

# Studio Ghibli's Video Game Play: The Media Convergence of Ni no Kuni

James Fleury

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The multiplatform *Ni no Kuni* (Bandai Namco, 2010/2013) represents anime studio Studio Ghibli's first dedicated video game project.<sup>1</sup> Although Japanese video game company Level-5 developed *Ni no Kuni*, Ghibli contributed to the story and was responsible for its visual design. The game demonstrates not only Ghibli's distinct visual style, but it also shares with the studio's films similar themes (loss of innocence, youth empowerment, the relationship between nature and technology) and storytelling characteristics (a young hero and a synthesis of Eastern and Western elements). Beyond its aesthetic and narrative contributions, Studio Ghibli also provided Level-5 a means of differentiating itself within the contemporary Japanese video game industry, as several companies attempt to expand into the West in response to shifts in the domestic market. Likewise, Ghibli has been adjusting to its own shifts, including co-founder Hayao Miyazaki's retirement from feature films and the studio's subsequent hiatus on film productions.<sup>2</sup> As such, *Ni no Kuni* represents a particularly significant example of convergence between the anime and video industries, as it suggests paths for both Studio Ghibli and Level-5, as they each look to diversify into new markets and revenue streams.



IMAGE 1 (Caption: Cover for the PlayStation 3 edition.)

## METHODOLOGY

As a study of convergence between Studio Ghibli and Level-5, this essay looks at overlapping trends between the anime and video game industries in terms of consolidation, diversification, and global expansion. Thus, it explores the concept of media convergence from a Japanese perspective, or what Marc Steinberg has called the Japanese "media mix."<sup>3</sup> Although *Ni no Kuni's* media mix has yet to expand beyond video games (a sequel was announced in 2015 for Sony's PlayStation 4)<sup>4</sup> and a modest selection of merchandise (including plush toys and a soundtrack album), the franchise nonetheless permits an analysis of not just how Studio Ghibli is working in the video game space as it faces an uncertain future but also how Level-5 and the game's publisher Bandai Namco are adjusting to their own changes in the game business. By looking at Studio Ghibli's work with Level-5 and the larger Japanese video game industry, I am, like Ian Condry, considering media convergent connections beyond anime studios themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Toward a media convergence analysis, I employ methods of media industries studies. This essay puts in dialogue a comparative textual analysis of *Ni no Kuni* and Studio Ghibli film projects with media industry trade and popular press articles, and promotional materials, especially those containing interviews with creative and corporate personnel associated with the game's production. With this evidence, I first contextualize *Ni no Kuni* within the larger history of anime and video game convergence. Second, I explain the complementary advantages that led to and resulted from the partnership between Studio Ghibli and Level-5 in their work on *Ni no Kuni*. I argue that the game, for both Ghibli and Level-5, serves as a way of adjusting to changes within the global entertainment industry in general and the Japanese content industries in particular.<sup>6</sup> Third, I explore how the game shares visual and thematic similarities with other Studio Ghibli productions. Finally, I hypothesize about what the game suggests in terms of Ghibli's future, as *Ni no Kuni* provides context for how the studio is navigating its own corporate shifts as well as broader transmedia-related content industrial shifts.

### CONTEXTUALIZING ANIME AND VIDEO GAME CONVERGENCE

Studio Ghibli and Level-5's collaboration on *Ni no Kuni* is situated within the history of video games' convergence with other media forms, particularly film and animation. As Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska remind us, "The interface between cinema and games extends well beyond the direct spin-off or industrial convergence ... Many games draw on cinematic devices, tropes and associations in a more diffuse manner."<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that the industrial, aesthetic and narrative overlaps between video games and other media are the same across national entertainment industries, as Hollywood media convergence significantly differs from Japanese media mix. Mia Consalvo explains that Hollywood has tended to follow a "center-periphery" model of convergence whereby a single media platform dominates the narrative, such as the films within the *Star Wars* franchise.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Japanese media companies with a background in toys and video games – what Steinberg calls "media mix conglomerates" – tend to take a more platform-agnostic approach focused on characters and storyworlds.<sup>9</sup>

The persistence of Japanese media mix conglomerates, such as Bandai Namco, stands in contrast to the history of failed convergence, or divergence, between film and video games in Hollywood. At different times, American film studios have attempted to work in the video game industry, with varying degrees of success. Warner Bros., for example, acquired video game company Atari in 1976, leading other studios to enter the video game market until the game industry crash of 1983 resulted in Warner's 1984 divestment of Atari and other studios' departures from the business. Studios once again took an interest in video games in the 1990s due to technological advancements that helped close the visual gap between film and games. However, Randy Nichols explains that by 2000, "many companies including Fox and DreamWorks had all but abandoned their game units, preferring instead to license their content and allow the video game industry to risk the high development costs."<sup>10</sup> Today, Warner Bros., through its Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment division, is the only studio to maintain an interest in traditional, console-based video game development and publishing.<sup>11</sup> Studio Ghibli's experience in the video game industry has more in common with Hollywood divergence than with the convergence of Japanese content companies.

