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Final Fight (Capcom 1989) is a famous example of a video game genre generally known as “beat 'em up” or “brawler,”¹ described by *Wikipedia* as “a type of action game where the player character must fight a large number of enemies in unarmed combat or with melee weapons.” The side-scrolling beat 'em up genre reached the peak of its global popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period sometimes referred to as the genre’s “golden age”.

Set in a contemporary, urban setting, *Final Fight* has a storyline that revolves around three playable heroes who attempt to rescue a young woman from the clutches of a criminal gang. Although likely the most influential and, by general consensus, among the best games in this genre,² *Final Fight* did not found the beat 'em up genre by itself: it was produced within the context of a specific, albeit recent, textual tradition and canon. This canon consisted of texts produced within the same medium (i.e. other video games, mostly of Japanese production) but also drew from an intermedial corpus. In its design and narrative tropes, *Final Fight* inherited and incorporated a number of elements from Hollywood action cinema that had been translated into the newer digital medium of video game.

To trace a history of the beat 'em up genre from its origins to *Final Fight*, I address questions on three levels.

On the intertextual level, what are the textual antecedents of *Final Fight*? What were the formal and stylistic conditions of possibility for this game within the history of the genre and the medium? What are the game’s intermedial connections, especially with films? To answer these questions, I trace a tentative genealogy, focusing on the narrative and representational elements of the game (what some scholars have called the “chromes” or “chrome properties” [Rollings and Morris 2004, p.44; Maietti 2004, p.155-157]). Specifically, I examine storylines, characters and settings and their relationship with the structural properties of beat 'em up gameplay.

On the “(v)ideological” (Gottschalk 1995) level, what value systems are put into play in a classic beat 'em up game? In what ways are the player’s choices axiologised? What conduct is rewarded or sanctioned? Which actions can the player’s avatar perform, and for which purposes? In what contemporary discursive formations did *Final Fight* participate as a textual device for the actualisation of ideologically non-neutral fictional conduct? I attempt to map the value system inscribed in this video game genre that, in turn, articulates it as a game (i.e. as a system of stakes, rules, sanctions, and rewards).

On the historical level, what were the industrial and commercial conditions entailed in the production of a game such as *Final Fight*? To the (actual or virtual) satisfaction of what demands, both material and symbolic, was it designed? Answering these questions calls for an analysis of the so-called “context,” which I consider to be a historical and social meta-narrative. In this respect, my research mostly focuses geographically and historically on the Japanese video game market of the 1980s and its transnational connections.

Comprehensively answering these questions would likely require a book-length study. In this paper, by combining textual analysis and historical investigation, I outline the most salient implications of these questions and some preliminary conclusions.

Starting with the (mainly cinematic) dissemination of transnational imaginaries of “street violence” and “vigilantism” against the background of large, modern American cities during the 1970s and 1980s, I attempt to show that *Final Fight* is an instance of the incorporation of these imaginaries into video games. More generally, I argue that, with various degrees of success, the classic beat ‘em up games produced in Japan carried out a function of symbolic appropriation and redistribution at a local level as they remediated³ a cinematic textual canon (which was, for a significant part, of foreign origin) into the video game medium. As video games, these texts shifted the focus of this appropriation from spectatorship to the forms of active agency prescribed in gameplay. The player thus appropriated control not only on a character in a game but also of an entire cinematic canon which, in the Japanese context, appeared rich in symbolic capital and marked by “American-ness.” The movies that inspired the classic beat ‘em up came from Hollywood, one of the “Greenwich Meridians” (Casanova 2004, pp.87-91) in the global cultural industry during the 1970s and 1980s, likely the last decades of what some scholars have called “the era of high Americanization” (Iwabuchi 2002, p.153). Video games were, in other words, the means by which a portion of the Japanese cultural industry could so successfully appropriate the symbolic capital of Hollywood products that these Japanese games transcended the borders of the Japanese national market and became big hits in the “West” (in the 1980s, no other sector of the Japanese cultural industry had been able to do this, at least not on this scale).

Initial Fight: The Constraints of Commercial Game Design

If we consider a video game to be a text that, to actualise its possible meanings, needs to constantly induce its user to act within it, we can understand that a basic problem in game design (in a very general and abstract way) is to provide the player with enough motivation to perform and reiterate the “nontrivial effort” (Aarseth 1997, p.1) required by the text. In other words, game designers must handle the fact that the text requires its user to perform a certain amount of work (*ergon*), which, like all work no matter how enjoyable, is prone to such pitfalls as fatigue, repetitiveness, boredom, frustration, and so on.

The implementation of a value system—which also becomes a ludic system, when interpreted as a system of gains and losses produced by certain interactions, rather than others—often provides the player with the narrative or ideological motivation to

keep on playing or, at least, to not discourage the user from playing. This value system might be made explicit or thematised, as in the case of games with a strong political agenda.⁴ However, in most cases, the value system tends to be incorporated implicitly in the text, with no evident thematisation. It might be seen as belonging to the realm of what Pierre Bourdieu calls a “practical sense,” the non-thetic acceptance of (*illusio*) and competence in the rules of a certain sport (or a certain social field) that make possible the successful execution of a game (or of a social conduct within the field).

This value system might have elements of various natures, often moral and emotive elements. As noted by Massimo Maietti (2008, pp.100-101), the most basic theories of textual reception and a number of classic studies on game anthropology highlight that the ethical systems in force in the “real world” and in a (video)game do not have a relationship of “simple equivalence.” As well, the acceptance of the ethical and epistemic systems of a game, no matter how dissonant from the convictions the player applies in the “real world,” is one of the strongest attractions of games, corresponding to what Johann Huizinga described as entering into the “magic circle.” Moreover, an empirical gamer who does not approve of or share the value system of a game might find other motivations, such as a gratifying audio-visual experience or even the possibility to put into practice ironic, parodic, or even resistential and subversive playing conducts (as far as the limits of text allow). In the latter scenario, the gamer’s avatar enacts conduct that produces attrition between the ethical systems of the empirical gamer and the “Model User:” “the user’s actions are evaluated by the system (sometimes with the most extreme form of reaction, the *Game Over*: the user is expelled from the fictional world) and s/he, in turn, has the faculty to align with the ethical system that emerges from this series of rewards/punishments, or to challenge it” (Maietti 2008, pp.104-105).

Now, we might assume that commercial game design tends to reproduce in video games a range of ideological and aesthetical elements considered legitimate (that is, allowed to legitimately exist) so that the games will be played by the largest possible number of expected users and be economically profitable.⁵ In devising these elements, designers hold as their reference, not necessarily the “real world” itself, but the textual tradition that situates the productive task (e.g. textual antecedents, canons, genre systems, repertoires of occurrences, current discourses on video games, etc.). This textual tradition subsumes specific representations (including moral values and aesthetic preferences) of the audience for whom the games are produced (what Maietti 2008, p.103 calls the “Model User” of a game). Pointing to an obvious example, it is widely accepted as a generic convention that a hero characterised as the “good guy” in a video game may kill dozens of “bad” male enemies to achieve the given objective. However, the practice of virtually killing children or women is significantly more controversial, as attested, in our case, by the American localisation of *Final Fight*, where the beating up of female-looking characters raised some controversy in the years after its release. In this respect, a video game can present a *genetically composite* value system, where both *autonomous* elements (perfectly legitimate in gaming tradition despite contrasting with “real-world” morality) and *heteronomous* elements (moral rules in force in the “real world” or other representational media, such as film, which are also adopted in the game world), coexist. This dichotomy between autonomous and heteronomous elements can be extended to the narrative or aesthetical elements in the game.

