

INTERTEXTUAL ENTERPRISES:
WRITING ALTERNATIVE PLACES AND MEANINGS
IN THE MEDIA MIXED NETWORKS OF YUGIOH

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- DRAFT -

In the late eighties and early nineties, during a renaissance in Japanese *anime* (animation) outer space provided the other-worldly context for disrupting narratives of the ordinary. The outer space genre of anime juxtaposed old technologies with new, and integrated the fantastic with familiar and everyday social dramas. In *Space Cruiser Yamato* a World War II battle cruiser is reborn as a space ship. In *Urusei Yatsura*, Lum, a sexy space alien falls in love with an earthling and becomes a vortex of spiraling chaos in his formerly mundane life. In *Galaxy Express 999* a young boy travels between distant planets in an other-worldly steam locomotive. Other *anime* genres dealt with the everyday dramas of romance, sport, and school life. In contrast, the fantasy genre needed a distanced spatial canvas upon which to render narratives of escape and difference, and space became one of the most compelling staging grounds for this imaginary of childhood fantasy.

In more recent years, cyberspace and inner space has come to occupy a similar role in the imaginary of Japanese popular culture. We don't need to travel vast physical distances to encounter the uncanny, but can find it close to home, in the near future, in multiple-personality psychological narratives, in an everyday world visited by alien

beings and supernatural creatures of uncertain origins. As fantasy has become a well-established element of run-of-the-mill media-enhanced reality, narratives of space exploration have imploded, becoming part of a pastiche of reference that sees little need to differentiate between aliens, mythology, the supernatural, and the virtual, all of which are inseparable from everyday and familiar worlds. Narratives of other worldly experience persist in technologically and phantasmagorically enhanced versions of our everyday world as goddesses, angels, monsters, aliens, and virtual creatures inhabit the homes and psyches of children. In *Digimon*, chosen children are able to enter the DigiWorld through their computers, and Digimon wander into our world through their relations with children. In *Corrector Yui*, the heroine battles forces of evil by donning her virtual reality helmet and transforming into a cyborg superhero. In *Angelic Layer*, young girls participate in a competitive sport where they manipulate fighters in virtual space. Most famously, in *Pokemon*, otherwise unremarkable children develop intimate relationships with monsters with special powers, adventuring in a pastoral world that may be earth or another planet. The distance between here and elsewhere has been rendered inconsequential.

One focus of my work has been on *Yugioh*, a *manga* (comic) and *anime* series that also relies on a blend of the real and virtual, and the interpenetration of the other world of multi-referential fantasy with the everyday social lives of children. In this paper, I describe how the fantastic and other worldly characters and narratives of the *Yugioh* pantheon are part of the everyday constructions of identity and social relations among children, adult fans, and media industries. First I frame this work as an effort in the ethnographic siting, or locating, of the virtual. Then I describe the cultural politics of a

linked but heterogeneous imaginary of *Yugioh* as it ties together people, commodities, and images in a complex media mix. In addition to making the fantasy of *Yugioh* manifest across a wide range of settings, the practices that I track also have the effect of rendering different versions of childhood, gender, and economic relations.

Ethnography of “Other” Space

Like the ethnographies of alien encounters described in other papers in this volume, I am interested in tracing how people in “our world” experience and produce intimate narratives of distant and strange worlds. What are the concrete locations and materials through which alternative realities are inscribed and subjectified, the contact points where we encounter and identify with the virtual other? How do marginal and fantastic imaginaries function as sites of alternative cultural production and performance? Finally, how can we translate an anthropological commitment to the study of difference and everyday practice to virtualized narratives of the uncanny?

My fieldwork in Japan and the US examines popular culture as material through which consequential difference, alternative realities, and differentiation from the mainstream are produced and performed. Unlike traditionally exotic anthropological objects, these sites of inquiry display difference as a product of partial, selective, and self-conscious performance rather than as an outcome of pre-inscribed and wholistic cultural distance. This is a move that complements efforts to tease apart the isomorphism between peoples, places, and cultures (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997) and transnational and diasporic studies in particular (Clifford, 1997; Ong, 1999), stressing cultural difference

and heterogeneity within and across national boundaries. Unlike studies that take national identity or ethnicity as the objects to be analyzed and deconstructed, however, my work looks at forms of affiliation such as gender, age, and social status and how they are “placed” by new media networks rather than geographic boundaries. These are exoticisms that are part of the intimate and everyday workings of “our societies” and commodity capitalism, a response to a proliferating palette of identifications and imaginaries that flow within and across national borders.