*Ni no Kuni*, in fact, is a major foray into the video game space for Studio Ghibli, after a series of mixed experiences. First, the 1983 laserdisc-based arcade game *Cliff Hanger* (Stern Electronics, 1983) featured redubbed and reedited animated sequences from two *Lupin III* anime films, including the Miyazaki-directed *The Castle of Cagliostro* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1979). Second, multiple video games were released in 1984 based on Miyazaki's film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1984). John Szczepaniak describes these games as "shmups (shooting games) where the goal is to gun down and kill Ohmu - which obviously goes against the spirit of the *Nausicaä* manga and films."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Luke Plunkett of gaming blog *Kotaku* writes, "It's no wonder by the mid-80s [Miyazaki had] had his fill of the medium, and refused any more video game adaptations of his films, a mandate that remains today."<sup>13</sup> Third, a more positive experience occurred with *Magic Pengel: The Quest for Color* (Agetec, 2003), a Sony PlayStation 2 game made without the involvement of Miyazaki but one on which Studio Ghibli animator Yoshiharu Sato served as artistic director. Ghibli producer Toshio Suzuki has admitted that, in the time since the *Nausicaä* games, several video game companies have approached the studio to partner on a project.<sup>14</sup> While Miyazaki did not work on *Ni no Kuni*, Hino describes it as "the first game that Studio Ghibli had fully participated in for animation creation."<sup>15</sup> Given the studio's need to diversify in light of its cinematic hiatus, its movement into games is not entirely surprising. Despite Miyazaki's aversion to video games, *Ni no Kuni* shares common elements with his and other Ghibli films, including themes and animation style.

### STUDIO GHIBLI AND LEVEL-5'S PARTNERSHIP

Collaborating on the game was mutually advantageous for both Level-5 and Studio Ghibli. Hino has said that the game was intended to celebrate Level-5's tenth anniversary, and, as part of this celebration, he met with Suzuki about the studio contributing animation to what would become *Ni no Kuni*. Ghibli's decision to collaborate with Level-5 came at an opportune time, as the studio had just finished work on *Ponyo* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2009). Musician Naoya Fujimaki, who had arranged the meeting, told Japanese gaming magazine *Famitsu*, "The entirety of Ghibli was free of work at just that moment ... Miyazaki may say that he hates games, but being a businessman, Suzuki isn't going to just let his staff play around all day."<sup>16</sup> Despite the studio's decision to finally work on a video game, it is almost certain that its executives would not have been interested in a game based on a film. Even so, Hino has said that the idea to create an original concept was a request made on the part of Level-5, not Studio Ghibli: "There were no plans to create a game out of Studio Ghibli's films. Rather, we requested that they create the animations for a project based on our ideas, which, in retrospect, was even better than turning an existing property into a game."<sup>17</sup> While Hino's statement makes sense (as both Level-5 and Ghibli have tended to focus on original work), Studio Ghibli still provided Level-5 the benefits of working with an intellectual property licensor.<sup>18</sup>

Although *Ni no Kuni* is not a licensed product, as it is not based on a preexisting property, I argue that Level-5's partnering with Studio Ghibli was still intended to mitigate risk. In particular, Ghibli, by contributing its distinct visuals and storytelling, helped Level-5 and Bandai Namco combat the volatility of the contemporary Japanese video game market, especially given Level-5's tendency to focus on original games. As Nichols argues, "[D]evelopers have had an increasingly difficult time getting original games into the market because licensed properties and franchise games are seen as less risky."<sup>19</sup> He also adds, "Having a marketable name - either a game creator, development team or even publisher - can make the difference in a game's (commercial) success."<sup>20</sup> As such, collaborating with Ghibli allowed Level-5 to leverage a familiar visual design from a globally recognized anime studio while still making an original product.

The production of *Ni no Kuni* occurred during a period of decline in the Japanese video game industry. Numerous press reports and industry stakeholders have argued that the business is struggling compared to its

North American counterpart. For example, Keiji Inafune, creator of the *Mega Man* game franchise (Capcom, 1987- 2012), said at the 2009 Tokyo Game Show, "Japan is over. We're done. Our game industry is finished."<sup>21</sup> A year later, Inafune left media mix conglomerate Capcom after twenty-three years to form his own video game company Compcept. Writing in 2014, Sam Byford of *The Verge* opined, "[T]here's no doubt [Japan] has continued to lose the grip it once held on the gaming world."<sup>22</sup> The argument is that, while Japan is struggling, Western game companies – such as Activision with *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003-Present) and Ubisoft with *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007-Present) – are dominating on a global level.

