Play in an Age of Digital Media:
Children's Engagements with the Japanimation Media Mix

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I would like to begin by thanking those that have made this research possible, many of who were kind enough to gather here today. First, I would like to thank the Abe Fellowship for sponsoring my research as well as this talk. I am particularly appreciative of all the work that Takuya Toda and Frank Baldwin have done to organize this event, as well as the simultaneous interpretation, and the opportunity to present my work to a Japanese speaking audience. This work was also funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science postdoctoral fellowship. Thanks to these two fellowship programs, I was able to spend three years in Tokyo conducting research on children's media.

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I am also indebted to the many people who I interviewed, played games with, debated with, and hung out with in the course of my research, including academic colleagues, media producers, parents, children, teachers, and game fans. Without all of your help this research would not be possible. Three years sounds like a very long time, but in the timeline of ethnographic research, it is also the beginning of engagement with an area of study, and this talk is very much a report from the field.

In this talk, I will start with a conceptual and thematic overview, and then focus on a case study of the consumption and production of Yugioh. In conclusion, I will describe what I see as some of the salient trends in children's media culture, and some ways that adults might participate in this culture in productive ways.

CHILDREN AT RISK

In both the US and Japan, there is a growing sense of concern about children and a sense of childhood at risk. Threats to children come from multiple quarters,

such as escalating educational pressures, changes in family structure, industrialization, and urbanization. Here I will be focusing on the role of media and commodity culture, which are generally named as central culprits in corrupting children's psychological, spiritual and physical health

The list of negative effects is long, including runaway consumerism, premature exposure to adult content, the loss of physical activity and dexterity, confusion of fantasy and reality, escalating violence, the loss of social skills, and the preponderance of solitary play. In contrast to the US, where the discourse tends to focus on loss of sexual innocence and negative media images, in Japan, the loss of social skills and social values, peer interaction, and community interaction are seen as the most dangerous threat to today's media kids.

Personally, I worry about my own children and their access to 24 hours a day of cartoon network, video, computer games, and the Internet. I reflect nostalgically on my own childhood spent stomping through the woods and fields, playing in the yard with neighborhood kids, retreating indoors to the TV only for special media moments such as Saturday morning cartoons. Already my one year-old son is a Thomas the Tank Engine otaku, obsessed with all objects imprinted with that smiling blue character. I wonder at my own sense of delight when I find a new Thomas toy that makes his face light up with joy and recognition. Should "Thomas" and "Percy" really be among his handful of infant words up there with "Mama," "Papa," and "milk"?

New media, technology, and commodity capitalism challenge deeply held beliefs of what is natural, good and wholesome for children. They deprive children of many of the social interactions and embodied experiences that were so central to earlier generations notions of play. We worry that relationships with computers, TV screens and fantasy characters are replacing children's relationships with the natural, messy environment, complex peer relationships, and engagement with the local community. Intense pressures toward educational achievement push children to grow up, learn, and achieve from tender years. And now, in the postwar era, play, too, has come under the control of adult technocrats, eager to market the latest fad, toy, and TV show to an all-to-receptive audience. Indeed the space for children just to be children, in a slower, less frenetic pace of life, less scheduled, less commodified, less technologized, playing timeless games like tag and kickball, squabbling among themselves, getting dirty, the space for this ideal of childhood seems to be shrinking by the day.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO CHILDREN'S CULTURE

Although personally very invested in this project, I have tried to approach these issues agnostically, trying not to subject today's children to judgments shaped by my own experiences as a child.

Methodologically, I am committed to ethnography, and direct observation and participation in the everyday lives of people that are different from me, letting them challenge my own ways of thinking and seeing the world. Politically, this has meant that cultural anthropology often turns a sympathetic ear to marginalized social groups and peripheral cultures that challenge dominant beliefs and social structures. I often take a traditional anthropological position of translating between different cultural worlds, between the worlds of child and adult, Japan and the US.