From the perspective of an empirical designer (either an individual or a group), the production of a game entails a negotiation with a series of aesthetic, narrative, and ideological aspects, both autonomous and heteronomous, available in the textual tradition of the medium or other discursive domains (including the “real world”). Together, these form what Pierre Bourdieu describes as a “space of possibles:”

Thus the heritage accumulated by collective work presents itself to each agent as a space of possibles, that is, as an ensemble of probable *constraints* which are the condition and the counterpart of a set of *possible uses*. Those who think in simple alternatives need to be reminded that in these matters absolute freedom, exalted by the defenders of creative spontaneity, belongs only to the naive and the ignorant. It is one and the same thing to enter into a field of cultural production, by settling an entrance fee which consists essentially of the acquisition of a *specific code* of conduct and expression, and to discover the finite universe of *freedom under constraints* and *objective potentialities* which it offers: problems to resolve, stylistic or thematic possibilities to exploit, contradictions to overcome, even revolutionary ruptures to effect. (Bourdieu 1996, p.235, emphasis in the original)

According to this view, a game designer, like any other cultural producer, is not a free “author” or unbridled “creator.” The designer’s work and position in the field itself are possible only within a “historical transcendental:”

This space of possibles impresses itself on all those who have interiorized the logic and necessity of the field as a sort of *historical transcendental*, a system of (social) categories of perception and appreciation, of social conditions of possibility and legitimacy which, like the concepts of genres, schools, manners and forms, define and delimit the universe of the thinkable and the unthinkable, that is to say, both the finite universe of potentialities capable of being thought and realized at a given moment—freedom—and the system of constraints inside which is determined what is to be done and to be thought—necessity. A veritable *ars obligatoria*, as the Scholastics put it, it acts like a grammar in defining the space of what is possible or conceivable within the limits of a certain field, constituting each of the ‘choices’ taken (in matters of *mise en scène*, for example) as a grammatically consistent *option* [...] but it is also an *ars inveniendi* which allows the invention of a diversity of acceptable solutions within the limits of grammaticality [...] In this way, this is undoubtedly how any cultural producer is irremediably placed and dated in so far as he or she participates in the same *problematic* as the ensemble of his or her contemporaries (in the sociological sense). (Ibid., p.236, emphasis in the original)

Among the factors that most limit the indefinite productive freedom of the author(s) in the case of game design, an important role is played by the specific characteristics of the video game industry, in particular, its strongly hit-driven nature, a trait shared with other sectors of entertainment industry. This characteristic was especially strong in the arcade market of the 1980s and 1990s, where generic mainstays tended to impose the reiteration of structural and stylistic properties previously proven commercially successful. This trend created a market of “clones,”⁶ in which *Final Fight* gained major roles as a clone of *Double Dragon* (Technōs Japan 1986) and, after becoming an international hit, a highly productive hypotext in later years.

In conclusion, in this paper, I assume as a working hypothesis that, in the production of video games, a system of constraints, inscribed in the agents and objectified in the texts, is among the elements that make up a “field” as “*the structured universe of possible solutions*” (Bourdieu 1991, p.42, emphasis in the original). This field produces “problematic[s] as a space of objectively realized possibilities” that “functions as a *possible market*, exercising effects of repression, or licensing and encouragement, on the expressive drive” (p.70, emphasis in the original).

In what follows, I attempt to show how such constraints, either in the intertextual or industrial domain, formed a specific “historical transcendental” that enabled the evolution of the beat ’em up genre through *Final Fight*. I also try to show how *Final Fight*’s relationships with other texts and media illustrate a range of strategies for the appropriation and distribution of symbolic capital within the field of the global and Japanese video game industries.

“It’s the Year 1989:” Tropes of Street Violence and Urban Vigilantism in the Popular Culture of the 1970s and 1980s

In Metro City, crime is rampant. There is neither peace nor order here. What you can find is only violence and death. In order to restore justice in the city, Mayor Mike Haggar has been inflicting resolute attacks on the Mad Gear, a huge, violent gang. But the basest retaliation was waiting for him.

It’s the year 1989... (initial sequence of *Final Fight*)⁷

The streets are no longer safe. Crime is rampant. Gangs de facto control the city. The police are ineffectual and even in league with the mob. Law-abiding citizens with a modicum of courage and initiative have no choice but to take action themselves. It does not matter if their actions are against the law. The law of the courts has no jurisdiction on the streets.

This basic ideological narrative can be found at the core of digital games such as *Final Fight*, as well as such films as *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974) and *The Warriors* (Walter Hill, 1979). These films are examples of two complementary modes of cinematic representation of street violence in big cities of the United States that were dominant in the 1970s and 1980s. *Death Wish* stands as a highly influential film from the subgenre of the “urban vigilante movie.” While reproducing the same anomic vision of the streets (urban public space *par excellence*), *The Warriors* focuses its symbolic agenda on the gang world that Paul Kersey, the protagonist of *Death Wish* portrayed by Charles Bronson, fights in first person.

In this section, I trace less a genealogy of the beat ’em up genre per se than the story of a *nexus*: the nexus between a specific gameplay (“beat ’em up”) and a specific set of narrative, aesthetic, and “chrome” elements and tropes. I focus on how these tropes, which appear remarkably dissonant to contemporary representations of

1970s and 1980s Japan as a society with one of the lowest violent crime rates in developed countries, came to be effectively remediated in video games produced in Japan. The discursive genealogy of street violence I briefly trace concentrates on mainstream “popular culture” products that circulated within commercial and often international consumption channels.

Scholars investigating the cinematic representations of street violence and urban vigilantism in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Hoppenstand 1993, Bailey 1993, Lenz 2005, Gustafson 2007, Maruska 2010) have devoted a great deal of attention to *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971). Both films were major commercial successes and spawned a number of sequels.⁸ According to some commentators (e.g. Lenz 2005), these films effectively capture the moment when, in the American discourses on penal and legal systems, more conservative and securitarian attitudes replaced the liberal and progressive tendencies prevalent in the 1960s. This evolution is synecdochically represented by *Death Wish*'s protagonist who, before the epiphanic moment when his family falls victim to criminal violence, is described in the film as a “bleeding heart liberal” (Hoppenstand 1993, p.158, Lenz 2005, p.117).

I do not focus on the causes of the success of these representations with American audiences. Commentators have mentioned various historical correlations: the ideological retreat after the progress in civil rights made during the 1960s, including the introduction of the now iconic “Miranda rights;” changes in the political climate with the Nixon and Reagan administrations; and the energy crisis and economic recession of the 1970s, which generated alarming rises in unemployment, poverty, and, consequently, crime in big cities.

More pertinently here, what happens in these films? The hero, who might be an ordinary citizen as in *Death Wish* or a law enforcer as the titular cop in *Dirty Harry*,⁹

takes the law into his or her own hands in order to counteract the vicious threat of crime and the terrible acts of evil, violence-loving criminals. During the process of fighting crime in the city streets, the urban vigilante becomes judge, jury, and executioner, circumventing the “law” (which is frequently portrayed as being either inefficient or corrupt) in order to save society and preserve the ideological concept of law and order from those who would subvert it at the expense of the weak and innocent. (Hoppenstand 1993, pp.150-151)

The hero's restorative agency takes place in the context of an apocalyptic and even dystopian vision of public order under attack. We find this circumstance is a common element in the beat 'em up genre. A teleological ethics justifies the hero's illegal and often violent actions: all offences against the law can be tolerated in the name of the achieved restoration of societal “order.” However, the hero generally acts at an individualistic level, and after his retributive action is concluded, nothing has structurally changed within a system that—the audience is left to presume—will remain as ineffectual as before the hero took the law into his hands. Therefore, in the fictional world of these movies, the main result of the hero's actions is an *exemplary* one. His legacy, however, frequently encounters controversy and even opposition from other characters from within the legal system. Although it cannot be said that cinematic vigilantism attempts to persuade its implied viewers to embrace the conduct it depicts, it does affect them by providing a fantasy that simplifies and

rectifies a perceived “reality” which would otherwise appear as out of control, threatening, and unjust.

