

***Nobunaga's Ambition* and Contemporary Japan: History of Medieval Historiography, Medievalism, and Historical Subcultures**

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Nobunaga's Ambition (original title in Japanese: *Nobunaga no yabō* 信長の野望) is a series of historical simulation games in the Sengoku and the Azuchi-Momoyama periods of medieval Japan. As a strategic war game, it is highly regarded by experts around the world.⁵⁷

Today, it is not unusual to find military simulation games that consider not only combat but also territory management, diplomacy, geopolitics and other factors, but when the first work in the series was released in 1983, it was a pioneer in full-fledged historical simulation games.⁵⁸ Since 1988, the market has expanded to the world, and now more than half of total sales are overseas.⁵⁹ In 1998, an internet version was also released, which was well received due to its online gaming style, which was rare at the time, allowing players to play against users from all over the world at the same time. As the Sengoku period is the most popular era in Japanese history, this work has attracted support from all ages, and 16 titles have been released to date.

In games, like in historical facts, the victory keys are not only in battles and territory management, but also in building roads, trading with merchants or Christian missionaries, holding tea ceremonies, improving manufacturing technology for guns and naval ships, receiving official titles from the Imperial Court, and other commands unique to the Sengoku period. Recent productions have used high-definition 3D images for maps and battles CG.⁶⁰ The popularity of this series is probably largely responsible for the fact that such an advanced academic knowledge of medieval history has

⁵⁷ Neil Randall, 'Nobunaga's Ambition', *Compute!* 104. (1989): 90-94., M. Evan Brooks, 'Computer Strategy and Wargames: Pre-20th Century', *Computer Gaming World* 75. (1990): 11-13, 70., M. Evan Brooks, 'An Annotated Listing of Pre-20th Century Wargames', *Computer Gaming World* 107. (1993): 136-143.

⁵⁸ M. Evan Brooks, 'Nobunaga's Ambition'. *Computer Gaming World* 51. (1988): 12, 34, 48-9.

⁵⁹ 'Kōe Tekumo HD Shacō Erilawa Yōichi Shi: Kao mo Shiranai Tomo to Kunitori', *Nikkei Sangyō Shimbun*. (30 January 2018): 19.

⁶⁰ 'Sōteigai datta Shirizu Ka Fan ga Atooshi: Kōteku HD Shachō', *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*. (5 March 2016). Available at: <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO97933310S6A300C1000000/>

become known to many people. It has also had a significant impact on the historical subculture in contemporary Japan. Tourism promotion and exhibitions of Sengoku cultural heritage in collaboration with *Nobunaga's Ambition* have been held throughout Japan.⁶¹ *NHK Taiga Drama*, one of the most famous and prestigious historical drama series by NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), uses 3D maps from *Nobunaga's Ambition* in 2016⁶² and 2022⁶³. Until now, also, *Nobunaga's Ambition* has been derived from video games to novels⁶⁴, comics,⁶⁵ and musicals⁶⁶.

There are indeed several events based on historical facts. These were in the form of quests and occurred by fulfilling conditions, such as taking control of a particular castle, and the lords, vassals or forces may learn some skills. Failure conditions are also set. If we do not want to kill particular characters, or if we hope enjoy a story that differs from the historical facts, it is an option to choose not to challenge these conditions. In terms of experiencing the 'if' of history, this is a great feature, especially for fans of the Sengoku period who have a wealth of knowledge.⁶⁷ New scenarios and characters can be added by purchasing power-up kits or downloading additional data. This makes it possible to play the game for a longer period without getting bored. Depending on the game, it may be possible to enjoy a parallel world of history by adding historical characters from China, Mongolia and Europe, as well as from ancient or early modern Japan. In the latest title in the series, the AI controls the individuality of each lord to keep the players motivated. In many cases, the user's forces expand in the second half of the game, and repeating the simple task of destroying smaller forces can become boring.

⁶¹ For example, from 14 March to 9 May 2024, an event was organised to visit historical sites and museums in Gifu, Fukui and Shiga prefectures and check in using the *Nobunaga's Ambition*'s location-based access function to receive in-game benefits and original goods. See Oshiro Meguri Kikaku Dai sandan: Nobunaga no Yabō Shutsujin de Gifu Fukui Shiga ni Shutsujin! Available at: <https://www.biwako-visitors.jp/guide/detail/788/>

⁶² *Sanada Maru*. See Sanada Maru. Available at: https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/movies/?id=D0009050427_00000

⁶³ *The 13 Lords of the Shogun*. See Kamakura Dono no Jūsannin. Available at: https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/movies/?id=D0009051379_00000

⁶⁴ Fuyuji Dōmon, *Nobunaga no Yabō*. (Yokohama: Kōei, 1990)

⁶⁵ Yōichirō Ono, *Nobunaga no Yabō: Rinne Tenshō*. (Tokyo: Gakken Paburissingu, 2014)

⁶⁶ *Nobunaga no Yabō: Enbu*. See Namaensō Myūjikaru Nobunaga no Yabō Enbu Kōshiki. Available at: https://x.com/nobunaga_enbu

⁶⁷ The game creator Kō Shibusawa シブサワ・コウ is a big fan of Nobunaga Oda 織田信長 and developed *Nobunaga's Ambition* based on the concept of a game where players could enjoy an 'if' of history that Nobunaga could not fulfil due to Mitsuhide Akechi's 明智光秀 betrayal. See 'Shōgai Gēmu Kuriētā (10): Anohito no Yabō Kanaetakute', *Nikkei Sangyō Shimbun*. (23 January 2018): 15.