Other-worldly discourses and images of cyberspace and mediaspace are built through the real, mundane, and material networks of commodity capitalism and everyday social practice, and anthropological practice involves first tracing these networks of spatially distributed relations. Methodologically, this has meant following *Yugioh* content across multiple sites of production and consumption, and looking at how media content is mobilized in practice by people in a wide range of social locations. To borrow from Arjun Appadurai (1996), this is an effort at looking at “the imagination as a social fact” rather than a set of referents to be examined independent of practice and material relations. This has meant analyzing how *Yugioh* content is a product of particular material relations in new forms of commodity capitalism. The production of virtualities “out there” is also about the production of realities “at home.” In contrast to contextualization in a geographic area, George Marcus has argued that

within a multi-sited research imaginary, tracing and describing the connections and relationships among sites previously thought to be

incommensurate *is* ethnography's way of making arguments and providing its own contexts of significance (1998: 14).

The innovation of the ethnographer as well as the informant is less in rendering the unfamiliar intelligible, but in tracing unconventional readings of and linkages between familiar but dispersed objects, in producing and performing the everyday as a site of phantasmic creativity. In the case of children's popular culture, and *Yugioh* in particular, these networks extend beyond the texts themselves, the creators of the texts, and the intended consumers, to include a wide range of social actors that repackage, appropriate, and perform *Yugioh* in often unexpected ways.

Childhood, Fantasy, and the Media Mix

At least since the rise of television in the fifties and beyond, children's popular culture has been a haven for imagining alternative realities, ghettoized and (partially) contained by the "naturally" imaginative and phantasmagoric life-stage of childhood. Even before the advent of mass media, childhood provided a repository of difference both intimate and strange, but recent years have seen childhood fantasy becoming both a more fantastic and capitalized site of cultural production in Japan and elsewhere. Children's play is cloistered in the domestic space of the home, controlled by the institution of the family. And yet, particularly since the advent of the television, and more so with the advent of the Internet, kids are also getting "out" more, in virtual and imaginary spaces produced through media networks. The imaginary spaces of children's media are also moving "in"

more to structure the subjectivities of children, domestic micropolitics, and a growing industry. Morphing from the *Mickey Mouse Club* to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, children's popular culture is becoming more fantastic, more culturally hybrid, and more "far out" even as it is becoming an utterly unremarkable aspect of everyday life for children (Cross, 1997), and increasingly, for adults as well.

The production of a space of childhood as a uniquely innocent space, deserving of protection, has gone hand in hand with increasing adult engineering of childhood, ranging from formal schooling to the proliferation of media designed for children. *Yugioh* and other contemporary media mixes in children's content need to be located within this production of childhood as a distinct social arena and market. Popular culture has become a mechanism for defining a distinct life-stage of childhood and articulating a counter-hegemonic subculture of children in opposition to the hegemonic adult values. In *Sold Separately*, Ellen Seiter writes about how commercials for depict children's products as a vehicle to critique and escape adult worlds and accountabilities.

Anti-authoritarianism is translated into images of buffoonish fathers and ridiculed, humiliated teachers. The sense of family democracy is translated into a world where kids rule, where peer culture is all.

Permissiveness becomes instant gratification: the avid pursuit of personal pleasure, the immediate taste thrill, the party in the bag (117-18).

Much as the counterculture of the sixties and seventies provided powerful advertising tropes in creating a new youth-oriented market (Frank, 1997), the growth of

the children's culture market has rested on differentiation from adult sensibilities and everyday accountabilities. In Japan, antagonistic discourses between children and adults are somewhat less pronounced (White, 1994), but children's popular culture has reflected a similar escapist and fantastic element. Japanese *anime* has provided a unique vision of childhood as charmed, cute, but non-innocent, an imaginary that has proved compelling both in Japan and overseas. This particular imaginary has been increasingly integrated into international media markets, particularly in the past decade, when *anime* became a major international commodity. In the later years of the nineties, Japan stole center stage in transnational marketplaces of children's media by innovating in media forms that create a hybrid relation between analog and digital media, a merging of the strengths of broadcast media with the communicative and performative power of the Internet and video games. *Pokemon* revolutionized the workings of media technology. By linking content in multiple media forms such as video games, card games, television, film, *manga* books, toys, and household objects, *Pokemon* created a new kind of citational network that has come to be called a "media mix."

