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BOOK REVIEW | 書評

Three Books That Offer Insights into the Dawn and Growth of Japanese TRPGs in the 1980s and 1990s

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Abstract

Few publications systematically document the history of table-talk role-playing games (TRPGs) in Japan. This review examines three books relating to Group SNE's activities to illuminate the emergence of Japanese TRPG practices in the 1980s and their development during the 1990s. It considers Yasuda Hitoshi's autobiographical account, a posthumous collection of writings by Yamamoto Hiroshi, and a volume of interviews with people involved in *Record of Lodoss War*, assessing both their value as historical sources and their limitations. Together, these works offer valuable firsthand perspectives on game design, publishing, and efforts to popularize TRPGs. At the same time, their accounts reflect the experiences and positions of a relatively narrow group of participants. A more comprehensive and multifaceted history of TRPGs in Japan will require the collection and preservation of testimonies from other creative groups, translators, editors, and players.

Keywords: Japan, TRPGs, RPG history, historiography, Group SNE.

要約

日本のテーブルトーク・ロールプレイングゲーム（TRPG）の歴史を体系的に記録した文献は限られている．本稿では，1980 年代の黎明期から 1990 年代の発展期における日本の TRPG 文化を理解するため，グループ SNE の活動に関わる 3 冊を紹介・検討する．安田均の自伝的著作，山本弘の遺稿集，そして『ロードス島戦記』をめぐる関係者へのインタビュー集を取り上げ，それぞれの史料的価値と限界を考察する．これらの文献は，ゲーム制作や出版，普及活動の実態を知るうえで貴重な証言を提供する一方，特定の立場や関係者の経験に偏っている．日本の TRPG 史をより多角的に記録するためには，他の制作集団，翻訳者，編集者，プレイヤーなどの証言を収集・保存する必要がある．

キーワード：日本，TRPG，RPG 史，歴史学，グループ SNE.

1. Introduction

Few reference works document the history of how table-talk role-playing games (TRPGs)[1] spread in Japan. Fujinami and colleagues divide the period up to 2006 into four phases: "Dawn: The Age of Boxed Sets and Imported Games (1984–1988)," "Development: The Flourishing of Domestic Fantasy (1989–1994)," "Transition: Maturity, Decline, and Revival (1995–1999)," and "The Present and the Future: New Fantasy

[1] Translator's note: In Japanese, the T in TRPG commonly stands for table-talk, not tabletop (see below).

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TRPGs." In six pages, they survey game titles, specialist magazines, and the genealogies of game systems and fictional settings (Fujinami, Katsura, and Kodachi 2006). As of 2026, however, the issue of the magazine *RPGamer* containing this account appears difficult to obtain. Apart from information scattered across websites, there are books that address aspects of the history of computer role-playing games (Watanabe 2023) and gamebooks (Yasuda and Okawada 2026). Yet, among the materials the author has been able to examine, accounts centering on TRPGs and featuring testimony from game designers have been limited to people associated with Group SNE (out-of-print books that are difficult to obtain, back issues of magazines, and *dōjinshi* were outside the scope of this survey).[2] Firsthand documentary sources remain insufficient for a comprehensive history. This review introduces three books that shed light on the role played by Group SNE, one of Japan's leading creative collectives, in popularizing TRPGs during the 1980s and 1990s.

The three books were produced in different ways: an autobiography by a participant in the field (Yasuda 2020), a posthumous collection of a game designer's writings (Yamamoto 2024), and a collection of interviews conducted by third parties with those involved (Steinberg et al. 2018). They thus also suggest different possibilities for documenting the history of TRPGs in the future.

2. Yasuda Hitoshi's Game Travels, 1950–2020

This autobiographical volume looks back on the life of Yasuda Hitoshi, the head of Group SNE.[3] It recounts the history of the analog gaming industry primarily from a business perspective. The chapter "1980: The Arrival of the Black Ships Called RPGs!" describes how science-fiction fans began playing RPGs before Japanese translations became available and how gaming clubs were established.[4] The chapter on 1984 explains the circumstances surrounding the founding of Group SNE and changes in its membership. A photograph of the founding members is itself a valuable historical document.