At the same time, my work on media departs from a traditional anthropological process, which has tended to focus on immersion in geographically localized communities, whether it's a village, a workplace, or a school. My work has involved moving between a wide variety of sites and tracing the linkages between them, linkages that are made up of not only human relationships but relationships mediated by mass media and commodity capitalism.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

My work on children's media takes as a focus the idea of cultural politics, the ways in which culture and social life are produced and negotiated among people with different social agendas.

The modern idea of childhood as a unique stage of life, deserving of special protection, education, and unique cultural products is not a universal given historically or cross-culturally. For example, Phillipe Aries has argued that the modern European conception of childhood emerged between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. In the middle ages, there was little separation between adult and children's worlds (Aries 1962). More recently, a growing number of social and cultural theorists have described the ways in which the notion of childhood is being produced in an increasingly global and media-saturated arena (Seiter 1995; Stephens 1995; James and Prout 1997; Jenkins 1998; Kinder 1999; Allison 2000).

At least since the Meiji era, with the adoption of mandatory education, Japan has developed its ideas of childhood in interaction with Western models. Since then, the US and Japan have been developing intertwined children's media cultures, and related areas of concern. Ideals of childhood in Japan are a complex product of ongoing transnational exchange. To trace this history is another topic, another talk. Here I would simply like to point out that the category of childhood is in constant flux, and springs not from some pre-given natural essence of children, but is an ongoing social and cultural production.

To say that childhood is a social and cultural production is not to say that there is no reality of biological immaturity as a unique stage of life. Rather, it is to say that the ways in which we understand and organize the lives of children are inseparable from specific social, cultural, and historical circumstances. Childhood is also a site of struggle which is not only about personal relationships, love and care, but is tied to battles in various political economic arenas. Children's destinies are being played out on a much larger stage than just the home and school.

As feminists have declared with the slogan "the personal is political," domestic relations need to be understood as political ones. This position parallels another argument that I take from feminist theory, that the category of "woman" and by extension, children, is not a product of nature but of culture. Further, these categories are produced and consumed by men as well as women, adults and children.

FIELDWORK AND FIELDSITES

In my fieldwork, I have been following children's media around different sites of production, distribution and consumption, including an after school center, hobby and card shops where gamers gather, conventions and tournaments, as well as to the corporations that produce the content. I have conducted over thirty formal interviews with parents, game players, educators, and people involved in children's media industries. I have engaged in hundreds of informal conversations and spot interviews with children and adults in the course of my fieldwork and everyday life in Japan. I have also been following animation on television, reading manga, and learning to play various electronic and card games. And finally, I have been reviewing educational and industry literature in relation to children's media culture in Japan

Soon after my arrival in Japan, I realized that it was impossible to separate out digital media from other media types. Children are embedded in a media mix where the content of comic books, animation, games, and toys constantly cross-reference each other. Thus my current work does not separate out computational media as a research domain, but sees new media as an emerging hybrid relation between digital and analog media.

Also, I have been looking at both boys' and girls' play and media, but for a variety or reasons, which I would be happy to address in Q&A, my initial focus has been on boys' content. I will not be presenting a specific case on girls' media today, but my work with girls will be informing my conclusions.

But this is enough of theory and background. Now I would like to take you on a journey through some of my ethnographic material, by focusing on the media mix content series, Yugioh.

YUGIOH

Yugioh, for those of you who don't have elementary-aged children, is a media mix content series which started as a manga series in *Shonen Jump* magazine in 1996, and has since spawned a television animation, two different card game versions, over ten different Playstation and Game Boy games, and a wide range of licensed character goods.

The most popular form of engagement with Yugioh is the official card game. During the peak years around 1999-2001, Yugioh cards were a pervasive fact of life for Japanese children. 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 indicated that almost every elementary student of both genders owns some cards, and every boy, without exception, plays Yugioh in some form. It was clear that I had begun my research in the midst of a major media craze, and it quickly became a focus of my fieldwork.