Complementing the strong agency of the individual who, from an opposite social milieu (generally law-abiding citizens and respectable bourgeoisie), descends into an evil underworld and restores a concept of “order,” another relevant subgenre in the cinematic canon of street violence depicts street life from the perspective of those who, according to securitarian and alarmist narratives, enjoy de-facto jurisdiction over the streets: gangs.¹⁰

The Warriors (1979), a cornerstone of this subgenre,¹¹ presents the gang world as having a remarkable gradation of moral values, which allows the watcher to side with the eponymous protagonist gang in their adventurous journey back to Coney Island. Unlike earlier films on gang violence, *The Warriors* has a taste for unrealistic, fantastic, and romantic characterisations, reflecting director Walter Hill’s poetics (Sobchack 1982, p.83), to the point that “despite the plethora of articles to the contrary, *The Warriors* doesn’t have much to do with real street gangs, then or now” (Barra 2005).

The Warriors’ strong narrative teleology has prompted comparisons between its various episodes (which follow a topographic progression) and the stages of a video game. According to Matteo Bittanti (2008, p.12), *The Warriors* is “a techno-ludic film *avant la lettre*, structured as a video game: an urban journey, battles with other gangs, stages of increasing difficulty, a final showdown with the ‘boss’.”¹² However, in terms of agency, *The Warriors* puts its protagonists in a position that is more resistential than active, anticipating the elements of the survival game genre.¹³ Structurally, this type of agency distances this film from the ludic-narrative model of the beat ‘em up. By giving an iconic example of a nearly mythical quest across the specific topological configuration of the city divided into zones and by featuring a highly original aesthetic characterisation of gangs, though, *The Warriors* became one of the most influential films of the beat ‘em up genre. It and other similar films, such as *Streets of Fire* (1984) by the same director, expressed not only a system of narrative and aesthetic elements but also the topography of the fictional universe in which this system was actualised. The central element in this topography—“the source for all the fictional treatments of street gangs” (Sobchack 1982, p.78)—rendered abstract and universal to the point of being marked by archetypal resonances, is the *street*: the street, as directly evoked in the titles of many works in this genre; the street, as a distinguishing feature of urban modernity, with its degradation and its liminality; the street, as the place where a paradoxical return of modern man to the state of nature and to the law of the stronger might take place—right in the middle of those monuments to modernity that are late-capitalist megalopolises.

Notes on the Japanese Localization of These Tropes

In Japan, as elsewhere, the 1980s witnessed a transition in the consumption practices of cinematic products. The development of television licenses and home video markets gave birth to new ways of dissemination of cinematic imaginaries, and theatrical release in one’s country ceased to be the only way to enjoy a movie.¹⁴ All

the films mentioned were released in Japan within few months of their American releases,¹⁵ and had a home video release in the following years. The Japanese market was an important outlet for major studio productions in the 1970s and 1980s. With some exceptions, American box office successes tended to fare well in Japan. *The Warriors*, for instance, was released in Japan on September 15, 1979, and ended in the top 40 in the distribution income annual ranking of foreign films.¹⁶ *The Warriors* received significant press coverage, often in exaggerated tones over its allegedly violent content. The Japanese distributors might have encouraged such coverage, as suggested by such ads as one in the *Yomiuri shinbun* newspaper on September 11, 1979. After reporting that the film raised serious social concerns in the United States, the ad presents a short selection of opinions from the Japanese audience, who variously declare that the film has quenched or provoked their violent desires. Some praise the gang outfits. That same year, *The Warriors* was featured on the cover of the September 15 issue (no. 769) of *Kinema junpō*, the oldest and most authoritative Japanese film magazine. The issue devotes 23 pages to the presentation and analysis of the film, with many black-and-white and colour pictures.

Streets of Fire (1984), traditionally considered one of the inspirations for *Final Fight*, was released in Japan on August 11, 1984. A 1950s-themed “rock-&-roll fable” depicting the quest of ex-soldier Tom Cody (Michael Paré) to rescue singer Ellen Aim (Diane Lane) from a biker gang led by Raven Shaddock (Willem Dafoe), *Streets of Fire* was not a critical or commercial success in the United States.¹⁷ It fared well in Japan,¹⁸ though, and was voted the best foreign film of 1984 by readers of *Kinema junpō*,¹⁹ one of the few awards for the film after its release. *Streets of Fire* went on to form a cult following in Japan. References to this film are found in numerous products of the Japanese entertainment industry in those years, which can be interpreted as a sign of the movie’s enduring popularity.²⁰

It can be reasonably assumed that these movies which expressed a specific vision of an inefficient penal system, dangerous modern cities, and streets as a locus contended by gangs, law enforcers and vigilantes saw significant dissemination in Japan, where their content was frequently constructed and perceived as something “foreign,” or, more precisely, quintessentially “American.” This characterisation did not deter Japanese audiences from enjoying them, or hinder further processes of localisation. Not only were these movies commercially successful, but there is evidence that local cultural industries appropriated and transformed their aesthetic and thematic contents. The video games analysed in what follows likely provide the most significant evidences of this process.

As manga and anime series, such as *Hokuto no Ken* (*Fist of the North Star*, 1983-1988), are representative of the many localised versions of the Cold War-era transnational narratives of the effects of a nuclear holocaust,²¹ *Final Fight* (and, more generally, the beat ’em up genre that flourished in the same years) can be seen as the result of the local reproduction and appropriation of transnational imaginaries based on “American” (“Western”) urban life.

From the *Dōjo* to the Streets

Let us return to the historical-stylistic evolution of the video game medium as the second axis converging in the nexus outlined.

It is well known that, as a genre, the head-to-head fighting game predated the beat 'em up by few years. Games, such as *Karate Champ* (Technōs Japan 1984, known in Japan as *Karatedō*) and *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* (Konami 1985) which are generally considered among the prototypes of the genre (Hunt 2002, p.198), draw from a thematic repertoire that is not vigilantism, despite some overlap. Most of these games take inspiration from the thematic tradition of martial arts, whose transformation into an internationally viable cinematic subgenre was initiated in the 1970s by the global reception of Hong Kong kung fu movies (epitomised by those featuring Bruce Lee, 1940-1973). Accordingly, these games do not present a bleak, urban setting but a location that more or less mimics that of a sports event—often as neutral as a *dōjo* or an arena—which becomes the stage for the competitive (and, at times, even ironically self-Orientalised) exhibition of the mastery of “Oriental” fighting techniques.

Leaving aside *Karate Champ Player vs. Player* (known in Japan as *Taisen karatedō bishōjo seishun hen*, Technōs Japan 1984)—an upgrade of *Karate Champ* with additional levels, some in such urban locales as a pier—*Urban Champion* (Nintendo R&D1 1984) likely was the first fighting game to introduce an urban setting, a feature thematised in the name itself. However, the game's mediocre design and apparent lack of motivations for the playable character, who engages in fist-fighting duels on the streets of an anonymous big city, achieved only modest impact. We can assign *Urban Champion* a marginal position in the history of this genre.

We might assume that the fictional world of street violence was first effectively transposed onto a head-to-head fighting game only a few years later, with the British and American levels of the first chapter of the *Street Fighter* saga (Capcom 1987). However, the remediation of some elements taken from the thematic stock of vigilantism and gang discourses lagged behind the sister-genre of beat 'em up. We might assume that the implementation of such elements in *Street Fighter* worked at an intra-medial level, that is, using existing games as hypotexts without necessarily taking inspiration, unless indirectly, from their cinematic referents. Moreover, the martial arts elements are still especially strong in *Street Fighter*, so the motifs of urban violence are far from dominant in this game.

An urban context was not necessary to justify and authenticate a duel between two fighters. The conventions of fighting sports and cinematic martial arts already provided effective narrative frameworks. On the other hand, it seems that, without this kind of narrative, the beat 'em up genre could never have been born. The side-scrolling beat 'em up emerged precisely when the designers made the hero (the player's avatar) *scroll* down a fictional *street* inhabited by criminals, thugs, muggers, bikers, punks, and the like.

While martial arts-inspired themes remain in transitional games such as *Spartan X* (Irem 1984)²² and *Chinese Hero* (Nihon Game 1984),²³ the remediation of the Hollywood treatment of the vigilantism and gang violence discourses became characteristic of the later Japanese titles that founded the beat 'em up genre.