The chapter on 1987 is particularly noteworthy. It records that *T&T ga yoku wakaru hon* (Understanding Tunnels & Trolls) (Kiyomatsu 1988) "sold more than 100,000 copies despite being a guidebook." It also conveys the aspirations behind the development of *Sword World RPG* (1989), expressed in remarks such as "We are going to make an RPG that can succeed internationally," "something new that can hold its own against overseas games," and "something more accessible to Japanese people." In 2026, a project to publish an English edition of *Sword World 2.5* (2018) began; a report stated that its crowdfunding had "surpassed two million dollars shortly after launch" and had reached "more than 115 times its target" (TRPG JAPAN 2026). The earlier ambition to create an RPG capable of succeeding internationally may thus be approaching realization.

The chapter "1992: The Split at Kadokawa Shoten and the Collapse of the RPG Bubble" contains facts that Yasuda was positioned to know through his involvement in the business, including the existence of five RPG magazines at the market's peak and the sellout of the initial print run of 100,000 copies of *Comp RPG*'s inaugural issue. Nevertheless, expressions such as a period of "heaven and hell"

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[2] Translator's note: Group SNE is a Japanese collective of game designers, writers, and translators founded in 1987 under the leadership of Yasuda Hitoshi. Its activities have included translating foreign RPGs, designing Japanese games such as *Sword World RPG*, and producing novels and published TRPG replays. It has played a central role in the development of Japan's commercial tabletop RPG culture.
Dōjinshi (同人誌) are self-published works, often produced by individuals or groups sharing particular interests (*dōjin*) and sold at events, such as the biannual Tokyo Comic Market (*komike*). Although frequently associated with fan fiction, they may also contain original creative or scholarly material. Regarding Japanese RPG practices, *dōjin* publications include scenarios, replays, supplements, and original game systems. *Dōjin RPGs* overlap with what is commonly called *indie RPGs* in English, but the terms reflect different histories of production and distribution.

[3] Translator's note: English translations of book titles and chapter names are provided for readability. They are not official translations; none of the discussed books have been translated. The Hepburn system is used for transliteration, and Japanese names appear in the order of family name followed by given name. Thus, Yasuda is the family name, Hitoshi the first name.

[4] Translator's note: The Black Ship metaphor has a historical association with the arrival of Western powers in nineteenth-century Japan. The chapter title implies RPGs were a disruptive foreign arrival (for good or bad).

and a "winter era" in the 1990s reflect a business-side perspective.[5] Players may have viewed the period differently. Fujinami and colleagues, for example, observe that "TRPG enthusiasts did not disappear; rather, with fewer titles and specialist magazines available, they were, if anything, starved for material" (Fujinami, Katsura, and Kodachi 2006).

The latter part of the book, "One Hundred Selected Games," evaluates games according to Yasuda's own perspective. His assessments of prominent overseas RPGs should be read as the views of one individual. Although the account of a pioneer who helped popularize TRPGs in Japan is invaluable, establishing a more objective historical picture requires comparison with other sources.

3. The Complete Yamamoto Hiroshi Warlock

Published in memory of Yamamoto Hiroshi, who died on March 29, 2024, this book collects works that had not previously appeared in book form. Its articles were originally published in the magazine *Warlock* between 1987 and 1988, and they provide insight into the historical circumstances of their original publication. Four aspects deserve attention. First, memorial contributions by five founding members of Group SNE, Tomono Shō, who joined through the group's first open recruitment, and four other creators offer glimpses into the gaming scene at the time. Tomono's account of the background to "Yōma Yakō" (Night Parade of Demons) points to some of the factors behind the success of the shared-world novels and the Japanese publication of *GURPS* (Jackson 1992).[6]

Second, Yamamoto produced introductory manga about RPGs. His depictions of the difficulties of finding fellow players and a place to play resemble experiences the author also encountered. The six-installment series *Doko demo T&T* (Tunnels & Trolls Anywhere) (Yamamoto 1987), which began approximately six months before the release of *Tunnels & Trolls* (T&T, Andre and Danforth 1987), may have contributed to the game's popularization. Although no causal link can be established between the manga and sales, Yasuda stated on X that T&T had sold "200,000 copies" (Yasuda 2019). Light-novel author Kamino Okina recalls that in Okinawa, the "original" D&D was then only available in English, was expensive and unusual, and even twenty-sided dice were difficult to obtain.[7] By contrast, he describes the paperback-format *Tunnels & Trolls*, playable with six-sided dice, as a TRPG accessible to people in outlying regions (Kamino 2026). Although it cannot be discussed in detail here, the introductory RPG manga "RPG nante kowakunai!" (RPGs Aren't Scary!) (Yamamoto and Koide 1992), serialized in *RPG Magazine* in 1991 and published as a collected volume by Hobby Japan in 1992, likewise illuminates conditions at the time. A revised edition was republished by Game Field Comics in 2000 (Yamamoto and Koide 2000).