The media mix of *Pokemon*, and subsequent series such as *Digimon* and *Yugioh*, create a virtual world that manifests in multiple media forms, and through which consumers can craft their own narrative trajectories through play with video and card games. This is a networked world of expanding reference that destabilizes the prior orthodoxy of children's media. Rather than spoon-feed stabilized narratives and heroes to a supposedly passive audience, *Pokemon* and *Yugioh* invite children to collect, acquire, recombine, and enact stories within their peer networks, trading cards, information, and monsters. These media mixes challenge our ideas of childhood agency and the passivity

of media consumption, highlighting the active, entrepreneurial, and technologized aspects of children's engagement with popular culture. They also create a proliferating set of contact points between practice, media, and imaginings, as players perform and identify with media characters in multiple and often unexpected ways.

Yugioh

Yugioh was the most popular media mix content among elementary age boys in Japan in the years from 2000-2002. Launched in 1996, the *Yugioh* manga 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. One survey in 2000 of three hundred students in a Kyoto elementary school indicated that by the third grade, every student owned some *Yugioh* cards (Asahi Shinbun, 2001). The *Yugioh* animation was released last year in the US in 2001, and now the card game has overtaken *Pokemon* here in popularity.

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, who becomes a second personality for him, Yami Yugi (Yugi of darkness), 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 pivots around the rivalry between two master duelists, Yugi and Kaiba, with Yugi representing one pole of

kindness and fraternity and Kaiba representing an opposing pole of ruthless individualism. Occasionally the two find themselves united against forces of evil, such as the shadow corporation ‘the Big Five’ or a group of ‘‘Card Hunters’’ that use cheating and counterfeiting to rob others of their rare cards.

The series focuses on a card game Magic and Wizards, a thinly veiled reference to Magic the Gathering, the card game that swept the US in the early nineties. In the *manga* and animation, players engage in lengthy duels where they pit monster, magic and trap cards against each other in dramatic play, often involving technologies that render the dueling monsters in 3D. The monsters include creatures derived from an entire spectrum of fantasy genres: outer-space, medieval, occult, mythological, cartoon, magical. Red-eyed dragons blast robot warriors and a Venus on a half-shell casts spells on penguin soldiers and carnivorous hamburgers. These fantastic creatures are rendered in the everyday world with more and more fidelity through advancing virtual reality technologies. The series began by mapping a contact point between the world of the monsters and the human characters in the threat of psychological horror; Yami Yugi’s special powers could hurl his opponent into a ‘world of darkness’ inhabited by the monsters depicted in the playing cards. Eventually, the (fictional) creators of the card game develop technologies that render the monsters in fully-interactive 3D, inflicting real-life pain as their monsters attack each other and the players. The *anime* depicts real and virtual worlds in constant and dynamic contact. In current renditions, duels becomes vividly life-like through ‘‘duel disks’’ worn on the players’ arms that project the monsters in vivid holographic 3D.

Yugioh is similar to the media mixes of *Pokemon* and *Digimon* in that they

involve human players that mobilize other-worldly monsters in battle. Unlike *Digimon* and *Pokemon*, however, the monsters in *Yugioh* inhabit the everyday world of Yugi and his peers in the form of trading cards that the players carry with them in their ongoing adventures. The “other world” of the monsters is in intimate relationship with the everyday; the human players in the *manga* mobilize monsters in their everyday world, and kids in “real life” mobilize these same monsters in their play with trading cards and game boys. The activities of children in our world thus closely mimic the activities and materialities of children in Yugi’s world. They collect and trade the same cards and engage in play with the same strategies and rules. Scenes in the *anime* depict Yugi frequenting card shops and buying card packs, enjoying the thrill of getting a rare card, dramatizing everyday moments of media consumption in addition to the highly stylized and fantastic dramas of the duels themselves.

Just as in the *anime*, the focus of dramatic action for kids is moments of card play. 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. Some participated in Internet groups that exchanged information and *Yugioh* goods. 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. 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 playing deck of forty or more cards that reflects a personal style of play. Children 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 *manga* series. Rules are negotiated locally, among peers, who acquire knowledge through extended peer networks, television, and *manga*.

Yugioh was a ubiquitous fact of life for kids in Japan during the years that I was conducting fieldwork in Tokyo. Boys would appear at playgrounds with their favorite cards displayed in cases worn around their necks. As I pick up my three year-old daughter from daycare, I see two tots with wielding dominoes, striking a characteristic duelist pose. “Time to duel!” one of them announces. Conversations about dark witches and white dragons peppered talk that I overheard on trains at on the street. At a McDonald’s I see a little girl, maybe five years old, excitedly tearing open a pack of new *Yugioh* cards under the supervision of her puzzled parents. “What do you do with these?” they ask. “They are just cool.” Even children not old enough to play the card game enjoyed the *anime* series and were energized by the palpable electricity of competitive play that coursed through the networks of kids’ play and imaginings. *Yugioh* was truly a mass phenomenon, creating an alternative imaginary and exchange economy that alternately alarmed, perplexed, and amused older generations.