How to justify and authenticate interminable sessions of brawls and beatings—not only from a narrative but also from a moral standpoint? The (mainly cinematic) narratives of vigilantism and street violence fitted the task perfectly: they provided a simple, even mythical, narrative framework and a rich thematic stock already available and widely disseminated in other media. Their implementation in a game allowed the designers to subsume the ethical and aesthetic implications of these films, with no need to create or negotiate them from scratch.

In its paradigmatic embodiment, the beat 'em up game can be summed up in a very simple formula: you move forward (quite literally), beating up enemies until they are no more. As in the lone vigilante movies, the player restores order through unlawful and unethical conducts. More than a collective order, this is a personal order: in most cases, the hero achieves little more than rescuing his kidnapped damsel in distress (the passive role of female characters is another feature these games share with the films from which they take inspiration). This is one of those genres in which, in the words of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, “the player is asked to defend or reestablish the status quo, so that even though the violence of the games appears to be antisocial, the ultimate message is not” (1999, p.93).

As in the vigilante movies, the agency is all placed in a single man (or a handful of men) who fights an overwhelming number of enemies. This quantity is even more overwhelming in a game than a film: the beat 'em up is not configured as a discrete series of duels but as a massive, continuous melee. The player simultaneously confronts multiple enemies, who, with the possible exception of the stage bosses, do not have as much stamina (iconically rendered as an energy bar) as the hero. Despite the purportedly realistic, contemporary setting, the deeds of the urban beat 'em up hero belong to the mythical or fairy-tale register: the player controls a human being whose physical prowess and courage make him highly superior to the average empirical player. Drawing on an old classification by Northrop Frye (without subscribing to its theoretical premises), we might place the beat 'em up in the “high-mimetic” mode (if not directly in the “romance”), whose protagonists are human beings superior in degree to the empirical readers of the story. More precisely, the story is destined to a happy ending, so we might place it in the “high mimetic comedy” category, where

a central figure [...] constructs his (or her) own society in the teeth of strong opposition, driving off one after another all the people who come to prevent or exploit him, and eventually achieving a heroic triumph, complete with mistresses, in which he is sometimes assigned the honors of a reborn god [...] The comic hero will get his triumph whether what he has done is sensible or silly, honest or rascally. (Frye 1971, p.43)

This characterisation of the hero shares many similarities not only with the media representations of vigilantism but also with the cinematic canon of contemporary American action movies. Like John Rambo and John Matrix, the hero of *Final Fight* and other similar games defeats an entire army all by himself. Like the fighting game, the beat 'em up is unrealistic despite its claims to urban realism and articulates a hyperbolic, even “baroque” (Surman 2007, p.214) rhetoric of the spectacle provided by action.

However, the prototype of the beat 'em up genre as we know it is a Japanese game, not only for its country of origin but also for the emphatic connotation of its “Japanese-ness.” *Nekketsu kōha Kunio-kun* (Kunio-kun: The Hot-Blooded Hardliners) was designed by Yoshihisa Kishimoto (1961-), one of the most important figures in the history of this genre, and released in Japanese arcades by Technōs Japan in May 1986. In the narrative that unfolds, the hero Kunio is a teenager enrolled in a Japanese high school that bears the eloquent name *Nekketsu Kōkō* (Hot-Blood High School). Kunio engages in a series of brawls in various city locales to teach a lesson to members of rival gangs who regularly beat up his best friend Hiroshi.²⁴ In this case, the American canon of cinematic vigilantism or gang violence is less influential than the established local tradition of the representation of juvenile delinquency. Kunio is among those youngsters who in the 1980s were commonly called a word that has since nearly disappeared: *tsuppari*, a juvenile delinquent who swings between the worlds of school gangs and petty crime.²⁵ A precedent in the field of video games can be considered *Seishun skyandaru* (Juvenile Scandal, Coreland 1985, known as *My Hero* outside Japan), a side-scrolling platform game featuring duels with stage bosses and beat 'em up elements in the line of *Spartan X*. The hero of the game is a boy who, like Kunio, sports a school uniform and a stereotypical *tsuppari* pompadour haircut (*aipā*). He travels in time to rescue his loved one and has to confront legions of punks in one of the three levels of the game (a city street).

The trope of the “juvenile delinquent” (male: *furyō shōnen*, female: *furyō shōjo*), who is often portrayed as a potential threat to the adult world of *shakaijin* (full-fledged members of society) but also as possessing romanticising traits, boasts a remarkable textual tradition in Japan. This trope was quite common in the alarmist discourses centring on youth in the late 1970s and early 1980s (until its place in the media spotlight was shared and then overtaken by the discourses on bullying (*ijime*) that boomed quantitatively in the 1990s).²⁶ The popularity of this trope is confirmed by the significant line-up of delinquency-prone adolescents in 1980s and early 1990s manga and anime. Examples known outside Japan include characters from *YuYu Hakusho* (*Yūyū hakusho*, 1990-1994), *Slam Dunk* (1990-1996), and *Kyō kara ore wa!!* (1988-1997). Madoka Ayukawa, the rebellious female protagonist and reputed bad girl in the highly successful *Kimagure Orange Road* (1984-1987) by Izumi Matsumoto, can be considered an illustrious (albeit moderate) representative of this category.

Despite abundant para-scholastic elements in *Kunio-kun*, the action does not take place at school but in a big city (easily assumed to be Tokyo) inhabited by *bōsōzoku* (motorcycle gangs),²⁷ yakuza, and gangs of juvenile delinquents, both male and female, and their respective leaders (*banchō* or *sukeban*). A virtual tourist to *Kunio-kun* can already find in this game many locations that soon became canonical in this genre: train platforms, abandoned construction yards, dark alleys, parking lots, and disreputable piers.

The North American localisation of *Kunio-kun* marked a turning point in the history of the representational and narrative properties of the beat 'em up genre. *Kunio-kun* was a huge hit in the domestic Japanese market,²⁸ so Technōs decided to launch it abroad. Fearing that what they perceived as typically Japanese elements in the storyline, setting, and characters might hinder the game's success in the United States, Technōs had the sprites redrawn so they looked more palatable to what the

Japanese designers perceived as “Western” taste. The designers explicitly took as their models the characters and settings of *The Warriors* (Gorges 2012, pp.108-109). Paradoxically, the application of the discourses of gang violence and vigilantism, among the most enduring and productive conventions in the beat ’em up genre, was born from an Occidentalist stereotype elaborated in Japan in the wake of cultural products coming from the United States.

With *Renegade*, as the international version of *Kunio-kun* released in December 1986 was baptised, the beat ’em up took to the streets of America for the first time. The visual set of *Renegade* was based on contemporary fictional representations of big US cities. For example, the trains were covered with graffiti, and ethnic minorities appeared among the non-player characters. This re-styling changed the sense produced by the genre as a whole. *Kunio-kun*, supported by a significant textual tradition, had incorporated into game the widespread trope of juvenile delinquency in Japanese society. However, in the following years, the Japanese designers of games with similar gameplay put aside the style of *Kunio-kun* and directly followed the example of *Renegade*, adopting narratives and representational elements inspired by the “American” setting of the vigilante/gang violence cinematic canon.²⁹ This change was intended to appeal to a wider international audience or to give priority to the North American markets. However, from the perspective of those who played these games in Japan, *Kunio-kun* must have appeared domestic, whereas the following beat ’em ups seemed exotic and “foreign:” their authenticity was based on the appropriation of the symbolic capital intrinsically attached to Hollywood products imported to Japan.

What Bolter and Grusin noted about *Myst* can be stated about the beat ’em up genre as well.

The feeling of immediacy in *Myst* [*Renegade*], as in other games of this genre, is generated in large part by the player’s expectations derived from the medium of film. It is not really as if the player were on *Myst* island [in the streets of an American big city], which after all looks like no island [city] on earth; it is as if the player were in a film about *Myst* island [an American big city]. The game can only attempt to satisfy the viewer’s desire for immediacy by seeming to put her in a film. Her sense of immediacy comes only through an awareness of mediation. (1999, p.97-98)

The remediation from film to video game entailed symbolic appropriation: through ways specific to digital games as a medium (game design and its actualisation in play), designers and players in Japan appropriated a foreign textual canon; they, quite literally, took *control* of it.

