

**The Media Mix:
Multiple Embodiments of Japanimation Characters**

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In the phenomenally successful Japanese comic series, Yugioh, our protagonist, Yugi, faces off with his arch rival, Kaiba, in a game of “Magic and Wizards,” a thinly veiled reference to the trading card game, “Magic the Gathering” which swept the US in the early nineties. Yugi and Kaiba’s duel becomes vividly life-like through cutting edge rendering technologies that make the cards and the depicted monsters appear as animated 3D images. In a strange twist of fate, they duel to save their loved ones whose spirits have been trapped in Magic cards by a diabolical game master (Takahashi 1999).

Yugioh is a drama of the hyperreal, of objects of fantasy becoming ever more vivid, life-like and omnipresent, even sapping the spirits of flesh and blood bodies. But the strange mingling of the real and virtual in the pages of Yugioh comics is but the tip of the iceberg in this drama of simulation. The Yugioh comic series has also spawned a television animation, its own immensely popular card game, over ten different video game versions, and character goods ranging from T-shirts to packaged curry to pencil boxes. In its myriad forms, Yugioh is a major force in the lives of Japanese children and many adults.

For the past two years, I have been conducting ethnographic research in Tokyo on children’s media use and popular culture. One focus of my work has been on Yugioh, the most popular media mix content among elementary age boys at the moment, by many indicators, even overtaking the popularity of Pokemon. One survey last year of three hundred students in a Kyoto elementary school indicated that by the third grade, every student owned some Yugioh cards (2001). My more limited sample of parents and children I have worked with also indicates that almost every elementary student of both genders owns some cards, and every boy, without exception, plays Yugioh in some form.

In the universe of Yugioh, simulacra reference simulacra referencing yet more simulacra, as millions of school children simulate the duels of Yugi and Kaiba who in turn manipulate their own simulated battleground, which references yet another simulation of Magic the Gathering, played by yet a different set of people with different symbolic technologies. As I follow Yugioh content around multiple sites of production, distribution, viewing, and play, from books to screens, to homes to tradeshows, to card shops, and to tournaments, I am left with this sense of a fantastic and endlessly recursive and self-referential symbolic universe, much as Baudrillard describes (Baudrillard 1981/1989).

At the same time, the Yugioh case reveals limits to the notion of hyperreality if it is viewed as a dematerialized and self-referential system of signification. The theoretical opposition between reality and fantasy, or the real and virtual, is a shaky foundation for analyzing the refracting references between and among objects, representations, and technologies in the Yugioh media mix. In addition to an analysis of the shifting relation between signifier and signified, the relation between reality and text, Yugioh demands that we query the relation between differently materialized texts, exploring issues of intertextuality, multiple materialities, and our proliferating palette of representational technologies.

It is undeniable that our children are growing up in a world every more saturated with media representations that build on each other in a self-referential monstrous snowball effect. But to understand the nature of this beast, it seems to me even more crucial that we demand an embodied, located, and mundane view of these fantasy worlds. How are different social networks and technologies tied to the symbolic and economic value of particular representations? How can we conceptualize the flows and relationships between different representational technologies and regimes of value?

I look to Arjun Appadurai's essay on the Social Life of Things for inspiration. Appadurai reads across different exchanges systems such as capitalist exchange, barter, and gift exchange to query "the conditions under which economic objects circulate in different regimes of value in space and time" (Appadurai 1986: 43). He calls for a focus on things themselves and how they circulate among different social contexts, as a way of "illuminating human and

social context.” Appadurai’s object orientation enables us to ground cultural commodities as concrete material entities in both the economic and physical sense, while also taking into account the role of social exchange and negotiation in animating these objects with meaning and value.

I take my cue from Appadurai’s notion of different regimes of value, the ways in which objects flow through different exchange systems, and get diverted to other ones. But I would like to shape these metaphors for the particular context of media technology and the high-tech media mix in children’s popular culture, calling for a focus not only on the flow of objects through different systems of exchange, but also on the flow of signification between and across different representational regimes and technologies. This effort can also be taken of an instance of multi-sited ethnography, hybridizing what George Marcus has called a “follow the thing” and “follow the metaphor” strategies (Marcus 1995). This presentation is very much a report from the field, and I hope it will be taken in that exploratory spirit.

Now back to Yugioh.

The intertextual networks around Yugioh are extremely broad and dense, comprising publishing, television, video game, toy, and merchandising industries, as well as large and varied player and viewer groups, including children and families as well as adults in core gaming communities. In my remaining time, I am going to take one small cut on this heterogeneous network of people, money, and objects, by focusing on a particular trading card monster as it acquires different meanings and values as it is circulated, exchanged, and represented in multiple forms.

