p. 65). In this framework, there is no definite version of a national history, but rather an “endless conversation”, which is often contentious (Gluck, 1993, p. 65; Hashimoto, 2015, pp. 4–6).

My analysis is primarily concerned with the conservative side of that conversation, which stresses the progress made by Japan since the Meiji Restoration rather than criticising its pre-war colonialism and militarism (Gluck, 1993, pp. 70–72). In particular, I focus on the ‘right-wing nationalist’ subset of conservatives, who seek to erase the memory of atrocities committed by the Japanese military during the 1930s and 1940s, and to restore the reputation of the pre-war military (Kingston, 2013, pp. 154–173).

Some studies of specifically Japanese animations and manga, and political aspects of both have appeared (see for example Stahl, 2010; Swale, 2017), but the focus of those studies has been largely limited to the analysis of the works themselves. Also, while fan-fiction in general has been the object of increasing interest in recent years, systematic studies regarding the fan-(re)interpretation of *specific* works appear to be rare. This paper adds to the existing empirical research in this area by approaching a specific work through an empirical study of its reception by its fan-audience. In the empirical section, I answer the following questions: What discourses regarding the Pacific War does the *Kantai Collection* media franchise present? Does its fan-audience reproduce those discourses in their own fan-fiction works, comment on them in any way, or ignore them entirely by, for instance, concentrating only on the pretty-girl characters?

Methods and data

The primary methodological framework for this analysis is discourse analysis as defined by Michel Foucault (see Foucault, 1978) and in particular the subset of it known as *genealogy*. Genealogy aims to examine the historical origins of discourses to arrive at what Foucault called *the history of the present*, or

in simple terms, to describe the reason why we see and talk about things the way we do today (Kendall & Wickham, 1999, pp. 24–34). The aim of this study is not to judge historical rights or wrongs or define good and bad representations, but to investigate the historical origins of statements in the original works and how those statements appear in the derivative works. Foucault's method differentiates itself by allowing the analysis to focus on the *process* of how those statements may have come to be, rather than on the interpretation of specific events.

Furthermore, the concept of *open works*, that is, works which invite the reader to complete their meaning (as opposed to *closed works* which attempt to guide the reader towards a single preferred meaning) is used in the analysis of why certain discourses may be transferred to derivative works (Eco, 1979, pp. 3–40). In addition, the procedural rhetoric framework as defined by Ian Bogost (2007) and expanded by Adam Chapman (2016) is applied. The idea of this framework is that discourse-like procedural rhetoric emerges from the rules of digital games, as opposed to solely from the explicit narrative content (Bogost, 2007, pp. 28–40; Chapman, 2016, pp. 71–72).

I analyse works published commercially by the official producers of the *Kantai Collection* franchise, which I refer to as *original works*, and derivative fan-fiction works (*dōjinshi*) self-published by audiences of *Kantai Collection*. The analysis of the former concentrates on the online Adobe Flash-based game from 2013, which was the first appearance of the *Kantai Collection* concept, and makes references to the PlayStation Vita version of the game from 2016. I gathered factual details related to game mechanics and characters from encyclopaedias of the game, commonly known as *strategy wikis*.

Discourses noted in the original works are compared to those of self-published fan-fiction works sold at fan-fiction sales events between 2015 and 2016. For the purposes of this study, 46 fan-fiction works by 30 authors were collected and analysed. All of the works under analysis are 20–30

pages and of the manga genre. Since these self-published works are produced only in very limited quantities in print for fan-fiction sales events, I used convenience sampling (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014, pp. 75–76) – I selected available works that, on cursory inspection, appeared to have content related to the research. The criteria included, for instance, elements of realistic (as opposed to parodic) representations of warfare and direct historical references.

The total amount of available material is immense; by way of example, 1,952 fan-authors participated under the *Kantai Collection* category at Comic Market 89 (Comic Market Organizing Committee, 2015), which is a typical number for these events (Vuorikoski, 2017, pp. 76–77), and several other similar events are held every year. As such, it is not possible to make any generalisations based on the sample used for this study. A diverse range of examples related to the research questions was selected, and the results may be treated as indicative rather than definitive.

The world of *Kantai Collection*

In the game, the player designated as *Admiral* leads a fleet of Second World War warships on the Pacific Ocean in battle scenarios reminiscent of the Pacific War. However, unlike in traditional war games, the ships are represented by *pretty girl* (*bishōjo*) characters who wear warship armaments strapped on their backs and appear to ski on water. On land, the characters behave like regular people. Most of the Admiral's day is spent interacting with these girls in one of their two personas. The pretty-girl characters are collectively known as *ship-girls* (*kanmusu*).