The remediation of thematic canons dispersed in highly successful genre movies appears to be a distinctive production model of Technōs and perhaps large sectors of the Japanese gaming industry in those years. In a rare interview published in Europe, *Kunio-kun* designer Yoshihisa Kishimoto recalls that “back then, it was common to conceive the games by drawing inspiration from cinema and successful movies” (Gorges 2012, p.99).³⁰ As reported by Kishimoto’s biographer Florent Gorges (2012, p.72, 79), the same design rationale can be found in his other works from this period, such as the laserdisc games *Thunder Storm* (a.k.a. *Cobra Command*, Data East

1984), inspired by *Blue Thunder* (John Badham, 1983), and *Road Blaster* (Data East 1985), equally inspired by *Mad Max 2* (George Miller, 1981).³¹

Final Fight planner Akira Nishitani (1967-) echoes Kishimoto's words in a 2007 interview:

Before we developed *Final Fight*, Capcom's president [likely Kenzō Tsujimoto] suddenly gathered us all together and said, "The future of entertainment is in movies! I'm installing ten TV screens for you. Watch as many different kinds of movies and information as you can find! And, from now on, when you develop a game, you must make its image first!" He ordered us just like that, so from that point on we approached our planning and design as if it were a movie. (*Retro Gamer Staff* 2007, p.51-52)

Therefore, it seems that the trend in the Japanese video game industry to appropriate symbolic capital that, being both *cinematic* and *foreign*, was doubly (i.e. from a medial and national standpoint) heteronomous was more than accidental or unconscious. These interviews reveal the purposeful carrying out of an industrial and commercial strategy. The "Capcom's president" from Nishitani's anecdote must have been aware that video game as a medium occupied a marginal position when compared to other sectors of the entertainment industry and certainly when compared to film. As well, the exploitation of heteronomous themes and aesthetics in video games (corresponding to a fundamentally servile, mono-directional process of remediation, typical of a dominated field of cultural production) was bound to be more remunerative than struggling for the actual autonomy of the medium (if such autonomy was even feasible or commercially viable in those years). This relationship of dependency can be detected in the (more or less extensive) regular incorporation of cinematic elements in other games of this age, especially explicit in *R-Type* (Irem 1987) and *Splatterhouse* (Namco 1988) which are visually and narratively indebted to the *Alien* and *Friday the 13th* franchises, respectively.

Proceeding further along this textual genealogy that leads to *Final Fight* is the famous *Double Dragon* (a.k.a. *Sōsetsuryū*, Technōs Japan, August 1987), which immediately follows *Kunio-kun* and shares the same designer and publishing house. The game's heroes are brothers Billy and Jimmy Lee, two gangsters with a knack for martial arts who must rescue one of their girlfriends kidnapped by a rival gang. This simple narrative structure is halfway between a Propp-like folk tale and Frye's "high-mimetic" mode. No wonder that, in its official arcade flyer, this game was presented as an "adventure fighting game" (*kakutō adobenchā gēmu*).³² "Adventure," one might assume, alludes to the generic similarity of the two brothers' journey to the modes of a heroic quest.

In gameplay, *Double Dragon* was likely the first beat 'em up to use an irreversible scrolling of the action from the left to the right of the screen. This directionality likely was taken from the platform genre, where it was already established as canonical. *Kunio-kun*'s stages were pre-designed areas where the avatar could roam with no fixed direction, which more resembled urban arenas than streets. Properly speaking, the *side-scrolling* element in *Kunio-kun* was still embryonic as the game looked more like a relatively static succession of one-versus-all bouts than a journey through multiple screens.

If only for this reason, *Double Dragon* is widely considered historically the most influential game of this genre, along with *Final Fight*. A number of references to Bruce Lee's movies, of which Kishimoto was an avid fan, appear in the game, but they are mostly marginal to the main narrative motifs, which delve from the canon of US-centric representations of vigilantism and street violence. It would be an exaggeration, however, to say that *Double Dragon's* visuals show only the contemporary urban setting, however significantly it is represented. Some storylines, conveyed (as common in that age) through such paratextual materials as machine flyers, posters, press releases, and magazine ads, set the events of the game in a post-apocalyptic future à la *Mad Max*.³³ In addition, the final stages bring the player through unrealistic settings. For instance, the "enemy's base" is a sort of secret fortress that is hidden inside a mountain and sports extravagant, Egyptian-like decor. It more resembles the headquarters of an evil organisation in the James Bond franchise than the lair of a gang's turf. (After *Double Dragon*, the final stage in a lavish residence became canonical in the genre.) *Double Dragon* became a national and international hit,³⁴ and more than *Renegade*, to which it was directly indebted, it was the hit that drove subsequent development of the beat 'em up genre. Clones that took inspiration from it began to appear.

Before turning to *Final Fight*, which was released in the "game centres" of Japan in December 1989, the following games deserve some words.

Vigilante (Irem 1988³⁵) is one of the clearest examples of the nexus between the beat 'em up genre and the discourses of vigilantism and gang violence. For instance, in the opening screen, the game title, coloured in a manner vaguely reminiscent of the US flag, appears in the foreground of the skyline of New York, where the story is set in 1988. The introductory screens prompt a well-known narrative cliché: "The police cannot stop the street gangs... As a vigilante you must defend your people's turf!!!" To add a personal canonical note and provide further motivation for playing, the next screen informs users that the "skinheads have taken Madonna [the hero's girlfriend, a clear homage to the homonymous pop star] hostage. Take the law into your own hands!"³⁶

5 stages in all including a street, junkyard, the brooklyn bridge, and a back street scene, and the final round. Skinheads with mohawk or spike hairdo attack you with a knife, chain, motorbike, rifle, etc. From everywhere, using dirty tricks. This is a hard-boiled touch action game of crushing rogues with your punch, kick and nunchakus to save Madonna. (original bilingual flyer, *The Arcade Flyer Archive* 2015)

The gameplay of *Vigilante*, however, takes a step back from the freedom of movement and the wealth of moves and holds available in *Double Dragon*. As noted by the contemporary Japanese press (Shun'ichirō 1989), in many respects, *Vigilante* is merely a re-styled and updated version of *Spartan X*, a product of the same software house. This detail is quite revealing as it shows that, when the designers of *Vigilante* planned to re-use the obsolete gameplay of *Spartan X*, they chose to make it more attractive by incorporating the discursive resources then in vogue. As frequently happens in the case of those who are in a subordinate position in the field of cultural production, they used these resources in the most radical and ostentatious ways, to the point that the congratulatory screen at the end of the game sounds like a

(maybe not at all unintended) parody: “Way to go dude!!! You saved Madonna[.] Law and order failed but, the vigilante prevailed. The vigilante rules the city!!!”

Dragon Ninja (Data East 1988), better known outside Japan as *Bad Dudes vs. Dragonninja*, entrusts the two eponymous bad dudes to rescue “President Ronnie” (North American version), kidnapped by a gang of criminal ninjas. The seven stages comprise American urban locales, including New York City. The absurdist plot of this game shows clearly that the narrative and representational conventions of the beat 'em up genre were in 1988 so established that the insertion of parodic elements (many going in the direction of spoofing the “American-ness” of the genre) was already a feasible way to add originality.

Double Dragon II: The Revenge (Technōs Japan) was released in the Japanese arcades in December 1988. Though a commercial hit, the game does not feature relevant innovations in gameplay (except for a controversial new control system).

A seminal game for the hybridisation of beat 'em up and hack and slash elements, *Ninja Gaiden* (known as *Ninja ryūkenden* in Japan, Tecmo 1988)³⁷ is based on the paradoxical and comical scenario of “Ninja in U.S.A.” ([sic], introductory screenshot). The game brings the ninja hero Ryu through many American locales (e.g. California, New York City, Las Vegas, and The Grand Canyon). In urban settings, the game replicates canonical representations of degraded American cities. The storyline centres on a mission to defeat an evil cult based on the prophecies of Nostradamus.