There are several reasons for Japan's struggles. First, escalating development costs have meant more iteration than innovation, leading to less diversity in terms of gameplay styles and stories.<sup>23</sup> Second, the Japanese gaming audience is said to be shrinking due to the country's aging population. Because of this, Consalvo argues that Japanese game companies need to pursue a media mix strategy, as "the possibilities of convergence help to shore up a games market that has started to contract due to the shifting demographics of Japanese society."<sup>24</sup> Third, home video game console sales are faring worse compared to the mobile market. *US Gamer's* Jeremy Parish argues, "Besides the essential need for games that can be played in a crowded commuter train, the reasons behind the growth of mobile games in Japan [are not] terribly different from the format's growing ubiquity in the West. Mobiles games are inexpensive, and they run on devices everyone already owns and uses."<sup>25</sup> Fourth, like Studio Ghibli's loss of Hayao Miyazaki, several video game auteurs, such as Inafune, are leaving the media mix conglomerates that own the gaming franchises they have created. As *Wired's* Chris Kohler proclaimed in 2015, "The era of the Legendary Game Designer producing massive triple-A games at Japanese studios is officially over." These auteurs are going independent, he claims, because the Japanese video game industry has become too risk-averse.<sup>26</sup>

It is not just the Japanese game market that is having trouble. In reference to the global video game industry, Nichols writes, "Rising production costs, as well as marketing costs, have consolidated power in the hands of a few large software publishers, forcing smaller companies – or developers – to fall into line."<sup>27</sup> He adds that several acquisitions and mergers occurred between 2005 and 2007, including the 2005 merger of Bandai and Namco.<sup>28</sup> In addition to entering the mobile market in 2007, Bandai Namco has implemented other strategies to succeed within Japan's volatile video game industry.

Bandai Namco's strategies are evident in the production and distribution of *Ni no Kuni*. Although Nichols argues that "the transnational nature of the video game industry cannot be stressed strongly enough,"<sup>29</sup> Consalvo emphasizes that Western and Japanese games have had difficulties selling in each other's markets.<sup>30</sup> She theorizes that this transnational imperative adds "another layer or level to convergence" that goes beyond story, character, and world expansion across media platforms and involves "that process working across regions and markets as well, carefully adapted not only for a technical platform, but for particular communities or nation states."<sup>31</sup> As part of this broader convergence, Japanese media mix conglomerates have worked to Westernize video games while retaining a distinctly Japanese appeal.

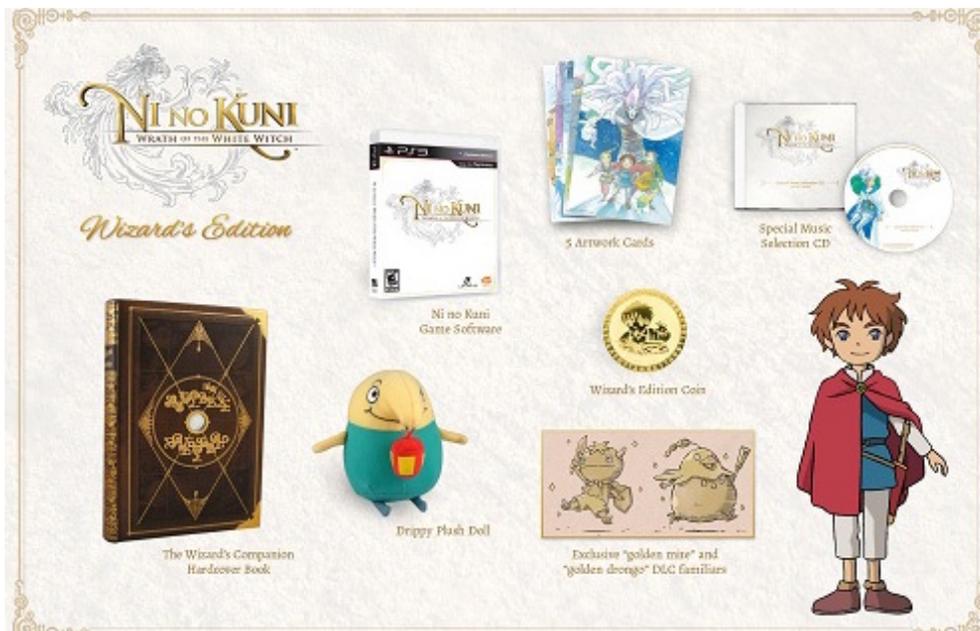
Bandai Namco and Level-5 have both established North American branches, as the production of and audience for content have gone global. In fact, Level-5's Akihiro Hino has explained that during development, "We think about the Japanese market first. However, in recent years, almost 100% of our titles are sold in North America and Europe."<sup>32</sup> This statement marks a shift from what Ian Condry observed during his anthropological study of anime-related sites of production conducted during the mid-2000s. He found that "anime creators talk little, if at all, about overseas audiences. They rarely talk about Japanese audiences, either. In general, I found that the professionals in the room viewed *themselves* as the audience that mattered."<sup>33</sup> This distinction might mean that, compared to anime companies, video game industry representatives, or at least those from Level-5, publicly state that the potential audience drives decisions to a greater extent. It also suggests that overseas audiences have become an important demographic.

