

Class: Japan 100 Introduction to Japanese Literature
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Assignment Background: In my Introduction to Japanese Literature class (Japan 100), I am focused on two central questions: 1) what constitutes narrative and 2) what constitutes Japanese cultural production. In order to probe these seemingly obvious questions, we explore narratives in a wide range of modes that include the classical narrative *The Tale of Genji*; medieval and early modern performance genres; modern novels; and contemporary film and video games. Students learn to locate the elements of narrative across these modes of storytelling and locate themes and tropes that reappear across time in this diverse range of times and narrative genres.

With this context, in week 14 of the course I have students read the first two chapters of Jane McGonigal's book *Reality is Broken* and have them play a prescribed section of Kojima Hideo's game *Death Stranding*. This is a game that presents themes of ghosts and the afterlife that are deeply rooted in Japan's cultural history even though it is set in a post-apocalyptic United States and features almost exclusively non-Japanese actors. Key questions encountered beginning in *Genji* and revisited throughout Japanese cultural history reappear in *Death Stranding*.

The assignments around this week's unit are:

1. After completing the reading and watching a recorded section of the game at home, students visit the gaming lab in the basement of Curtin Hall in small groups to play the game from a pre-saved point. The group then conducts an analysis following the CRIT method (Close Reading Interpretive Tool), which is the same method that they have used earlier in the course to interrogate written and performative narratives.
2. During the Wednesday meeting of the class, students are tasked with articulating formal and narrative ways that we can think of this game as consistent with the Japanese cultural tradition. To do this, students will break in [Games and Narrative assignment sheet draft Death Stranding](#)
3. to their initial groups which met for the gaming sessions. The groups will each receive a different prompt: ghosts, masks, obligation/emotion, and time. Each group will create a statement about the ways that these elements in *Death Stranding* resonate with performances and texts from earlier in the course. Once students have completed this task, the groups will be jigsawed, with new groups consisting of one member from a previous group. Those groups will then create a new statement which articulates how *all four* elements resonate with prior narratives engaged with in the class.

Outcomes: This assignment had a quantifiable impact on how students thought about narrative and Japanese cultural production. This is most clearly shown by a pair of word clouds that are compiled from responses solicited from the entire class at the beginning and end of the semester. Students are asked to note three words that they associate with Japan and three words that they associate with literature. After they organize their responses and present to the class, I compile their answers in a word cloud. The differences between the beginning and end of the semester assignments, attached below, were even more striking than in normal years.