The hero of Yugioh, Mutou Yugi, is a high school boy with a split personality. Yugi's original personality is one of a small, weak, skinny and unpopular kid, whose one strength is his skill in playing games. One day, he solves a complex ancient Egyptian puzzle and unlocks a hidden spirit of an Egyptian pharaoh within it, which becomes a second personality for him, powerful, secure, decisive, and ruthless. The two Yugis use their game expertise to combat forces of greed and evil, battling with adults as often as with other children. The series focuses in particular on a card game Magic and Wizards, a thinly veiled reference to Magic the Gathering (Takahashi 1997).

Yugioh, like Pokemon, is a story of children using the competitive play as an arena to address serious social inequities and problems, and to engage with adults as equals. It inverts the traditional power dynamic between adult and children's culture, and between play and work, making children's play the center of consequential social action rather than a marginalized and trivial domain of consumption.

YUGIOH CONSUMPTION

The boys that I encountered in the course of my fieldwork engaged with Yugioh at multiple levels. Most owned versions of the game boy game, read the manga at least periodically, and watched the TV show. But the most popular is the card

game. All of the boys I encountered had some kind of collection of cards that they treasured, ranging from kids with large boxed collections and playing decks in double-encased sleeves, to kids with a single dog eared stack of cards, held together by a rubber band.

Yugioh cards have been released in a variety of forms, including ready-to-play packs, vending machine versions, and limited release versions packaged with game boy software, in books, and distributed at trade shows. The most common form of purchase is in five card packs costing ¥150. These packs are sold at convenience stores, toy stores, bookstores, and stationary stores, often right at the checkout counter. They are sold at a price point and locations that make it an easy purchase for a parent to appease a child while out shopping, or for a child to make on his own with a bit of allowance.

A new series of these five card packs is released every few months. When purchasing a pack of cards, one doesn't know what one will get within the fifty or so cards in a series. Most card packs have only "normal" run of the mill cards, but if you are lucky you may get a "rare," "super rare," "ultra rare," or perhaps even an "ultimate rare" card in one of your packs. This marketing strategy fuels a constant stream of purchases well beyond what most kids will actually use in their game play, as they try to acquire, in most cases unsuccessfully, the most coveted cards.

DUELING

The standard process of game play is one-on-one, where duelists pit monster, magic, and trap cards against one another. Each player makes a personal playing deck of forty or more cards that reflects his personal style of play. Because there are several hundred possible cards, the combinations are endless. This also creates an insatiable mill of desire. Children are never able to acquire every card that they want, particularly when at the mercy of hit or miss card packs. Further, cards acquire value not only through their use in game play, but also have symbolic value through their association with the card series. Cards that are used by the key players in the manga series are always of premium value even though they may be useless in the course of actual game play.

Although the Yugioh official card game was originally produced as an easy-to-play children's version of the adult card game Magic, over the years it has evolved into an increasingly complex game, inaccessible to a newcomer. My research assistants and I spent several weeks with the Yugioh EX starter pack, poring through the rule book and the instructional videotape and trying to figure out how to play. It was only after several game sessions with some elementary school children, followed by some coaching by some patient adults at a card

game arena, that we slowly began to understand the basic game play as well as some of the fine points of collection, how cards are acquired, valued, and traded.

In fact, mastery of the rules of Yugioh card game play is well beyond the capability of an average elementary aged child, taxing the capabilities of even an adult professional with an academic interest in the topic. First and second graders generally had a limited grasp of the actual rules of the game, engaging more as "duel-gokko" or pretend dueling, mimicking the turns of phrase and actions of the players on the anime series, but not really grasping the rules of how to take turns and how one monster wins over another. It is often difficult to determine a winner or loser, and duels are often ended without clear resolution. By the third grade or so, kids begin to pick up the formal rules of play and know how to put together a deck. By the upper elementary grades, kids have a good grasp of the basic rules, but often diverge from the official rules in the fine points.

Children generally develop certain conventions of play among their local peer groups, and often make up inventive forms of game play, such as team play, or play with decks mimicking the characters in the comic series. Rules are negotiated locally, among peers, who acquire knowledge through extended peer networks, television, and comic books. Despite the difficulty of the rules, it is very rare for kids to consult the official help line or rule books, and they will engage in ongoing an sometime heated debate about the rules during the course of their game play.