*Ni no Kuni* and Level-5's collaboration with Studio Ghibli demonstrates this pursuit of a global audience. Moreover, the game helped to further extend Ghibli's influence in the West. As Dani Cavallaro notes, several of Miyazaki's recent works have adapted Western literary sources, which "could be seen as pivotal in the increase of his films' relevance to Western audiences."<sup>34</sup> On a broader level, Cavallaro argues that Ghibli's films

are globally relevant by virtue of the central themes they handle; closely bound with *Western* culture due to the literary and cinematographical sources they draw upon, and to the settings which several of them employ; and distinctively *Japanese* in their use of tradition and lore, their display of an eminently pictographic sensibility, and their original adaptation of *manga* and *anime* aesthetics.<sup>35</sup>

In this way, *Ni no Kuni* benefitted both Level-5 and Studio Ghibli, as it helped expand their market reach to the West.

The path to *Ni no Kuni's* Western release was not without challenges. The original version of *Ni no Kuni*, subtitled *Dominion of the Dark Djinn*, debuted in Japan for the Nintendo DS handheld in 2010, but it has not been released outside the country. Reportedly, this portable edition was never localized because it came packaged with a printed book, titled *The Wizard's Companion*, that players need to continually consult throughout the game's story.<sup>36</sup> While the DS *Ni no Kuni* remained a Japanese exclusive, the version for the Sony PlayStation 3 (PS3), released in Japan in 2011 and subtitled *Wrath of the White Witch*, did come to the West in 2013, with a digital form of *The Wizard's Companion* included in the game instead of as a packaged accessory (allowing for a swifter localization process).<sup>37</sup> Traditionally, Japanese-developed games have been released first in Japan;<sup>38</sup> this is especially true for portable games, including the DS *Ni no Kuni*, as it is the dominant handheld market.<sup>39</sup>



**IMAGE 2 (Caption: A special, limited "Wizard's Edition" of the game included a printed copy of The Wizard's Companion.)**

After both the DS and PS3 versions arrived in Japan, the challenge with bringing the latter to the West rested with the localization. Compared to the 1980s and 1990s – when poor translations resulted in dialogue such as "All your base are belong to us" from the European version of *Zero Wing* (Sega, 1989) – Japanese game companies today "are paying more attention to how games are localized for overseas markets, going beyond facile translations to a more in-depth recasting of games for different markets."<sup>40</sup> The localization process for *Ni no Kuni* was especially difficult due to the game's immense amount of spoken and written text, including *The Wizard's Companion*. Hino admits,

*Ni no Kuni* was a massive localization challenge. On top of the large amount of text, approximately a million Japanese characters, and voice overs [sic], we had the 352 page Wizard's Companion to translate and lay out for both digital inclusion within the game and for physical printing. There are many puzzles and other interactions between the Wizard's Companion and the game itself, which required a lot thought put into them in each language, such as the creation of the Nazcaän alphabet.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to the textual challenges, the game's animation also delayed the Western release. Hino says, "[M]any of the anime scenes had to be redrawn to fix language and setting issues. Even the motions had to be tweaked, from retiming the comedy sketch scenes for maximum comic effect, down to minor motion capture changes like making Oliver (the protagonist) bow in a Western fashion"<sup>42</sup> Due to these changes, it is no surprise that the game's Western localization took nearly two years.

Despite the challenges of localization, Hino asserts that *Ni no Kuni* retains a hybrid Japanese and Western style. For instance, he explains, "Some characters were given their own characterizations and dialect to recreate their personality in the target language, so I believe that the localization provides players with an experience as close as possible to the feel of the original Japanese version."<sup>43</sup> In terms of its gameplay the game also is distinctly Japanese but with a Western appeal.