Third, Yamamoto wrote a series teaching newcomers how to create scenarios. Its first installment begins with an account of his own failure and proceeds with detached analysis and the narrative skills that he would later display as a science-fiction author. Around the same period, he was writing a serialized *Sword World RPG* replay for *Dragon Magazine*;[8] that experience may also have informed the series. In a

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[5] Translator's note: The expression *fuyu no jidai* (冬の時代, "winter era") is used in Japanese TRPG discourse to describe the perceived decline of the commercial TRPG market during the late 1990s and early 2000s, particularly the reduction in published games and specialist magazines. As the author emphasizes, this characterization primarily reflects developments in the publishing industry and does not necessarily indicate a corresponding decline in actual play or player communities.

[6] Translator's note: Yōma Yakō (妖魔夜行) is a Japanese shared-world fiction series associated with *GURPS*.

[7] The Japanese translation of *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D, Gygax and Arneson 1974) was already available at this time (1985); however, it was hard to obtain in rural areas, such as Okinawa.
Translator's note: After World War II, from 1945 to 1972, Okinawa was under U.S. occupation. Even after it was returned to Japan, U.S. military bases remained there, and it is believed that a large quantity of American goods were imported for U.S. military personnel and their families. Therefore, unlike other regions of Japan, it is believed that the English-language version of D&D was sold in Okinawa.

[8] Translator's note: In Japanese TRPG publishing, a *replay* (リプレイ) is an edited account of an actual play session, commonly presented through dialogue between players and the game master, with additional narration or commentary. Unlike conventional fictionalizations of game sessions, replays often retain the structure and progression of gameplay. They became an influential form of TRPG-related publication in Japan, serving both as entertainment and as introductions to game systems and styles of play.

supplementary article added for the book publication, Tomono Shō describes the material as having "lost none of its relevance." An important part of the context is that relatively few published scenarios were available, and game masters generally had to create their own. For *Tunnels & Trolls*, only two scenario volumes, excluding solo adventures, had been published at the time. *Sword World RPG* scenario collections appeared at a rate of roughly one or two per year (Group SNE 2010). Even for a group playing only once a month, that supply would have been inadequate. Kamino also recalls playing scenarios created by his GM every week (Kamino 2026). In *RPG gēmu masutā taizen* (The Complete RPG Game Master Handbook), Yamakita Atsushi devotes 36 of the book's 240 pages and ten chapters to "Chapter 5: Scenario Creation." Including "Appendix 1: Scenario Creation Chart" (44 pages), roughly one-third of the book consists of guidance on scenario creation (Yamakita 1995). These examples underscore Yamamoto's pioneering contribution.

Fourth, the "List of Game-Related Publications" at the end of the volume provides a guide to Yamamoto's work in the RPG field. Comparable bibliographic documentation of other game designers' achievements would be valuable for reconstructing RPG history.

4. Record of Lodoss War and Its Era: Testimonies on the Early Days of Kadokawa Media Mix

This volume brings together public hearings held during a University of Tokyo summer program in 2014 and interviews conducted in advance. The principal interviewers belong to a generation unfamiliar with *Record of Lodoss War* (Yasuda and GroupSNE 1986). The interviewees include not only creators Yasuda Hitoshi and Mizuno Ryō but also Yoshida Takashi, a former editor of the magazine *Comptiq*.[9] His testimony is particularly helpful for understanding the role that magazines played in the spread of RPGs. Compared with the autobiography discussed above, Yasuda's contributions here devote more attention to his relationship with Kadokawa Tsuguhiko.

In addition to discussing the origins of *Record of Lodoss War*, Yoshida describes the process of obtaining the necessary review and approval from TSR before *D&D ga yoku wakaru hon* (Understanding Dungeons & Dragons) (Kuroda 1987) could be published. He also explains that the serialized essays "Kuro-chan no RPG sen'ya ichiya" (Kuro-chan's Thousand and One RPG Nights) (Kuroda 1989) were strategically conceived to popularize the idea of a "world of swords and sorcery." Such editorial testimony is valuable, and comparable accounts from editors of magazines other than Kadokawa's would also be welcome.

Regarding the serialization of the *Record of Lodoss War* replay, Mizuno Ryō explains, "Among Yasuda Hitoshi's acquaintances, I was the only one who mainly played *Dungeons & Dragons*." He also says that "the people at Kyoto University mostly played role-playing games with much more complicated systems." Read in conjunction with other testimony, this suggests that they were playing *RuneQuest* (Perrin and Stafford 1978) before it was translated into Japanese.