THE MEDIA MIX

Media mix content like Yugioh is based on the fact that their market is well-organized and segmented enough to support a diverse range of consumers and products. The media mix supports different forms of engagement depending on age, with younger children orienting to the anime, manga, and character goods, and older children orienting to the video and card games. It is also sophisticated enough to challenge adults who go even further in developing game strategy and pushing the envelope on the collection aspect.

The way Yugioh content is produced and distributed creates a constant stream of exchange between players, what the industry calls buzz—exchange and trading of actual cards, as well as the exchange of information: what cards have been released, which ones are the most valuable, the most useful, the most coveted, as well as constant discussion and debate about rules and game strategy. When gamers get together, there are always these two forms of exchange: the exchange of cards and the exchange of information.

There is also exchange and cross-referencing between different media types. Game aficionados scour *Jump* for the latest news on Yugioh cards and game

rules, and reading the comic series that previews new cards to be released. The Game Boy versions of the game closely parallel the card game, and players can input codes on the physical cards to make those same cards appear in the virtual version.

In other words, the Yugioh media mix is a highly esoteric and multi-referential symbolic universe. As with any form of esoteric knowledge of this sort, one effect is the exclusion of outsiders, in this instance, most adults such as parents and teachers. Although I encountered a handful of parents at card arenas that knew how to play the game, in general, parents had little interest in learning the game, and only occasionally paid attention to the series on television.

Another outcome of this kind of esoteric consumer and gaming knowledge is that it spawns professional hobby groups, or what in the US we would call otaku groups, or maniac groups in Japan, that are built on the exchange of money, cards, and information about Yugioh. I would like to turn for a moment to these core communities of gamers.

CORE GAMERS

Like most other kinds of popular anime and game content, Yugioh has an avid following of teenage and adult fans. These fans frequent the specialty hobby and card shops that buy and sell single cards, and which sometimes provide duel spaces for players to gather and play. With the advent of the Internet, the communication and organization of core gamers has exploded. A quick web search will bring up hundreds of pages related to Yugioh, ranging from publishers of fan zines (doujinshi), to pages devoted to video game tips and cheats, to pages devoted to the exchange of information about the official card game and buying, selling, and trading cards.

I began my research resolutely focused on the experience of what I perceived as "regular kids" but I found myself drawn more and more to core gaming communities and spent quite some time frequenting hobby shops, card game arenas, and even *doujinshi* events. For one, they are ideal ethnographic informants, thoroughly and genuinely engaged with the subject matter, and incredibly generous with their time, information, and even their playing cards.

For another, core gamers are also instigators of important trends in consumption, technology use, and changes in our notions of childhood. They often challenge mainstream ideas of what is appropriate for adults and children, and foreshadow social changes with their early adoption of new technology and new media culture.

Core gaming communities are in an uneasy relationship with the entertainment industries that create Yugioh content. They exploit gaps in dominant systems of meaning and mainstream commodity capitalism, mobilizing tactics that are a thorn in the side of those relying on mass marketing and distribution strategies. In my research on mainstream industrialists and publishers, most are quick to distance themselves from otaku markets, preferring to align themselves with what they see as normative or "regular" (*futsu na*) children.

SEARCHING

Let me give you one example of the tension between mainstream industry and the otaku market. One kind of expert knowledge is known as *sa-chi* "searching" which are methods with which card collectors identify rare card packs before purchase. Collectors meet with each other on rounds of convenience stores sharing tips and techniques. 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.

Now these tips are posted on numerous web sties 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.

Single cards, often purchased in these ways, are sold at card shops and on the Internet. The total volume of these kinds of exchanges is extremely large. One collector I spoke to said that he purchases about 600 packs of cards in each round of searches and could easily make his living buying and selling Yugioh cards.