*Ni no Kuni* follows the conventions of the Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG) genre, which encompasses character-based storytelling and complex battle systems. As Kohler defines the genre as it was in the 1980s and 1990s, "The stereotypical Japanese RPG was ... one in which a party of plucky young kids would leave their tiny village and go see the world, hacking away at little bunny rabbits in the fields around their hometown, then gaining enough experience to take down massive dragons and save the Earth from doom."<sup>44</sup> By the time of *Ni no Kuni*'s development, JRPGs had fallen out of favor with gamers outside of Japan, as first-person shooters such as *Call of Duty* and action games like *Assassin's Creed* have become popular. For this reason, representatives of Level-5 and Bandai Namco emphasized in interviews that *Ni no Kuni* drew from, but was not limited to, JRPG conventions. Speaking with *GamesIndustry.biz*, Lee Kirton, the UK marketing and public relations director of Bandai Namco, asserts, "[Y]ou're always going to get a gamer that just wants to shoot things, and many that want to play action adventures. *Ni no Kuni* (putting the name and studio aside) is actually a very Western RPG action-adventure which has had some amazing localization."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, in reference to the game, Hino argues, "It's very Japanese and that's what we're keeping - but in terms of the game system, it doesn't necessarily follow the formula of past JRPGs. In that sense, it keeps a Japanese feel but it's still a new type of RPG - or a new type of game."<sup>46</sup> Thus, as part of the game's cross-cultural appeal, it follows a hybridized model of gameplay.



**IMAGE 3 (Caption: An example of the game's hybridized gameplay.)**

### **STUDIO GHIBLI'S INFLUENCE ON *NI NO KUNI***

For Studio Ghibli, working on a product with cross-cultural appeal came as Miyazaki's retirement and a subsequent hiatus from active film production had cast a shadow on the studio's future. Although Miyazaki did not work on *Ni no Kuni*, he is the creator with which the studio is primarily associated, a perception that Condry calls "both a blessing and a curse."<sup>47</sup> Miyazaki himself, in the documentary *Kingdom of Dreams and Madness* (Mami Sunada, 2013), admits about Studio Ghibli, "The future is clear. It's going to fall apart." While anime might be popular throughout parts of the world, Condry reminds us, "[C]ultural success and economic success mean different things."<sup>48</sup> Because of this economic challenge, many studios, as part of media mix conglomerates, pursue character-based merchandising, which Steinberg claims to be "the bread and butter" of the anime industry.<sup>49</sup> Condry claims, however, that, despite "efforts to keep merchandising part of the picture, Studio Ghibli does poorly in the emerging communication networks that operate across media."<sup>50</sup> The studio's collaboration with Level-5 on *Ni no Kuni* was likely intended to diversify into a new medium and revenue stream in which it could pursue new storytelling and merchandising opportunities.

Studio Ghibli served in several roles on *Ni no Kuni*. Yoshiyuki Momose acted as the project's Director of Animation for Ghibli, which involved designing characters, storyboarding, animating cut-scenes, directing motion capture actors, and staging.<sup>51</sup> He explains that, with *Ni no Kuni*, "[W]e used the same approach we take on our animated films."<sup>52</sup> Although Ghibli's contributions to the game were primarily in terms of its visuals, Hino admits that the studio "did have a lot of input with regards to the storytelling elements."<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Level-5's Tadahiro Masuya reveals that the visual design drove the game design: "Studio Ghibli's beautiful scenery will make people want to explore. We were careful about balancing the size of each map."<sup>54</sup> These statements from Hino and Masuya suggest that Studio Ghibli provided far more than just character designs and animated sequences.

It is easy to see why Ghibli would be interested in partnering with Level-5 on *Ni no Kuni*, as the game shares a number of themes and motifs with its films. In short, the story focuses on a thirteen-year-old boy named Oliver from Motorville, a nostalgic 1950's American town. Following his mother's death, one of Oliver's tears drops onto a doll that his mother had made for him. The doll comes to life and claims to be Drippy, High Lord of the Fairies from a parallel world known as the Another World that has fallen under the dark reign of the wizard Shadar. Drippy explains that each person in Oliver's world has a "soulmate" in the Another World, including his mother, and that Oliver might be able to save his mother if he agrees to enter this world, train as a wizard, and defeat Shadar. At the end of the game, after becoming a *mahō shōnen* and vanquishing Shadar, Oliver returns to his world and finds his mother to be alive once again.

As this brief summary demonstrates, *Ni no Kuni's* plot reads like that of a Studio Ghibli film, particularly in terms of Oliver's characterization. The game is a coming-of-age story for its child protagonist, who suffers the loss of his mother after she had rescued him from drowning. Oliver becomes in danger of drowning after the racecar that he and his friend had built careens into a river. Like other Ghibli protagonists, such as the title character in *Nausicaä* as well as Jiro in *The Wind Rises* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2013), Oliver has an affinity for building machines and is associated with a specific mode of transportation. Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc argue that modes of transportation in Studio Ghibli projects serve "as a metaphor for growing up or showing that sometimes freedom comes at a price."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, this is evident in Oliver's accident with his racecar that leads to his mother's death, and, moreover, the incident occurs near a bridge, a transitional setting that marks Oliver's abrupt loss of innocence.