I’d like to introduce you to the Blue Eyes White Dragon, called Blue Eyes for short, probably the most famous of the Yugioh trading cards. Blue Eyes first makes it’s appearance in 1996 in the ninth installment of the Yugioh comic series in the weekly Jump Magazine. “This is the Blue Eyes White Dragon Card” explains Yugi’s grandfather. “It is so powerful that production was stopped right away. It is the ultimate rare card that any card addict would give a right arm for” (Takahashi 1997a: 33). Soon Kaiba makes his first appearance in the series, a high school student that is president of his own game company and a card game

master. He reacts with shock upon seeing the card, “This card, the legendary Blue Eyes White Dragon!” (36). He offers a whole case full of cards in exchange, but Yugi’s grandfather refuses (38). Later, Kaiba steals the card from Yugi who has taken it to school to play (41), only to have the card taken from him when Yugi beats him in a game of Magic and Wizards. He suffers cruel punishment for his greed in the hands of Yugi and his supernatural powers, trapped within a card and the world of Magic and Wizards to experience a simulation of his own destruction (69-71). Kaiba responds by acquiring the only other Blue Eyes cards in existence through ruthless means, finally, destroying Yugi’s grandfather’s card after winning a duel with him (Takahashi 1997b: 68).

Thus begins an ongoing feud between Yugi and Kaiba, manifesting in pivotal card game duels between the two that punctuate the ongoing series. Both Yugi and Kaiba are card masters, but Kaiba represents one pole of ruthless individualism, battling for his own pride and power, and Yugi, the pole of selfless kindness, battling to help his friends and family as well as to perfect his game. The Blue Eyes White Dragon symbolizes Kaiba, proud, cold, powerful, ruthless, single-minded, and is his mascot, familiar, and weapon. In every cover and image shot of Kaiba, there is a Blue Eyes hovering behind him, a constant presence.

A few years after the Blue Eyes card appeared in the pages of Jump Magazine, a Yugioh cartoon series was launched on TV Tokyo. Soon after, The Blue Eyes card was released by game maker Konami in several incarnations as part of its Yugioh Official Card Game. The first version was released in March 1999 in the first card release, packaged as a starter box with cards, playing accessories and instructions for a simplified version of Magic the Gathering. Just as in the comic series, the Blue Eyes card is the most powerful card in one-to-one combat, though it can be toppled by various monster combinations, magic, and trap cards. Konami puts it at the top of the hierarchy of rareness, printed with a shiny surface and labeled an “ultra rare” card in contrast to normal cards, plain old rare cards, and super rare cards. This rarity is something declared rather than based in actual scarcity at this point, as the numbers of Blue Eyes cards in circulation is the same as all the other cards. In other words, rarity is signified within the fantasy domain rather than actualized in an economic system of exchange.

As the card game starts riding an unprecedented wave of popularity, Konami starts releasing new cards in smaller five card packs, costing the equivalent of just over one USD, and begins their strategy of producing scarcity within the regime of economic exchange and the flow of physical cards. Unlike the starter box with a fixed set of cards, the smaller packs are a gamble, like baseball cards, where one doesn't know exactly what one is getting. Ultra rare, super rare, rare and normal cards are produced and distributed among packs in proportion to their declared rarity. Later that year, Konami releases a different version of the Blue Eyes card in what they call their EX pack, which is similar to the original starter pack in that it contains a ready-to-play fixed set of cards, divided into a Yugi and a Kaiba deck.

In May 2000, a year after the card series was launched, Konami starts reprinting cards from the Starter Pack in the smaller five card pack format, beginning with a series called The Legend of the Blue Eyes White Dragon, where a lucky buyer might happen across an ultra rare Blue Eyes Card. Strategically, the Blue Eyes card in this series is the same as the original starter pack, rather than reproducing the one from the EX pack. In other words, this is a re-release of an out of print classic card, continuing to maintain its scarcity while also generating consumer excitement about this new round of circulation.

Yet another version of the Blue Eyes White Dragon was released this past April as an undocumented card in the Spell of Mask series. This card is in a new category created last year of "ultimate rare" cards featuring not only shiny surfaces and embossed fonts, but relief pictures as well. Ultimate rare cards are extremely difficult to track down, and are the stuff of legend and rumor, as they don't appear in official Konami card lists. In scouring fan and auction sites, I have only discovered the existence of three ultimate rare cards, one of which is a version of Blue Eyes. I discovered this card on a number of online auction sites, offering it at a price ranging from the equivalent of ten to twenty USD, in contrast to the ultra rare version, offered for as little as five USD.

Even more scarce are the limited edition versions of the Blue Eyes card distributed only at the Jump Magazine Trade show in 1999, which fetch a price of almost five hundred USD. This past summer, in anticipation of the Yugioh launch

in the US, one thousand copies of an English version of the Blue Eyes White Dragon were mailed out to Jump Magazine Readers who sent in a postcard request. I have yet to see this card priced online. There may well be more versions that I am unaware of.

The different material forms of the card are central in economic valuation, though all Blue Eyes cards are functionally identical in the context of game play. The artwork, whether there are embossed fonts, holographic or embossed surfaces are key details attesting to rarity. In addition, auction sites will always disclose the state of the individual card for sale, whether it has a scratch or a bend in one corner, or whether it is a perfect item. The presence of even a minor flaw will generally cut the value of the card in half.

