

Virtual Earthquakes and Real-World Survival in Japan's *Disaster Report* Video Game

BEN WHALEY

This article analyzes the first video game in the Zettai Zetsumei Toshi (2002, Disaster Report) series for Sony's PlayStation 2 console against the backdrop of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. In the game, players must use limited resources to escape from an earthquake-stricken city while rescuing other survivors. The article argues that the game makes visible the marginal victims and narratives of survival often erased under the collective rhetoric of national trauma. This is explored in relation to disaster photography and artistic representations of 3.11. The article suggests that the game's narrative rejects governmental rhetoric about nuclear energy and that the game-play mechanisms utilize "limited engagement" or a form of operationalized weakness in order to communicate victimhood to players. The article concludes with an examination of how the in-game disaster photography inscribes players' actions, making it more difficult to subsume these images into a generalized account of natural disaster trauma.

Keywords: 3.11, disaster, earthquake, Fukushima, Japan, photography, popular culture, trauma, tsunami, video games

They say we must never forget Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the *Daigo Fukuryū-maru*, Fukushima.... But for the vast majority of us who did not directly experience those events ourselves, this slogan is an impossible command. Nevertheless, we continue to refresh our individual experience and memory through continuous contact with monuments.

—Takashi Arai (photographer, Fukushima Prefecture)

JAPAN has been called an "earthquake nation." According to art historian Gennifer Weisenfeld (2012, 13), disasters have historically served as a transformative force in Japan, influencing not just society and politics, but art and culture as well. Yet, as Peter Duus (2012, 175) enjoins us to remember, disasters are also always within the country's "living memory" due to their frequency. Certainly, one such disaster, both transformative and still very much alive in national memory, occurred on March 11, 2011, when Japan experienced the largest earthquake in its recorded history. This magnitude 9.0 quake devastated the northeastern Tōhoku region of the main island of Honshū, crumbling buildings and causing widespread landslides and fires. More terrifying yet was the tsunami it triggered some forty minutes later that sent fifteen-meter-high waves surging inland as far as ten kilometers, washing away everything in their path—vehicles, buildings, lives (Gill, Steger, and Slater

Ben Whaley (benjamin.whaley@ucalgary.ca) is Assistant Professor of Japanese in the School of Languages, Linguistics, Literatures and Cultures at the University of Calgary.