Konami has been rumored to have tried, unsuccessfully, to pressure some card shops to stop the sale of single cards. They have also tried to exclude the members of at least one core gaming team from the official tournaments. Konami makes their business out of selling card packs to regular consumers in mainstream distribution channels. They also are working to police the boundary between children and adult culture, promoting an image of Yugioh as designed for "regular kids" and tournaments as contexts that any average child could participate in.

At the same time, Konami is plays to multiple markets by mobilizing mass-oriented strategies as well as fodder for core gamers. They have both an official

and unofficial backchannel discourse. They continue to generate buzz and insider knowledge through an increasingly intricate and ever-changing set of rules and the release of special edition cards and card packs.

BORDER ZONES

The Yugioh case demonstrates how the market for media mix content is becoming organized into a dual structure, where there are mainstream, mass distribution channels which market and sell to run of the mill consumers, and an intermediary zone which blurs the distinction between production and consumption, which is fueled by the Internet and otaku groups. In this extremely complex set of media environments and markets, we are seeing new kinds of contact zones, tensions, and cultural politics.

The cultural establishment, represented by the voices of parents and educators, and Konami's official marketing discourse, maintains a boundary between the sanctioned consumption of Yugioh content by children and certain unsanctioned forms of consumption of Yugioh content by adult core gamers and collectors. It is clear that the legitimate place for children's entertainment is in the home, under the surveillance of parents, and that the legitimate economic relation is one of standardized commodity relations, distributed through mainstream channels such as convenience and toy stores.

None of the parents I interviewed condoned buying and selling single cards at professional card shops, though some turned a blind eye towards occasional visits. In particular, they did not like the idea of their kids selling and buying rare cards for high prices in the professional networks. Part of the problem was price and the fanning of consumer desire to levels well beyond what children could manage financially and psychologically. Here are a few quotes from parents.

> If my child can understand the meaning of spending 5000 yen on one card, then it would be okay. With 5000 yen I could buy this, and this, and this. But instead, I want to buy this one card. Understanding this trade-off is quite different from just buying it because he desires it.

Probing further, there is also the fear of exploitation, that adult collectors may abuse their power as adults in exploiting gullible children. Children are bound to lose in financial negotiations with adult collectors.

> This may be a strange way to put it, but I explain it this way. I know not all these guys are like this. But what if some strange guy came up to you and said, "Check this out. This is really rare. It really could be sold for 10,000 yen, but just for you, I will sell it for 1000 yen." What if you buy it, and later

find out that it wasn't rare at all. Could you really make that judgment?
And could you take that responsibility?

Card vendors also see relations with children as a difficult border zone. Some see children as a legitimate market for their goods, and indeed, there are some that exploit children by selling counterfeit cards. Others would prefer not to sell to children because they see them as unreliable and irresponsible in their financial transactions. Card shops have limitations on children selling cards, though buying is generally not a problem.

While card shops have firm policies in place for their transactions with children, buying, trading, and selling over the Internet is a gray zone. One trader described a problem he had with a trade he did over the Internet with a junior high school student.

> He said he was in a big hurry, and wanted it ASAP, so I sent the card express mail, and he said he would do the same. But a month passed, and he still didn't send his card. When I emailed him, he would say, "Oh, I will send it tomorrow" or "I sent it already." When I finally got the card, it was not the card that he had promised, and it was in terrible condition.

What was most galling to him was the response of the parent, when he visited the child's home to try to talk through the problem. "The father took the attitude that his son had done nothing wrong. After all, he is just a child."

In contrast to the parental stance, that his son was innocent by virtue of his being a child, the adult trader had a different view of childhood responsibility, which was much less innocent and cloistered. In the words of another core gamer, describing children's often-desperate efforts to get the cards that they desire, "Kids are dirty." In fact, this same gamer described with some pain how he used to share cards and information with neighborhood kids, but some false rumors spread that he was selling cards, and parents asked him to stop talking with their kids.

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF YUGIOH

After they became popular, adults have been increasingly setting limits and boundaries to children's transactions around Yugioh. Yugioh cards are generally banned from most schools and after school centers because they cause problems when cards are stolen or traded among children. Parents have often found that they have had to intervene.