Hand in hand with the release of the Yugioh cards, Konami continues to release new versions of Yugioh Playstation and Game Boy software, shipping limited edition cards within the software package. This provides another distribution channel for rare cards that also drives software sales. Currently the Game Boy software is in its fifth incarnation. The Game Boy software ties together the fantasy world of the comic characters and real life game play, allowing the player to play against the comic characters in story mode, or against other kids by connecting their Game Boys together. The linkage between the physical cards and the virtual game cards extends beyond the card inserts in the game packages. Each physical card has a special code printed on it that can be inputted into the online version, making the physical card manifest in the online space. In fact, it is nearly impossible to proceed with the Game Boy game without having access to a collection of physical cards available for virtualization.

Despite this prolific production and reproduction of the Blue Eyes card and its every morphing status as a rare and coveted object, the actual utility of this card in game play is quite limited. Among professional players—by this I mean both children and adults that compete in national and international tournaments—use of this card is impractical as well as passe.

The problem is that for people playing by expert rules, the card is too powerful and unwieldy, requiring two other monsters to be sacrificed in order to be able to play it. The spectacular duels enacted in the comics and cartoons feature flashy,

powerful monsters that find their way into card collections rather than card play. This is the case for both the physical and online versions of the game. In other words, the regimes of value between the symbolic, monetary, and competitive value of cards are interconnected, but also distinct.

In contrast to professional players, elementary aged children that I encountered did use the Blue Eyes card in their duels. For example, one fourth-grader that I played with had three Blue Eyes cards in his deck and took pride in his collection of different versions of the card. Children's play is more closely wedded to the meanings and fantasy play produced through comics and cartoons rather than a competitive game adhering to strict rules and win conditions. Their game play is high volume, high flourish, reenacting the same turns of phrase used by the comic characters, and interspersed with loud insults, bragging, and cries of defeat. This is in sharp contrast to the play of professional players, particularly in tournaments, which is quiet and low key, with most communication conveyed by gesture and actual card play. When my research assistants and I would bring our decks to play with elementary aged children, they were often surprised that our decks lacked high level monsters such as Blue Eyes. They assumed that these are the most powerful and effective cards, as evidenced by their use by the characters in the comic series.

The different regimes of valuation and representation of the comic content and the physical cards reference each other in ways both obvious and subtle. The production of cards that appear in the comic book and the enactment of comic book styles of game play are versions of this. More subtle are the complex negotiations that fix economic value in the sale of single cards by professional collectors. In my interviews with card collecting professionals, all acknowledged that a card's status in the "original work"—by which they mean the comic series—adds value to the card, independent of whether it is a useful card in game play or whether it is a scarce card. For example, the ultra rare Blue Eyes card fetches a higher price than other ultra rare cards because it is featured prominently in the original content. A sense persists that the real life card game play is a copy, a simulation of that of Kaiba and Yugi, albeit one that is very unfaithful and has very different material and social contexts.

The social, material, economic, and technical network of Blue Eyes is highly varied, and well beyond the control of Konami, Shueisha, and TV Tokyo, the primary corporations involved in the production of Yugi and Blue Eyes. The auction and rumor mill on the net, spawned by the core gaming and collector communities are particularly galling to Konami, as an alternative regime of value and cultural production that feeds of its products. Following this thread, I want to present one final example of the intersection between economic and symbolic value, colliding in the materiality of a media object.

I want to introduce to you practices called sa-chi “searching” which are methods with which card collectors identify rare card packs before purchase. These methods were disseminated initially among face-to-face communities of collectors who shared what they had learned about minute differences in packaging that enabled one to identify the key packs. Thus I find myself out at one am with a group of card addicts, standing in the corner of a convenience store eyeing and pawing through three boxes of just-released card packs presented by a grudging but amused salesperson. We are successful in identifying all of the rare, super rare, and ultra rare card packs in the store, before heading out to make rounds of all neighborhood convenience stores before daybreak when average consumers will start buying. With the advent of the Internet, these tips are posted on numerous web sites soon after the new packs hit the shelves. These web sites post detailed photos highlighting and describing minute differences in packaging such as the length of the ridges along the back of the card pack, or slight differences in printing angle and hue.

Let me conclude.

The Blue Eyes White Dragon, in all its incarnations, emerges from a monstrous and shifting network of signifiers, technologies, objects, and capital. Its existence is virtual to the nth degree, a simulacra referencing chains of simulacra. Yet the meanings attached to Blue Eyes are also inseparable from the political economic conditions and material technologies contextualizing its incarnations, ranging from the mass media of comics and television, to commodities such as Game Boy cartridges and card packs, to limited edition connoisseur cards and counterfeits that circulate among professional collectors. These different incarnations circulate among distinct but intertwined regimes of value and

representation. Some of the regimes touched upon here include the hyperbolic fantasy content disseminated through publishing and broadcast, personalized and interactive game commodities produced by Konami, peer status negotiations among children, and professional collecting and trading of single cards among adult collectors.

Rather than generalized statements about what Blue Eyes signifies, my hope in this presentation was to outline just some of the concrete sociotechnical networks surrounding a particular object, and to open up some questions about the relations between these different regimes of value and representation. As such, I have focused on the intricate relations between different material manifestations as sites of analytic interest, trying to reveal the stunning complexity of webs of sociality, materiality, and signification mobilized by late modern consumer culture and media technology.

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