After this loss, Oliver ventures into a magical world, another common Studio Ghibli motif. Cavallaro argues that, throughout Miyazaki's films, "the encounter with a magical Other (acts) as a metaphor not merely for a flight of fancy but also ... for the imperative to confront maturely and responsibly the full import of such an encounter."<sup>56</sup> In other words, the child's journey through the magical world calls for maturity and growth. In the game, the Another World is a distorted mirroring of Oliver's reality, with characters existing in each and his actions in one world affecting the other. This demonstrates Cavallaro's notion that, in Ghibli films, "[n]o imaginary domain ultimately promises unconditional escape from moral and social obligations."<sup>57</sup> By the end of *Ni no Kuni's* story, as Hino explains, Oliver "matures from a dependent child into an adult who can get by without his mother."<sup>58</sup> This recalls the ending of *Spirited Away* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2001), when Chihiro reunites with her parents after they had been transformed into pigs. Because *Ni no Kuni* demonstrates these thematic similarities, Studio Ghibli's influence on the story is clear.

In addition to providing narrative guidance, Studio Ghibli's main contribution to *Ni no Kuni* was the game's visual design. Although the game employs the same cel-shading technique as Level-5's previous work, Hino says that *Ni no Kuni* is unique because of its "animated film-like world"<sup>59</sup> that allows users to "play an

animated film.<sup>60</sup> This world, Hino argues, derives from Studio Ghibli's work on the game: "There are no direct connections with any Ghibli anime per se, but seeing as we were doing our best to express the feel of the Ghibli world in our game, there may be several scenes or characters that look like ... previous Ghibli works."<sup>61</sup> As Hino's statement suggests, Ghibli anime are strongly associated with their character and world designs.

*Ni no Kuni's* emphasis on its characters and world make the game appropriate for a media mix strategy. Condry argues that anime not based on a manga tend to be built upon "the design of characters, the establishment of dramatic premises that link the characters, and the properties that define the world in which the characters interact."<sup>62</sup> As such, the characters and world, rather than the story, establish the transmedia connection across platforms. As part of this media mix strategy, Studio Ghibli used *Ni no Kuni* to design new characters that could be subsequently merchandised and carried to other media. In a promotional video, the studio's Yoshiyuki Momose enthuses that, with the game, "[W]e made characters that we normally wouldn't create."<sup>63</sup> To be more specific, *Ni no Kuni* not only stars human characters but also the anthropomorphic doll Drippy and a diverse array of Pokémon-like creatures called familiars that populate the Another World's landscape. In terms of world-building, Hino says that Momose emphasized that the overall storyworld of Motorville and the Another World "feel real"<sup>64</sup> by "look[ing] like people inhabited it."<sup>65</sup> To develop these characters and world, *Ni no Kuni* features animated sequences.

Throughout the game, Level-5 works to emulate what Odell and Le Blanc refer to as Studio Ghibli's "house style"<sup>66</sup> and what Ken Motomura, the game's director at Level-5, describes as "Studio Ghibli's signature hand-drawn look."<sup>67</sup> Cavallaro argues that, compared to digital animation techniques, the hand-drawn aesthetic "allows the animator to infuse an element of humanity into the characters."<sup>68</sup> This humanity-infusing approach meant that the animation in *Ni no Kuni* had to be altered to look more like that of an anime and less like that of a video game. With the cut-scenes (short, non-interactive videos that disrupt gameplay), Momose used motion capture to record actors performing as the game's characters. Because motion capture does not resemble the look of an anime, Hino explains that designers at Level-5 "adjusted the (actors') movements in a way that make them a little choppy."<sup>69</sup> The designers worked to emulate Studio Ghibli's style of animation not only in the cut-scenes but also throughout the rest of the game as well.

Achieving a similar animated style throughout the game helps to overcome the disadvantages of relying on cut-scenes to tell a story. In most video games, as King and Kryzwinska note, there is usually "a clearly visible gap between the high quality graphics found in cut-scenes and the lower-quality images that characterize more interactive periods of gameplay."<sup>70</sup> Because *Ni no Kuni's* cut-scenes are, according to Hino, "a selling point," Level-5 attempted "to reproduce the look and feel of those scenes in the real-time graphics so that you would hardly be able to tell the difference between the two."<sup>71</sup> This involved making adjustments to colors, shadows, and movements. Indeed, the game does smoothly transition between the pre-rendered cut-scenes and the real-time, interactive sequences, at least visually. What is jarring is that the characters speak only during cut-scenes and specific moments of gameplay whereas the majority of the real-time sequences feature dialogue in the form of on-screen text. The inconsistent use of spoken versus written dialogue works against Level-5's goal of making the cut-scenes appear indistinguishable from the remainder of the game. Despite Hino's assertion that the animated cut-scenes are the game's main attraction, he reveals, "We tried hard to minimize the amount of time the user would lose control of the character."<sup>72</sup> This underscores that with convergent video games there needs to be an appropriate balance between each medium. In its use of both anime and gaming storytelling devices, *Ni No Kuni* achieves this balance.