Tough Turf (Sunsoft/Sega, March 1989), a minor representative of the genre, is also remarkable for its ironic overtones. It combines white-collar heroes with canonical beat 'em up gameplay and iconography. The game takes place mostly in a factory full of hostile punks, which deservedly earns the place the appellation of a “tough turf.”³⁸

The title of *Crime Fighters*, originally released by Konami in April 1989, thematises its motives for playing. The playable characters are vigilantes who must rescue numerous women from the clutches of a lecherous criminal, and as explained in the introductory screen, the heroes “clean up the streets while [they]’re at it.” According to the Japanese cabinet flyer, the game is set in Chicago. The city streets are portrayed as extremely dangerous and degraded, following the vigilante/gang violence canon. The streets abound with representatives of all kinds of urban subcultures—punks, greasers, reggae aficionados, leathermen, and bikers—who are all portrayed as caricatures with casual hints of racism and homophobia. Some cognitive diffractions are provoked by the insertion of Japanese elements, such as a map of a circular subway line reminiscent of the Yamanote line in Tokyo (stage 1) and posters of adult video idols on the street walls (stage 2). Material for sexual innuendo and transgression pops up occasionally adding to the general atmosphere of moral unlawfulness (ads featuring half-naked women, a woman in a dominatrix attire among the enemies, and the final joke spoken by the hero to the rescued girls: “Do you mind being kidnapped again... by me!?”). The incorporation of elements from popular films becomes parodic when fighting stage bosses designed as look-alikes of *Friday the 13th*’s Jason Voorhees (stage 2), *A Nightmare on Elm Street*’s Freddy Krueger (stage 5), and Arnold Schwarzenegger (stage 7).

Cinematic elements abound in *Gang Wars* (Alpha Denshi, July 1989), a minor representative of the genre. Especially notable are the cut scenes which are strongly reminiscent of *The Warriors* and the storyline that places Mike and Jackie, the two heroes, in “1989 New York.” Here, they fight fancily dressed gang members to rescue a kidnapped girl.

In *DownTown* (Seta, August 1989), a little-known overhead beat 'em up game, the player controls a white-collar guy stranded in a dangerous neighbourhood after accidentally catching corrupt cops accepting bribes from gang members. Chased by cops and gangsters (whose sleeveless jackets are *de rigueur*) alike (as in *The Warriors*) the hero has to fight his way through six poorly conceived urban stages to the final showdown with the gang kingpin.

DJ Boy (Kaneko), a bizarre beat 'em up, features as its hero a boy who rollerblades his way through many thugs and stereotypical American locales (including a stage in the Old Wild West) to retrieve his stolen boom-box. This game was in development during the same period as *Final Fight* and released in September 1989. Set mostly in urban locations, *DJ Boy* conflates beat 'em up conventions with a humorous portrayal of ghetto life and hip hop subcultures. The stereotypical portrayal of the American city dwellers (black, gay people, hair metal fans, punks) in the game is far from politically correct.

Final Fight

Released in December 1989, *Final Fight* was one of the most influential games in the early 1990s and met with huge international commercial success and critical acclaim.³⁹ Its status as a consecrated classic was mentioned as early as November 1992 in the “All Capcom” special issue of *Gamest*, one of the most authoritative Japanese magazines specialising in arcade games: “the smash hit that established the style of fighting/action games as we know it” (C • LAN 1992, p.8). According to Zenji Ishii (1992), the magazine’s editor-in-chief, *Final Fight* “made the game world switch from shooting games to fighting games” (p.87). The impact of *Final Fight* on the beat 'em up genre and the arcade market can be gauged by the outpouring of similar games in the following months and years, many by Capcom itself. The Japanese press styled this trend a “fighting game boom” (*kakutō gēmu būmu*).

In addition, the nexus between the beat 'em up gameplay and the discourses of street violence and vigilantism appears most explicitly in *Final Fight*.

A column in the aforementioned “All Capcom” issue, commenting on a picture of the “Bay Area” stage where the Statue of Liberty can be seen in the background, summarises the game as: “Contemporary America: a place where dreams, liberty, and violence are intertwined. *Final Fight* expresses realistically such American world [...] Force indeed is the only means to gain freedom.” (*Gamest* 1992, p.149). *Final Fight* can hardly be considered a realistic portrayal of late 1980s America, but its urban setting does sum up in an exemplary way the entire thematic and narrative canon of the beat 'em up genre, which, as I have attempted to demonstrate, is indebted to American cinematic texts. Its stages (“Slum,” “Subway-Park,” “West Side,” “Industrial Area,” “Bay Area,” “Up Town”) articulate a highly recognisable,

geographically and socially ascending teleology. The enemies are thugs with sleeveless gilets à la *The Warriors*, female prostitutes (or transvestites, according to different localisations), punks with mohawks and leather jackets, etc., led by a high-society, white-collar kingpin who lives in a lavish mansion.

General planner Akira Nishitani remarked on the “American-ness” of *Final Fight* in a 1992 interview:

Since the beginning, [*Final Fight*] was intended for America. Since fighting games were selling well in America, we designed it, following all the conditions to make a hit. Like, interrupting the flow of the game as least as possible, putting a map on the screen so you can understand where you are or how far you have to go [...]

In the beginning, we began working on *Final Fight* as a sequel to *Street Fighter* but at that time *Double Dragon* was very popular, so we shifted to a game of that type.

So we made *Final Fight* expressly for America, but when I went there for a business trip, they told me “A one-on-one fighting game in the vein of *Street Fighter* would have sold better.” I was like, hey, really? (*Gamest* 1992, p.74)

Final Fight is famously laden with many references to contemporary mainstream (i.e. mostly American) pop culture, mostly in the names and appearance of NPCs (e.g. Poison, Axl, Rose, Sid, Sodom, Graham Oliver, etc.) inspired by the hard rock scene of those years.⁴⁰ The presence of tributes to *Streets of Fire* (beginning with the name Cody for a playable character, purportedly inspired by Michael Paré’s character in the film) has attained the status of an Internet factoid, with numerous online repetitions of this theory. This issue is far from definitive. Asked about this detail, Nishitani replied that the developing team did not know about *Streets of Fire* before or during the development of *Final Fight* (*Retro Gamer* Staff 2007, p.52). However, Akira Yasuda (1964-, a.k.a. Akiman), who is credited as the game’s planner along with Nishitani, avowed cinematic inspirations in two tweets on March 9, 2011:

The film called *Street Fighter* [Japanese title of *Hard Times*], where Charles Bronson stars alongside James Coburn, is extremely good, and such things as the fight on the wharf, if I remember well, were a reference for the Ken stage [in *Street Fighter II*]⁴¹

Hard Times was directed by Walter Hill; and besides that he also made a movie called *Streets of Fire*. That one was a source of inspiration for *Final Fight*, as for the name of the protagonist. (Yasuda 2011)⁴²

Whether Nishitani and Yasuda’s statements are true, what is relevant is *Final Fight*’s participation in the same fictional tradition as *The Warriors* and *Double Dragon*. This relation played and still plays a crucial role in the appreciation and success of this game both in Japan and elsewhere. Whether philologically sustained or not, its indebtedness to the imaginary of *Streets of Fire* appears plausible to the gaming community.

The trope of digital vigilantism finds one of its highest points in the characterisation of a playable individual in *Final Fight*: Mike Haggar. Haggar, who later became a recurring character in the Capcom fictional universe, is an unusually strong,

muscular, middle-aged man. He is a former professional wrestler, the father of Jessica (the game's kidnapped young woman), and no less than the mayor of Metro City. He reportedly sought this (according to a number of paratextual sources) to "revive Metro City, which was in the grasp of the Mad Gear, a violent gang" (Japanese cabinet flyer; *Gamest* 1992, p.8). Although at the top of the city's political and military system, Hagggar obeys the kidnappers' instructions to not call the police. He decides, instead, to take to the streets and beat up every thug he meets on his way, assisted by two trusted young men (Cody and Guy, the other two playable characters). It is hard to imagine a more blatant abdication of the forces that are supposed to discipline the public sphere to the logic of private justice, a circumstance undoubtedly rendered lighter by the irony of Hagggar's unlikely attire.