Children are hungry for cards that can increase their position in the status hierarchy of Yugioh, hungry for insider knowledge. The rumor mill among

children is very active though often ill informed. All the children that I spoke to about it had heard of search techniques, and some even had some half-baked ideas of how it might be done. Children share the same active and entrepreneurial stance, cultural fascinations, and interests as the core gamers, but they lack the same freedom of motion and access to money and information. And as parents have pointed out, they lack social and financial maturity. But children's self-perceptions are probably closer to that of the game otaku, and they create their own microeconomies among peer groups, trading, buying, and selling cards in ways that mimic the more professional adult networks. They see parents and teachers as usually well-meaning but ignorant participants in this world.

Until recently, by managing children's physical motion, peer activity and allowance, parents could create natural limits to kids participation in adult worlds. With the advent of the Internet, however, it is going to become more and more difficult for parents to police access to these social worlds, and to maintain a separation between adult and child consumers. Children's media consumption is no longer confined to the space of the home, and relatively passive engagement with media such as television and manga. I believe that we are entering a more interactive, communicative, networked, and socially extroverted age in children's media, of which Yugioh is an outstanding example.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF CUTE

I want to return now to the questions opening this talk. How can the case of Yugioh inform our ideas of childhood? Is childhood really being corrupted and eroded by premature exposure to adult content, values, and interests? Are technologically-mediated engagements replacing healthy relationships with peers, parents and community?

In many ways, the Yugioh case exemplifies many of our fears around the corruption of childhood. Children are being exploited as consumers from a tender age, rubbing shoulders with adult collectors and gamers in the pursuit of fetishized commodities. They are immersed in fantasy content that is often violent and gives an unrealistic picture of social life. All of these are concerns we must engage with daily as parents, educators and concerned adults. But there is more happening here than children being passively exploited and brainwashed by adults and commercial media. In this last part of my talk, I want to discuss two trends in which children's culture is becoming a generative and socially active site of cultural production.

The first thing that I would like to point out is that Yugioh and most other Japanimation content is clearly *coded and marketed* as children's culture despite adults' role in its creation. Just as Yugi's immature frame harbors the spirit of a

powerful adult pharaoh, Yugioh content is a celebration of triumphs over what children see as adult norms of responsibility, deferred gratification, discipline, work, and academic achievement. Childhood has become a cultural commodity of intense value, fascination and power, and only when we have created something of value, can we experience a sense of that object at risk.

Given the collusion between well-meaning adults that hold out a vision of child's play as a realm of authentic, pure, and carefree pleasure, and industry that produces this vision of childhood through an endless stream of high-tech commodities, should it surprise us that adults are drawn into its spell as well? Childhood is becoming a compelling cultural export outside of the domain of actual children, as adults work to discover their inner children and an authentic childhood that they probably never had. Otaku and adult fan communities are one indicator of this. In girls' popular culture, we see the commodification of cute, marketed at adults. Approximately one third of all character goods in Japan are consumed by adults aged nineteen and older (Databank 2000). It is quite unremarkable here to see characters such as Miffy and Snoopy used for advertising adult products such as bank accounts, insurance polities, and vacation packages. More insidiously, schoolgirls and childlike comic characters are becoming widely acceptable as objects of adult male desire.

In his study of advertising images in the sixties and seventies, Thomas Frank describes what he calls the conquest of cool, the appropriation of hip, youthful, counter cultural images in selling commodities that broadcast resistance to the square mainstream of work and discipline (Frank 1997). I believe we are seeing a similar process in the conquest of cute in the commodification of images and products of childhood. Childhood play is becoming fetishized and commodified as a site of resistance to adult values of labor, discipline, and diligence. It becomes a receptacle for our dissatisfactions about rationalized labor, educational achievement, and mainstream status hierarchies. For adults, these images of childhood are a colorful escape from the dulling rhythms of salaried work and household labor.