**IMAGES 4 AND 5 (Caption: The cut-scenes and the gameplay look similar, but the latter does not include spoken dialogue.)**

Although *Ni no Kuni* might visually resemble an anime, there are nonetheless important distinctions between film and video games. In terms of storytelling, King and Krzywinska write, "The ideal suggested by the game designer Richard Rouse is to achieve a balance between narrative as predetermined and structured into the game and the variable 'player's story' generated in each individual experience."<sup>73</sup> In other words, game creators, especially those working on emphatically convergent projects such as *Ni no Kuni*, need to acknowledge the unique interactive properties of the video game medium. With animation, there are differences between video games and anime as well. Cavallaro describes anime's cinematographic style as taking "a still image and moving the camera from left to right to convey the impression of movement through what is being presented in just a single image."<sup>74</sup> Hino explains that this style meant that Level-5 had to adjust its typical approach: "[W]e tended to move the camera to create the coolest composition possible, or we'd exaggerate character movements for added effect. But they (Ghibli) only move the camera when it's necessary, and instead compose scenes so that the natural movements of the cast are easy on the eye."<sup>75</sup> Even though *Ni no Kuni* emulates the visual style of a Studio Ghibli film, it provides an altogether different narrative experience. As Hino says, *Ni no Kuni*, in contradistinction to a film, provides "the freedom of actively participating in a way that only a game can provide."<sup>76</sup> Ultimately, *Ni no Kuni* fulfills its promise of being a playable anime.

## CONCLUSION

In September 2013, approximately eight months after *Ni no Kuni's* Western release, Hayao Miyazaki announced that he would be retiring. Because of Miyazaki's strong association with the studio, Suzuki stated in August 2014 that Studio Ghibli would be indefinitely halting film production and focusing on its merchandising interests. At the time of Suzuki's statement, there were rumors that Dwango, a Japanese online gaming company, would be purchasing the studio, but this proved false.<sup>77</sup> However, it is not impossible to imagine, following its work on *Ni no Kuni*, that Ghibli will adopt a more media mix-aligned strategy.

Level-5, for its part, has expressed interest in further video game collaborations with Studio Ghibli. Akihiro Hino has said, "I want to adapt their movies into games," particularly *Castle in the Sky* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1986).<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, Hino has also suggested that, depending on sales figures, *Ni no Kuni* could become a franchise: "I get excited just thinking about sequels for the series or creating a movie."<sup>79</sup> Thus, Studio Ghibli's future in anime might emerge from its past in video games.

<sup>1</sup> Two versions of *Ni no Kuni* were released, with *Ni no Kuni: Dominion of the Dark Djinn* (Bandai Namco, 2010) appearing exclusively in Japan for Nintendo DS and *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* (Bandai Namco, 2013) available worldwide for Sony PlayStation 3. Unless otherwise specified, this essay focuses on the PlayStation 3 version.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Debruge, "The Red Turtle' Pulls Studio Ghibli Out of Its Shell," *Variety*, 12 May 2016. Although Studio Ghibli has, as of this writing, not returned to active production, *The Red Turtle* (Michael Dudok de Wit, 2016) represents Studio Ghibli's first external co-production.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 135. Steinberg explains, "Since the 1980s, the term media mix has been the most widely used word to describe the phenomenon of transmedia communication, specifically the development of a particular media franchise across multiple media types, over a period of time. In a word, it is the Japanese term for what is known in North America as media convergence."

<sup>4</sup> Allegra Frank, "Ni No Kuni 2 Is Coming to PlayStation 4," *Polygon*, 5 December 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 113. Condry argues for "a nuanced sense of the broader network of production nodes," or the consideration of an anime's success based on its larger production context.

<sup>6</sup> See Condry, 14. Following Condry, I use the term "content industries" to describe the Japanese entertainment industries.

<sup>7</sup> Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, "Introduction: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces," in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, ed. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Mia Consalvo, "Convergence and Globalization in the Japanese Videogame Industry," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2009), 136.