A stereotyped image of New York City evidently inspired *Final Fight's* Metro City. Both cities are on the Atlantic coast, and the Statue of Liberty can be seen in the background of the "Bay Area" stage.⁴³ In its more synthetic representation, the topology of *Final Fight* is iconically rendered with a map of the city, divided in zones that are stereotyped according to the generic canon of the beat 'em up and cannot be manipulated by the player's agency (they only change colour from red to green when completed). In this respect, *Final Fight's* map represents a negative, passive counterpart to the creative urban agency achieved that same year by *SimCity* (Maxis 1989). Ironically, the "Detroit, 1972" scenario in the original *SimCity* confronts the player with issues shared by many beat 'em ups of the same years (rampant crime and city degradation) but proposes a completely different gaming solution.

In conclusion, the storyline, characters, setting, production and reception history of *Final Fight* make it the most exemplary instance of the nexus between beat 'em up gameplay and the representational paradigms of American street violence in the 1970s and 1980s.

Conclusions

The video game industry of the 1980s can be described, to borrow Pascale Casanova's formulas (2004) from the literary field, as a "deprived" (*démuni*) or "dominated" (*dominé*) space in the field of cultural production. In other words, the game industry was a portion of the field that lacked the symbolic resources and economic power necessary to fully autonomise itself in relation to other contiguous fields. In particular, the field of film production exerted a strong influence on the game industry. Game designers and publishers perceived the need to appropriate part of film industry's symbolic capital through processes of translation and remediation that, at least in this early phase, were completely mono-directional (from film to video game).⁴⁴

In the case of the beat 'em up genre, other formal and structural stakes were at play. In designers' eyes, they emerged, in Bourdieu's terms, as a "problematic" needing a solution: how to narratively and ideologically justify the iteration of acts of physical violence that were no longer discrete and sport-like but massive and simultaneous (and, therefore, more ethically sensitive). I have shown that, as in the martial-arts-themed, one-on-one fighting game genre, the remediation of a thematic canon articulated within a tradition of cinematic texts became the means to solve this

problematic. Leaving aside any judgement (if meaningful at all) on the progressive or reactionary nature of the value systems expressed in games such as *Final Fight*, we can certainly stress the crucial role played by filmic elements in the aesthetic and moral legitimisation of such games.

The mainstream of the beat 'em up genre evolved in Japan (possibly the most vital advanced video game industry in the world after the 1983 North American crash) from the mid-1980s onwards. The genre systematically incorporated and reproduced the textual canon of vigilantism and street violence expressed in American films such as *The Warriors*, and used this canon as the basis for its ideological and aesthetic justification. This process produced games such as *Renegade*, *Double Dragon*, and *Final Fight*, which most successfully reveal the nexus between the beat 'em up gameplay and the street violence discourses.

From a local standpoint, the medium of the video game represented, in a particular phase of the Japanese cultural industry, a successful way of appropriating, through remediation, the specific symbolic capital incorporated in foreign (American) cultural products (films). The nature of video games as a medium prompted a re-negotiation of the ideological systems inscribed within the games designed on this basis, transferring the focus of agency into players' hands. They provided players all over the world with the possibility to play the international movies.

In a larger perspective, these video games became commercially successful at a global level, despite dissonance with contemporary representations of everyday Japanese life (no less in their settings than in their focus on criminal issues completely unrelated to Japanese society) and the lack of the aura of authenticity marking similar games hypothetically produced in the United States. Games such as *Double Dragon* and *Final Fight* present an especially significant case in the processes of the local appropriation and dispersion of imaginaries and immaterial products within a US-centred global cultural field. In many respects, these games' genesis and reception stand among the most striking episodes in the globalisation of cultural flows, which came to a more mature phase by the end of the century.

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Notes

- ¹ In Japan, this genre is generally considered a subgenre of the *beruto sukurōru akushon gēmu* (belt-scrolling action game). For convenience, I consistently use the term “beat ’em up” to refer to this genre throughout this paper. Like all genre categories, the category of “beat ’em up” is the result of historical processes of construction and pertinentisation articulated in the discourses on video games, in which the specialised press and industrial parlance played an important role in the early stages. Accordingly, this category has no necessary ontological value, and in this paper, I use it in its empirically verifiable circulation as a discursive object, leaving further problematisation for other occasions. Therefore, I do not analyse here its relationship with other categories, such as the similar “hack and slash” or “slash ’em up” genre.
- ² Among numerous accolades, *Final Fight* was awarded the 1990 Grand Prize from *Gamest* (1986-1999), one of the most authoritative Japanese magazines specialising in the arcade industry.
- ³ Throughout this paper, the most basic definition of “remediation” is used: “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, p.45).
- ⁴ The *America’s Army* franchise (United States Army 2002-) is one of the most studied games in this respect. On *America’s Army* and other games connected to what some scholars have called the “military-entertainment complex,” see, for instance, Lowood (2008).
- ⁵ Such a description does not clearly fit the conduct of “avant-garde” or “political” game designers, or video game artists. Their positions within what we could call the “market of videoludic symbolic goods” (a term that is merely a Bourdieuan extrapolation), which is not considered in this paper, can be seen as homologous to those agents in the literary field who share the rejection of the commercial logic of the “market” and work for the appropriation of other forms of capital (Bourdieu 1996, p.217-219).
- ⁶ For an analytical definition of “clone,” see Maietti (2004, p.163-164).

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- ⁷ Unless otherwise specified, I refer to transcripts from the Japanese arcade versions of the games. All translations from Japanese, as in this case, are my own.
- ⁸ The *Dirty Harry* franchise consists of five feature-length films, the last of which was released in 1988. *Death Wish* had four sequels, the last released in 1994.
- ⁹ In the second case, Gustafson (2007) summarises the characteristics of this genre: “A vigilante cop film hero disregards the procedural safeguards of the law and circumvents the criminal justice system in order to catch or otherwise incapacitate street criminals, often by employing violence” (p.162).
- ¹⁰ A fact also well described by Cyrus, the visionary leader of the federated gangs in *The Warriors*: “Now here’s the sum total. One gang could run this city. One gang! Nothing would move, without us allowing it to happen. We could tax the crime syndicates, the police, *because we got the streets* suckers! Can you dig it?” (emphasis added).
- ¹¹ A more detailed genealogy of the “gang film” is outlined in Sobchack (1982).
- ¹² See also Pike (1998, p.13-14).
- ¹³ The *Warriors* is based on Sol Yurick’s novel of the same name, originally published in 1965. As is well known, inspiration for the novel came from Xenophon’s *Anabasis* (Yurick 2003, p.ix-x). See also Roth (1990) for an interpretation of the symbolic meanings of the film, in which the concepts of play and personality development are also involved.
- ¹⁴ Consider, for instance, that *Dallos (Darosu)*, widely regarded as the first Original Video Animation (OVA) in history, was released in December 1983.
- ¹⁵ The Japanese release dates were cross-checked on the *Internet Movie Database* and the *Kinema Junpō* online database.
- ¹⁶ The film earned a little more than ¥100 million (Jiji Tsūshinsha 1980, p.119). As explained in Nornes and Gerow (2009, p.169), “up until 1999, distributors only publicized distribution income (*haishū*), not box office gross, thus keeping the theater take secret. (Since *haishū* tends to be 40-60% of total box office, you can still estimate the total if you know the *haishū* figure).”
- ¹⁷ Accordingly, the claim reported in the Japanese promotional campaign that the film was a “national hit” and “quickly climbed the charts” in the United States (e.g. *Yomiuri shinbun*, evening edition, July 20, 1984) was certainly an exaggeration.
- ¹⁸ *Streets of Fire* earned approximately ¥340 million in distribution income in 1984 (Jiji Tsūshinsha 1985, p.128) and ended among the top 30 foreign movies of that year. For an idea of the market’s size, consider that the first film on that same chart was *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Steven Spielberg, 1984), with revenue of ¥3.26 billion (ibid.).