All of the over 100 ship-girl characters have their armaments modelled upon those of historical warships, primarily ones that were in service during the 1930s and 1940s. The characters chat with the Admiral during the game and sometimes reference something that happened to their referent warship. All ship-girls are characters in so far as they have different personalities. Their personalities are often formulated in terms of

their attitude towards the Admiral; some have a cold attitude, while others indicate that they would like to have a romantic relationship with the Admiral. The depiction is definitively non-military-like, rather, it closely identifies with the tropes of the dating-simulator genre of games.

I refer to this as the *parodic* aspect of *Kantai Collection*. While references to war history are included, they are incorporated into a part of a comedic interaction between characters. Unlike in most war games, the Admiral does not actually participate in battles. After the orders are given, the fleet proceeds through a series of battles at random. That the nature of the fleet's progress is random rather than guided by any military strategy is made quite explicit: when the fleet arrives at a point where sea-routes diverge, an animation of a character spinning a roulette wheel to decide the fleet's direction is shown.

As promised by the producer, and unlike most war games which represent *realistic* military action, for example where warships are actual ships and tactical decisions are not made at random, *Kantai Collection* provides only a very limited *framing narrative* (Chapman, 2016, pp. 121–122), in all of the versions. Only the unforeseeable nature of an ongoing war is explicitly proclaimed by the enemy, known as the 'Abyssal Fleet' (*shinkaiseikan*), which are unknown creatures that feature as monsters (some with human features) that appear from the depths of the sea and attack humanity.

Nonetheless, a narrative does emerge from the procedural rhetoric of the game. I refer to this as the *realistic* aspect of the game. The player starts the game at a naval base on Honshū, at what appears to be the Yokosuka naval base. As the player completes each mission, the area of play expands throughout the Pacific, from the Kurils towards Micronesia, and, in the Vita version, to South-East Asia. Maps in the online version of the game are often obscured, although the fictional place names are indicative of the locations, for example 'Northern Waters' (*hoppō kaiiki*). The Vita version features

a realistic map of the Pacific as the game's main screen. In the animated series, a 'final victory' is to be achieved with the conquest of a specific island; the island is not named, but a map of Oahu with an enemy base where Pearl Harbor is located is shown.

In other words, while the limited framing narrative describes the objective of the game as defensive, and the animated series essentially repeats the same narrative, the discourse that emerges from the rules of the game and the plot of the animated series is that of territorial expansion throughout the former Japanese empire. This, of course, matches quite closely actual discourses associated with Japan's entry into the war with the United States – Japan had to attack to defend itself (see for example Kingston, 2013, p. 158).

***Kantai Collection* reimaged**

While some may consider the depiction of Imperial Japan's warships re-establishing Japan's colonial empire a central element of the franchise, and thus perceive the franchise as right-wing, there are no components that make it *necessary* to pay attention to this element. Nothing stops the player from proceeding through the game without giving thought to colonial expansion or any other historical reality, since there is little narrative and details, with the exception of the ship-girls' connection to historical warships, are made abstract. The question is then, how does the fan-audience interpret the historical discourses described above in their fan-fiction works?

Given that war is a major motif for the original works, one might expect war to also be a major motif for the derivative works. However, this is not the case, even in the selected *dōjinshi*, because they contain references to warfare. In many works, battles or enemy attacks are depicted on a few pages, but the stories focus on the characters spending time with each other. Furthermore, the activities of the ship-girls do not always correspond to a country sieged by an overwhelming enemy; they might visit a *matsuri* or spend their time sampling

desserts in a restaurant. A few similar merry-making episodes appear in the animated series as interludes between more action-oriented scenes, but not in the game versions. Their depiction does not correspond to pacifism where war is opposed, however. Rather, the characters exist in a state of no-war, where enemy attacks happen as if they were traffic accidents; that is, the war exists but is not relevant to its supposed fighters.

Works that depict pitched and desperate battles also exist, but their structure tends to be similar – war is happening, but it has no beginning, end or reason. In other words, war is not a practical (a means to an end or a way to acquire resources) or ideological (a defence of some abstract priceless values in an attempt to ‘protect the sacred motherland’) activity. It just is.

Both forms correspond to Ōtsuka’s (2012) idea of *stage devices*, whereby an element that appears historical or political is only a method of bringing dramatic tension to stories. Here, the audience appears to interpret the supposedly militaristic content of *Kantai Collection* mostly as a convenient item to bring excitement to the story-world. This is possibly affected by the open nature of the original works; though the player must engage in war to some degree to progress in the game, the major parodic or character-driven aspect allows the audience to easily focus on other matters.

When the characters are brought together in pitched battles, however, it is not uncommon for the fan-authors to bring up their motivations. Even if the war remains abstract, the ship-girls still fight on behalf of their human commanders, who often treat them as little more than tools (that is, as warships, not persons). In the original works, the ship-girls fight to protect the Admiral and, by extension, the country. When the fan-authors make characters’ motivations explicit, this is almost never the case – they fight to protect each other, not the state or the nation. This may take the form of ignoring orders to prioritise saving another ship-girl (at the expense of their human masters) or

just giving up amid a battle because their friends are dead and there is no more reason to fight.