When we talk about childhood disappearing and eroding, we are in the midst of a kind of cultural paradox. As we pour more and more of our attentions and concerns into creating a cute, pure, and carefree childhood, we also make childhood more and more an object of adult intervention and control.

HYPERSOCIALITY AND THE DIGITAL MEDIA MIX

But even as adults are messing with children's lives more and more, the consumption of children's culture is becoming a site of more active, differentiated and entrepreneurial consumption. Rather than being a one-way street connoted by the term mass media or mass culture, current media mixes in children's

content assume uniquely active and differentiated consumer positions and a high degree of media and technical literacy. In contrast to the passive mode of engagement invoked by television, or the solitary mode of engagement invoked by video games, games such as Yugioh and Pokemon, and the related exchange or cards, monsters, information and money, are hypersocial, sociality augmented by a dense set of technologies, signifiers, and systems of exchange.

Far from being antisocial, atomized and depersonalized, I see children's engagement with Yugioh representing a new kind of technologically enabled hypersociality. But the social relations supported and produced by Yugioh are a far cry from neighborhood kids gathering to play tag or getting yelled at by the *ojisan* next door. These new forms of play take densely coded fantasy worlds as a starting point, as the raw material for play. They rely on activist, otaku-like engagement with esoteric knowledge communities. Our longstanding reliance on branding and sanctioned distribution channels is breaking down. Yugioh takes many forms, some of which are acceptable to most parents, and some of which are not. Forms of play, exchange, and interpretation are becoming harder and harder for parents to regulate based on surface readings. Yugioh may be a passing fad, but trends in technology, culture, and political economy point in these directions. Even girls content, which has tended to be more low-tech and clearly demarcated from boys' domains, is now entering the digital age, with fan groups exploding on the Internet and video game versions of *shoujo manga* proliferating.

PARENTING MEDIA KIDS

As part of my research on children's media culture, my Abe project in particular focuses on parents' role in managing children's media and consumption. In conclusion, I would like to focus a bit on the issue of intergenerational relations and how parents and other adults can productively intervene in children's engagements with popular culture.

It is not really that we want children to be in a world apart from adult values and interests, but rather we want to manage those contact points, limiting them to sites that promote positive social, psychological, and physical development. Traditionally, these have been educational institutions, mainstream media, standardized commodities, and contact between parents and their children. Other sites of contact between adults and children are seen as dangerous, contact with strangers in urban centers and on the Internet, financial transactions that are outside the confines of standardized commodity capitalism. Now, in an era of proliferating cable channels and the Internet, the boundary of the home is just as porous to outside influences and contact as the street.

But much as we set our children free to roam the messy realities of local communities and outdoor space, we need to find ways to allow a space of autonomy and exploration across the digital landscape. As the natural boundaries of local communities once functioned, we need to define natural boundaries for children's activity in mediaspace that celebrates their self-determination, while cushioning against risks of exploitation. And we need adult role models and leaders to help guide children through these domains, setting standards of value and morality that are tuned to contemporary realities rather than calling children back to a byegone era. Commodity capitalist relations have become a legitimate contact zone between strangers and children by the brute force of marketing. We need to legitimize new forms of contact between adults and kids in the domain of play that go beyond these financial arrangements.

This is not a simple matter, and I don't have the answers on what we need to do as parents in managing the chasm between overprotection and risk in relation to children's access to digital media and consumer culture. But I do have three examples from my research that point to possibilities for celebrating the strengths of contemporary children's culture, while revitalizing it with what many of us feel we may have lost.

My first example is an encounter between a group of core gamers and a group of children, organized by a group of mothers. One enterprising mother had contacted a leader of a Yugioh game team through his web page, and asked him if he would be willing to come teach her son and his friends how to play the game. She was tired of their constant bickering over the rules, and felt that they could really use the expertise of more competent players. He was more than willing, and showed up at the restaurant owned by one of the mothers with a group of eight card experts and a nosy anthropologist and her research assistant and boxes of cards as gifts. A revolving group of about fifteen children had these Yugioh *senpai* instruct them in game play, look through their decks, and sharing cards from their own collections. These particular relationships did not extend beyond this day, but I could imagine a scenario where they might, where we could channel the energies and interests of adult fans and gamers into productive points of contact which are not anonymous encounters and financial transactions the internet or in a card shop, but are ongoing relationships, building mixed generational communities of expertise and knowledge-sharing. In fact, Yugioh card trading and play is a source of many valuable lessons in fairness and how to negotiate value and meaning in the contemporary world.