- ¹⁹ It also made it on the staff's annual list of the top 10 foreign films (Jiji Tsūshinsha 1985, p.212).
- ²⁰ For instance, in an opening scene of the first episode of *Megazone 23* (released on March 9, 1985), a science fiction OVA series, four characters who live in a simulated 1980s Tokyo (a situation that has drawn parallels with *The Matrix*) go to the movies to see *Streets of Fire*. A poster of the film is reproduced at the entrance of the theatre. The song at the end of *Streets of Fire* ("Tonight Is What It Means to Be Young," a title translated as "Kon'ya wa seishun" in Japan) was covered with Japanese lyrics and the title of "Kon'ya wa enjeru" (Tonight There Will Be an Angel). This version was featured as the opening song of *Yanusu no kagami* (The Mirror of Janus), a TV *dorama* based on a manga with the same name, which was broadcast by Fuji TV between December 4, 1985, and April 16, 1986 (18 episodes). The first episode (released on February 25, 1987) of *Bubblegum Crisis*, a science fiction OVA series, features a concert scene that references the first scene of Hill's movie. The song performed by a female protagonist, dressed very similarly to *Streets of Fire*'s Ellen Aim, is called "Kon'ya wa harikēn" (Tonight There Will Be a Hurricane), which, despite its different melody and lyrics, is an allusion to "Kon'ya wa seishun." Interestingly, as noted by Phillips (1994), *Streets of Fire* serves as the hypotext for scenes in *Qi pi lang* (Seven Wolves), a 1989 Taiwanese movie directed by Zhu Yanping (a.k.a. Kevin Chu Yen-ping).
- ²¹ For instance, *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) was the fifth most lucrative foreign film in 1980, with ¥1.1 billion (Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan, Inc. 2015).
- ²² In *Spartan X*, known in European and North American markets as *Kung-Fu Master*, the player controls a martial artist who kicks and punches through legions of enemies on the five floors of a palace to rescue his kidnapped girlfriend. The game is officially (and very loosely) based on *Wheels on Meals* (Sammo Hung, 1984) starring Jackie Chan, which was released in Japan under the title of *Spartan X*. The absence of holds or special moves and the frenetic rate of hits per second make *Spartan X* more similar to a generic game of reflexes. The same can be said of *Shao-Lin's Road* (also known as *Kicker*, Konami 1985), another early beat 'em up. *Kuri Kinton* (Taito 1988) can be considered a later, revamped instantiation of this gameplay.
- ²³ In this action game with beat 'em up elements, the player controls a Chinese martial artist engaged in simultaneous fights with other practitioners and various monsters.
- ²⁴ This narrative element can be inferred from the introductory screens and the original Japanese flyer, reproduced, for instance, in Gorges (2009, p.36).
- ²⁵ A survey of the meanings and the history of this word is available *sub voce* in the *Nihongo zokugo jisho* (Dictionary of Japanese Slang). A strong thematisation of this juvenile type can be found in *Tsuppari wōzu* (Tsuppari Wars), an action/fighting game released by Sammy for the Famicom in 1991.

- 26 Erbe (2003) provides an overview of the evolution of Japanese discourses from the tropes of “children as dangerous” to those of “children in danger.”
- 27 *Bōsōzoku*, too, became a recurring trope in alarmist Japanese discourses and representations of youth subcultures in the 1970s and 1980s.
- 28 Gorges (2012, p.104, 108) reports that Technōs sold approximately 5,500 original boards in Japan, while the Famicom port of the game sold around 400,000 units. The game spawned many spinoffs, inaugurating the popular Kunio-kun franchise.
- 29 This was a mainstream trend. There were also a few notable exceptions, such as *Knuckle Joe* (Seibu Kaihatsu 1985), an action game set in a post-apocalyptic future indebted to *Mad Max* and *Fist of the North Star*. It features rudimentary melee fighting sessions, some in dilapidated urban settings. Other exceptions were the Old Wild West-themed *Western Express* (a.k.a. *Express Raider*, Data East), which features side-scrolling fighting sessions on the top of moving trains, and the robot-themed *Get Star* (known as *Guardian* outside Japan, Toaplan), both released before *Kunio-kun* in 1986. Military settings coupled with beat 'em up elements can be found in *Datsugoku* (a.k.a. *P.O.W. Prisoners of War*, SNK 1988) and *Ikari III: The Rescue* (SNK 1989). None of these games, however, enjoyed success or resonated as well in the mainstream evolution of the genre as *Kunio-kun/Renegade*, *Double Dragon*, and *Final Fight*.
- 30 However, according to Kishimoto, *Kunio-kun* was an exception to the rule as it was based on his personal experiences as a rebellious teenager (Gorges 2012, p.55).
- 31 The laserdisc game itself can be considered, both thematically and technologically, a manifestation of the video game's position as a medium dominated by film in those years. Perhaps not coincidentally, this genre disappeared from the arcades when the medium reached a sufficient degree of aesthetic and technological autonomy.
- 32 Reproduced in Gorges (2009, p.36). This formula was used to advertise the subsequent chapters of the saga as well.
- 33 This is the case of the Sega Master System port, in which the story is set in a post-atomic New York City (Marakasu Jōji Ueno 1988, p.125).
- 34 Gorges (2012, p.132) reports that 40,000 original boards were sold worldwide, including 26,000 in the United States alone. The NES and Sega Master System ports were also highly successful. An indirect measure of the success of *Double Dragon* in US arcades is the diffusion of the original board among collectors registered with the Video Arcade Preservation Society: on a scale of 1 to 100, with 100 representing the widest diffusion, *Double Dragon* scored 86 as of June 2015, *Renegade* 15, *Avengers* 5, *Vigilante* 27, *Bad Dudes vs. Dragonninja* 39, *Ninja Gaiden* 35, *Tough Turf 2*, *Double Dragon II* 41, *Crime Fighters* 29, *Gang Wars* 10, *DownTown* 4, *DJ Boy* 11, and *Final Fight* 73 (*The International Arcade Museum* 2015).

- ³⁵ Here, as in the following cases, I refer to the Japanese release, unless otherwise stated. Release dates were cross-checked in the *Gaming History* and *The International Arcade Museum* databases.
- ³⁶ All the in-game text is also in English in the Japanese version of the game.
- ³⁷ The NES version was developed simultaneously. The game was originally conceived for the North American market.
- ³⁸ Despite the similarity of their names, this game is not connected to *Tuff Turf* (Fritz Kiersch, 1985), a film on juvenile gangs featuring James Spader and Robert Downey Jr.
- ³⁹ According to official data provided by Capcom, the 10 titles of the *Final Fight* franchise had sold 3.2 million units worldwide in the home market, as of March 2015. Of these, the 1990 Super NES port sold 1.48 million units (Capcom IR 2015).
- ⁴⁰ According to Nishitani, this choice is attributed to a “woman co-worker” (*Retro Gamer* Staff 2007, p.52).
- ⁴¹ *Hard Times* (1975), Walter Hill’s directorial debut, was released in Japan on October 25, 1975. The film stars Charles Bronson as a street boxer who travels the United States during the Great Depression. Significantly, the Japanese title of the film is *Sutorīto faitā* (Street Fighter).
- ⁴² Contrary to widespread belief, Yoshiki Okamoto, producer of *Final Fight*, was not directly involved in the design of the game.
- ⁴³ The backgrounds of the arcade version can be seen online on *VGMaps.com: The Video Game Atlas*.
- ⁴⁴ Historically, with the exception of Japanese productions and anime, the first feature film based on a video game was *Super Mario Bros.* (Rocky Morton and Annabel Jankel, 1993), which is mostly remembered as a commercial and critical failure. The movie was followed only one year later by a no less disastrous adaptation of *Double Dragon* (James Yukich, 1994).
- ⁴⁵ North American titles are given first.