Therefore, the AI forces are designed to become as powerful as the user's, so that the user and the AI can compete on equal terms until the end of the game.⁶⁸

Not all the content reflects historical facts. For example, many popular Sengoku lords⁶⁹ have a brave and handsome appearance, while many lesser-known Shugo lords⁷⁰ have eerie insidious whitewashed make-up. This may be an expression of the stereotype that *samurai* are robust, while aristocrats are decadent. These stereotypes are probably due to the widespread prejudice in the early modern period against the court nobles as weak and lazy, and in the modern period for the *samurai*, namely military officers, as hard-working and skilled in valour.⁷¹ In fact, Kototsugu Yamashina 山科言繼, who appears in the game as the contact person for the Imperial Court, also wears white make-up and speaks in a unique tone (he cannot be controlled by the player as a military lord). Several fictional characters made famous through dramas and novels⁷², also appear, while Ryūkyū Kingdom (current Okinawa prefecture) and Ainu (the Japanese law⁷³ regards them as indigenous peoples to Hokkaidō) do not appear, out of consideration for political issues.⁷⁴ From 1994 onwards, it became possible to play some princesses as warlords, even if they had never participated in wars in history.⁷⁵ This is thought to have been influenced by the growing ideology of gender equality, as well as an attempt to expand the popularity of the game among females. Although it is a well-known historical fact that a few princesses have served on the battlefield in Sengoku period, it was not very common.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, efforts have been made in recent years to reflect the latest research, for example by correcting data on characters who are considered to have

⁶⁸ Hirosato Mishima, Kenji Ōta, Tadayuki Irie, 'AI of the Video Game "Nobunaga's Ambition: Taishi"', *Journal of the Society for Artificial Intelligence* 38.5. (2023): 606-611.

⁶⁹ *Daimyō* 大名 who gained their position on merit, with or without appointment to public position by the Shogunate.

⁷⁰ *Daimyō* with roots in being appointed as the *shugo* 守護 [governor] by the Muromachi Shogunate.

⁷¹ Tomohiko Okano, *Genji to Nihon Kokuō*. (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2003)

⁷² For example, the Sanada Ten Braves (Sasuke Sarutobi 猿飛佐助, Saizō Kirigakure 霧隠才藏, Seikai Miyoshi 三好清海, Isa Miyoshi 三好伊佐, Kosuke Anayama 穴山小助, Kamanosuke Yuri 由利鎌之助, Jūzō Kakei 笥十藏, Rokurō Unno 海野六郎, Jinpachi Nezu 根津甚八, and Rokurō Mochizuki 望月六郎) is very famous and much-loved.

⁷³ Article 1, Act on Promoting Measures to Achieve a Society in which the Pride of Ainu People is Respected. Available at: <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/4538>

⁷⁴ Kōei Shuppanbu, ed., *Nobunaga no Yabō Tenshōki Jiten*. (Yokohama: Kōei, 1996)

⁷⁵ Somutamu Tai, 'Buyū to Chiryaku de Sengoku Jidai o Kakenuketa Hime Bushō Gosen: Sono Miryoku o Nobunaga no Yabō Kaihatsu Tantōsha ni Kiite mita', *Walker Plus*. (2023).

Available at: <https://theme.walkerplus.com/shutsujin/article/1161510/>

⁷⁶ For example, Naomori Ii's 井伊直盛 eldest daughter Naotora Ii 井伊直虎 and Tadakatsu Houda's 本多忠勝 eldest daughter Komatsu-hime 小松姫 are well known.

unfairly low ability values.⁷⁷ It was also highly regarded as a tool for learning history even in schools, with more than several hundred real-life characters and castles appearing.⁷⁸ This series has had a significant impact on Japanese medievalism, and at the same time has made people aware of the enjoyment of learning about the Sengoku history.

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⁷⁷ For example, previously, Ujizane Imagawa's 今川氏真 ability rating was extremely low, but since 2005 his political ability has been revised to more than 70. This may be due to a reassessment of his artistic and cultural qualities and the fact that the Imagawa family continued to exist as *hatamoto* 旗本 [guardian of the banner] of the Edo Shogunate in early modern times. It has also been pointed out in recent years that the former Imagawa vassals may not have had such a low opinion of him. See Yukikazu Hasegawa, 'Tenshō Gannen Ikō ni Okeru Imagawa Ujizane no Seijiteki Chii', in *Ronshū Sengoku Daimyō Imagawashi*. eds. Sengokushi Kenkyūkai. (Tokyo: Iwata Shoin, 2020): 257-286.

⁷⁸ For example, the *Nobunaga's Ambition* is used as a teaching tool at Harvard Business School. See Tarō Kawashima, 'Nobunaga no Yabō Kaihatsusha ni Kiku Shibusawa Kō to iu Sōgyōsha no Na o Seō Jūseki', *IT Media Bijinesu Online*. (2024). Available at: <https://www.itmedia.co.jp/business/articles/2403/23/news041.html>

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