Much as we have indulged our children's infatuations with rock stars and athletes, despite their many personal shortcomings, we may need to learn how to indulge children's infatuations with game and media experts. This won't happen by shutting out all adult participation in these worlds, but rather by legitimizing particular forms of adult participation and leadership, which will act as a natural

beacon for children. This is a different kind of community, a different kind of engagement between adults and children from what we are accustomed to. We are not talking about the neighborhood *oniisan* or *ojisan* helping one's child throw a baseball, but we are talking about new kinds of alliances and linkages that are based in networks of technology and information as much as in local places. We need to work harder to put a human face and build ongoing intergenerational exchange in these digital economies.

Another example is from a Gakudoukan, a public afterschool center, in central Tokyo where I participant observed and spoke to the teachers there. I recall being surprised, when I first visited, with all the products of popular culture present. They were sponsoring Yugioh tournaments, the walls were plastered with colorful drawings of popular characters such a Hamutarou and Yugi, the library was full of manga, and housed a television for viewing videotaped cartoons. In my observations at the Gakdoukan I gradually came to realize that the teachers there managed a balance between incorporating elements of consumer culture, and encouraging creative and generative play. In an interview, one teacher gave voice to this orientation

> I think that children really don't need to have visual culture and can make their own play. They have the power to take the world of visual culture and make it their own. So we don't say that manga is not good, or you can't watch videos for too long, or commercial things are bad. Not at all. I feel like I would like them to use these things as a foothold to increase their own creativity.

In many ways, this teacher gives voice to the faith in children's creativity and autonomy that I heard from many parents.

Afterschool contexts of play of this sort, where children are free to explore their own interests, and adults play an engaged but supporting role, are valuable sites for children to engage with popular culture in a social context with peers as well as adults. As I observed girls drawing their own pictures and cutouts of Pokemon and playing Pokemon-gokko, boys huddled together over Yugioh comic books, or another older girl teaching some younger girls how to draw *shoujo manga*, I felt that given the space, the time, and a reasonable set of limits, children will create their own versions of childhood and meaning with the cultural resources at hand.

Finally, I would like to introduce the voice of a parent with what I found to be an inspiring stance towards his children's engagements with media. Himself a cultural producer, he was quite critical of mainstream media in our discussion of various television shows and fads. In particular, he described ways in which he

tried to convey to his son the conditions of production and marketing that produce media and fashion spectacles.

> I don't let him do other things while watching TV. It's disrespectful to the people who made the show. So watch properly. Do you know how hard they worked to make this? They probably stayed up all night. They made drawings one at a time on vinyl, and made the characters move a little at a time. That's what you call cell animation. By making films one page at a time, it turns out like this.

He continues a little later in the interview:

> So when he wants a Game Boy Advance, I say fine. But I ask him to think a little bit about why it is that everyone is so excited about getting one. I guess because we are a merchant family, he's been exposed to this kind of thinking from an early age.

This is an example of critical engagement and media literacy that goes beyond surface content to query the actual social and economic contexts in which media are located. It encourages a kind of identification and recognition with the adult worlds of media producers that sees even so-called passive media such as television as a social and cultural production, based in particular political economic conditions. Although it does not build direct interpersonal relationships, I believe this kind of awareness is another form of productive engagement between children's and adults' worlds.

These are just hints to responses for complex problems of which I am just beginning to scratch the surface. I will be continuing this research with parents and children in the US for the second half of my Abe fellowship. I am hopeful that the US context will yield similar examples of strategies and positions that engage positively and creatively with the current realities of modern children. I look forward now to hearing from all of you about your perspectives and experiences.

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