Mizuno estimates that, at the time of the interview, the number of TRPG players was "several tens of thousands, at most around 100,000." Comparing this figure with the approximately "100,000" players he recalls from the era of *Sword World RPG* in the 1990s, he characterizes the market as having shrunk to "about one-fifth" of its former size. Although he provides no objective evidence for the estimate, it is valuable as the impression of a writer who had access to sales figures and royalty income.

The "Related Chronology" in the appendix is also useful. Nevertheless, the volume focuses on the publisher Kadokawa Shoten's media-mix strategy and does not offer a panoramic view of RPG practices as a whole.[10] Other sources are needed to understand different groups of players. For instance, the

[9] Translator's note: *Comptiq* (コンプティーク) is a Japanese computer-game and entertainment magazine published by Kadokawa that played an important role in serializing *Record of Lodoss War* replays and thus in the birth of the Japanese TRPG industry.

[10] Translator's note: In the Japanese media industries, *media mix* refers to the coordinated development and circulation of characters, narratives, and fictional worlds across different media, such as magazines, novels, manga, games, and animation. In the context of *Record of Lodoss War*, the term highlights the interconnections between TRPG play, serialized replays, literary adaptations, and Kadokawa's publishing activities.

activities of Yūentai in play-by-mail (PBM) gaming, briefly mentioned by Yoshida, call for testimony from those involved.[11]

5. Toward a Historical Record of the Pioneer Generation of Japanese TRPGs

The three books reviewed here are useful for understanding Group SNE's activities from the formative period (1984–1988) to the expansion period (1989–1994). In his supervisor's foreword to the Japanese edition of *Tunnels & Trolls*, Yasuda refers to a "'table-talk' (conversational) RPG," suggesting that he also helped disseminate the term "table-talk." Yet a history of Group SNE would also benefit from the testimony of Kiyomatsu Miyuki, who translated *Tunnels & Trolls* and designed the rules for *Sword World RPG*.

Group SNE's activities represent only the tip of the iceberg in the larger history of Japanese TRPGs. In his research on experience-point rules, Fujibayashi identifies "three creator groups representative of Japanese TRPG culture: Group SNE, F.E.A.R., and Adventure Planning Service" (Fujibayashi 2024). An account of Japanese TRPG history requires, at a minimum, sources concerning all three groups. The Japanese game-design collective Adventure Planning Service (often, simply Bōken) produced a comprehensive chronology of its publications and products (Bōken Kikakukyoku 2024), but this does not document the circumstances of its activities or provide testimonies from its creators. During the "winter era" of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Yasuda 2020), Far East Amusement Research (F.E.A.R.) established the TRPG support magazine *Gamers Field*, held regular conventions, and actively engaged fans through events such as the "45-Hour Endurance TRPG Session" at the Japan Game Convention (JGC) 2002 (F.E.A.R. 2002). Its contributions to discovering new game designers and popularizing TRPGs – including the *Double Cross* series, a winner of the first Game Field Award that marked its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2026 (Fujimi Shobō Kōshiki TRPG-ONLINE 2026) – deserve to be documented through accounts by those involved. The role played by Atelier Third, which published works such as the 2001 special issue *TRPG ga yaritai!!* (TRPG Sapuri Henshūbu 2001) and organized a visit and lecture by Greg Stafford (Stafford and Katsura 2003), should not be overlooked either. Nihon PBM Archives (Nihon PBM Ākaibusu 2020) has begun compiling materials on play-by-mail activities by companies including Yūentai, but accounts placing these activities in a broader perspective, including their relationship with TRPG players, remain scarce. Other underdocumented areas include translators who introduced overseas RPGs to Japan in the 1980s and creators who emerged from the *dōjin* RPG scene. To preserve the history of TRPGs in Japan, it is essential to record testimonies from participants and other people involved and to publish further documentary research.

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[11] Translator's note: Yūentai (遊演体) was a Japanese game company established in 1988 and one of the pioneers of commercial play-by-mail (PBM) role-playing games in Japan (see, Fujibayashi 2026). Its games, including *Net Game '88* and *Hōrai Gakuen no Bōken!* (1990), involved hundreds or thousands of players whose written character actions contributed to a shared fictional world. Game masters processed these actions and returned narrative accounts of their consequences. Unlike contemporary online RPGs, these early games operated primarily through postal correspondence.

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