- <sup>9</sup> Steinberg, 172.
- <sup>10</sup> Randy Nichols, *The Video Game Business* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 119.
- <sup>11</sup> See Cynthia Littleton, "Disney Folds Infinity Console Video Game Business, Takes \$147 Million Charge," *Variety*, 10 May 2016; and Joshua Brustein, "Can Lions Gate Sell More Movie Tickets With Video Games?" *Bloomberg*, 25 February 2016. Aside from Warner Bros., other major film studios have been involved in video games strictly through licensing (such as Disney) or investment in mobile game development (such as Lions Gate).
- <sup>12</sup> John Szczepaniak, "Nausicaä," *Hardcore Gaming 101*, August 2012.
- <sup>13</sup> Luke Plunkett, "Ni no Kuni Isn't Miyazaki/Ghibli's First Video Game," *Kotaku*, November 25, 2011. Also, see Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The Films of Hayao Miyazaki & Isao Takahata* (Harpندن, England: Kamera, 2009), 61. Miyazaki's frustration with the *Nausicaä* games and their alteration to the storyline parallel his tension with the film's international distributors, who also made narrative changes through editing and dubbing. Also, like his order that no video games can adapt his films, Miyazaki demanded that his films not be altered for international release.
- <sup>14</sup> Kevin Gifford, "Studio Ghibli Discusses Ninokuni Project," *1UP*, May 20, 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> Matthew Reynolds, "'Ni no Kuni' Interview: Level-5 on its Studio Ghibli Collaboration," *Digital Spy*, February 1, 2013.
- <sup>16</sup> Andrew Webster, "The Ridiculously Charming World of 'Ni no Kuni,' Studio Ghibli's Gaming Masterpiece," *The Verge*, January 23, 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> Webster, emphasis added.
- <sup>18</sup> Level-5 has not worked on video games based on other media but has tended to focus on original game properties, including the *Professor Layton* series (Level-5 and Nintendo, 2007-Present).
- <sup>19</sup> Nichols, 53.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.
- <sup>21</sup> Sam Byford, "Japan Used to Rule Video Games, so What Happened?" *The Verge*, March 20, 2014.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> Hiroko Tabuchi, "Japanese Playing a New Video Game: Catch-Up," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2010.
- <sup>24</sup> Consalvo, 137.
- <sup>25</sup> Jeremy Parish, "Can Japan's Games Industry Overcome Last Gen's Slump?" *US Gamer*, October 18, 2014.
- <sup>26</sup> Chris Kohler, "The Era of Japan's All-Powerful Videogame Designer Is Over," *Wired*, April 30, 2015.
- <sup>27</sup> Nichols, 52.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. The consolidation that occurred between 2005 and 2007 was partly due to a new generation of video game consoles becoming commercially available, including the Microsoft Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii, and Sony PlayStation 3.
- <sup>29</sup> Nichols, 44.
- <sup>30</sup> Consalvo, 137.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.
- <sup>32</sup> Christian Nutt, "GDC: Level-5 CEO Akihiro Hino's Keys to Success," *Gamasutra*, March 25, 2009.
- <sup>33</sup> Condry, 51, emphasis in original.
- <sup>34</sup> Dani Cavallaro, *The Late Works of Hayao Miyazaki: A Critical Study, 2004-2013* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 8.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 7, emphasis in original.
- <sup>36</sup> Anoop Gantayat, "Level-5 CEO: Ni no Kuni Sequel Possible If PS3 Version Successful Overseas," *Andriasang*, April 18, 2012.
- <sup>37</sup> A special, limited "Wizard's Edition" of the game did, however, include a printed copy of the Wizard's Companion.
- <sup>38</sup> Nichols, 44.
- <sup>39</sup> Byford.
- <sup>40</sup> Tabuchi.
- <sup>41</sup> Colin Campbell, "Ni no Kuni: The Interview," *IGN*, January 8, 2013.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Reynolds.
- <sup>44</sup> Kohler, "Spirited Away Animators Breathe Life Into Astonishing New Game," *Wired*, January 22, 2013.
- <sup>45</sup> Rachel Weber, "Ni no Kuni: Marketing Magic," *GamesIndustry.biz*, January 24, 2013.
- <sup>46</sup> John Bedford, "Level-5 Isn't Trying to 'Protect' the JRPG with the 'Very Japanese' Ni no Kuni," *Eurogamer*, April 17, 2012.
- <sup>47</sup> Condry, 151.

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**Author bio:**

James Fleury is a Ph.D. Candidate in Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA. He currently serves as co-Editor-in-Chief of *Mediascape: UCLA's Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* and contributes to the *Mediascape* blog. His publications have appeared in *Mediascape*, the edited collection *James Bond and Popular Culture: Essays on the Influence of the Fictional Superspy* (McFarland, 2014), and the *South Atlantic Review* (2016). For his doctoral dissertation, he is researching the history of video game development and licensing at Warner Bros.

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