According to Ōtsuka’s (2012) theory, the commercially published works define the framework for the grand narrative. Also, the question of motivation is an aspect closed to player interpretation: both explicit and implicit narratives specify that the world will be taken over by the Abyssal Fleet unless the Admiral/player engages them. That the fan-audience often reproduces an oppositional reading (Fiske, 2011, p. 40) where the war-to-save-the-world is not the first priority implies that real-world value orientations influence the construction of the grand narrative. Notably, very few reproduce any other reading – either the matter is ignored or the oppositional reading is used.

With its stated commitment to not having any pre-made story, *Kantai Collection* does not comment on *macroscopic* historical questions such as what led to the Abyssal Fleet’s appearance or what the geopolitical effects were. On the one hand, as with their approach to war, the fan-authors ignore these questions. Meanwhile, *Kantai Collection* is overflowing with a *microscopic* history of warship and sea-battle minutiae transported from real-world history. This approach is, on the other hand, enthusiastically adopted in the *dōjinshi* where fan-authors unearth even more historical facts about warships and use these facts to further build up the ship-girl characters. There are ship-girls, for instance, who enjoy drinking afternoon tea whose model warships were built using British parts, and some will even include references to history textbooks, or apologies for the lack of such references in their postscripts.

The fan-authors also produce a significant amount of mesoscale history, such as stories about plots and betrayals inside the state or between military commanders. While these plots are often structurally similar to the infighting that characterised the Japanese state in the 1930s and 1940s, they are concrete references to the world of *Kantai Collection*. Unlike the warship facts,

real-world history is not used directly; instead, the authors construct something like Ōtsuka's (2012) grand narratives of the story-world.

Finally, the expansionist logic of the original works is conspicuously absent in the *dōjinshi*. When fan-authors indicate locations where action is taking place, they are almost always near the Japanese mainland. Explicit depictions of locations are rare in general, and there was little to suggest that any action took place at any remote locale. The expansion towards the outer limits of the Japanese empire implied by the original works is never brought up. This facet of the original works appears not to be of interest for the fan-authors in constructing their grand narratives; on the contrary, when representatives of the state appear in the *dōjinshi*, they are often depicted as cruel and exploitative.

Conclusions

This study is based on a discourse analysis of the *Kantai Collection* media franchise and fan-fiction interpretations of it. It empirically evaluates theories of media consumption proposed by Eiji Ōtsuka (2012) and others and to consider claims that *Kantai Collection* represents a resurgence of right-wing nationalism.

The original media franchise *Kantai Collection* contains discourses of expansionist war and the Japanese empire, but these realistic discourses are accompanied in equal amounts by parodic representations of warships as pretty-girl characters and highly non-military-like play logics. As a result of this balancing act, it is difficult to pin any singular reading of the franchise - it can be perceived as right-wing if you look at one part of it, yet it can just as well be said to be a non-political game if you look at another. A generous interpretation would be that the producers are offering the players a chance to 'create their own story'; an opportunity to select between something like right-wing nationalism and plain fun. However, from the viewpoint of cultural studies, the political message will always exist, even if there is also 'fun'. A less generous

interpretation would thus be that the parodic representation and the gender representation that centres on pretty girls are a smoke screen for the political message of the original works.

As suggested by Ōtsuka's theory, the fan-authors studied enthusiastically adopted and expanded many elements and conventions from the original works to construct an increasingly detailed grand narrative of their own. However, the same authors also studiously ignored central elements of the original works, namely those of expansionism and empire. To the contrary, they emphasised themes such as loyalty between friends and implicitly criticised state authority. In other words, the fan-authors either did not treat assumed political messages as such but instead used them as emotional devices or as a starting point for different (oppositional) narratives. They did not reproduce the enthusiasm that the original works have for the heroic military trope.

While an audience that enjoys *Kantai Collection* for its right-wing content may exist, I find no evidence that the selected audience of hard-core fans of the franchise was in *explicit* support of that content. On the contrary, when they explicitly commented on the political aspects of the original works, their interpretations of the franchise were that responsibility towards friends trumps responsibility towards the state, which is precisely the kind of attitude that nationalist commentators such as Yoshinori Kobayashi (e.g. 1998, pp. 52–55) frequently criticise. A far larger number of fan-producers took both the plain fun and the right-wing-like aspects in their stride and did not include any depictions that could be described as either support or criticism of the latter in their works. Whether this implies an *implicit* acceptance of the right-wing-like aspect or simply a lack of perception and/or interest in the matter is for future research to decide, as is the question of why the fan-audience makes these choices.

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