In the remainder of this paper, I describe three uncommon contact points between the fantasy worlds of *Yugioh* and the worlds of child and adult players, sites that direct some of this electricity into more concentrated spectacles of the *Yugioh* imagination. I illustrate some of the ways in which the other world of *Yugioh*, embedded in a variety of media technologies such as trading cards, the internet, and *anime*, become mobilized as concrete material and symbolic resources in the lives of committed *Yugioh* players and

fans. These sites of translation between fantasy and reality are sites of consequential subject formation, social negotiation, and the production of childhood as a particular cultural domain.

Siting 1: Yugi Incarnate

In the course of my fieldwork, I had the good fortune to meet Yugi incarnate, an eleven year-old *Yugioh* expert. I will call him Kaz. My research assistants and I had been frequenting one hobby shop in central Tokyo that hosted weekly *Yugioh* tournaments. We are usually the only female participants in these events dominated by guys in their teens through their twenties. Kaz was one of the regulars at this event, generally beating the adults that competed regularly, and taking home the weekly gift certificate prize. It was unusual to see elementary aged kids that frequented these mostly adult-oriented spaces, and Kaz stood out even more in being the most skilled *Yugioh* player of the bunch. This despite a substantial financial handicap compared with the adult players who could afford to buy all the cards that they needed to play. He lived in a single parent household headed by his father, and had an unusual amount of freedom in traveling through the city after school and on the weekends.

Kaz's play with the older duelists in the tournaments had overtones of Yugi that other players remarked upon. One of the leaders of one of the powerful adult gaming teams called him a prodigy of immense talent. Another player described how he was "like Yugi" in that he always managed to draw the right card at just the right time. Another player explained to me that Kaz did not always have the best strategy, but he

was fearless in his attacks and relied on his intuition, having “the heart of the true duelist” often ascribed to Yugi. I often marveled at his composure as he trounced older players in duel after duel. He was a ruthless player, and after defeating his opponents would often rub it in with an understated but cocky self-confidence.

Nobody was surprised when Kaz won in the Tokyo regional junior championship hosted by Konami, the company that makes *Yugioh* cards. Konami sponsors separate tournaments for adults and children, and Kaz was just below the cut-off for the junior category. I was among the small group of his fans that followed Kaz to this event and the subsequent national championship held at the Toy Show. Upon entering the huge hall of the trade show, we quickly spot the *Yugioh* booth. It is dedicated to the national championship, and the center of the booth has a large enclosed structure that spectators enter in from one side. It is a replica of the stage that was the setting for the second duel between Yugi and Kaiba. The center of the space has a glass box containing a table and just enough space for two duelists. Along the periphery is seating for the spectators and a booth with two commentators giving blow-by-blow descriptions of play.

Before long, the final duel of the junior “King of Duelists” tournament is announced. Of course, Kaz has made it to the finals and his name is trumpeted together with his opponent’s. The two boys walk through a set of double-doors that open with clouds of smoke pouring out to announce their entry. In contrast to the spectacle of plexiglass and smoke being produced on the corporate side, the players and spectators are strikingly mundane. Kaz is dressed in the same black Puma jogging suit that I see him wearing almost ever time I see him, and even Kaz’s close friends alternate between watching the duel and chatting and playing with their Game Boys, barely attentive to the

action on center stage. As is typical of the duels of more experienced players, there is little dialog between players, and all action is understated. In contrast to younger children who might mimic the turns of phrase of the *manga* characters and boast about the cards they are playing, professional duelists communicate with gesture and expression more than verbal bravado, making the emotional undercurrents of the duel detectable only to the experienced observer. Kaz wins and his friends are blasé, declaring it was “a foregone conclusion.” In the award ceremony that follows, the press snaps pictures of a grinning Kaz and he appears in the next edition of *Jump Comics* together with the next installment of *Yugioh*.

Kaz’s relationship to Yugi is less surface mimicry than performance of a resonant subjective and social location. Kaz’s virtuosity at the card game and the grudging respect of his adult opponents mirror the narrative of *Yugioh*. Like Yugi, too, Kaz had two faces, the face of the ruthless duelist and the childish persona of a sixth grader. My research assistants describe in their fieldnotes how they think he is adorable, and I feel the same. He has pudgy pink cheeks and an embarrassed and shy smile that appears when he is talking about anything other than *Yugioh*. After winning the national championship with his characteristic swagger, he blushes beet red when one of my research assistants congratulates him and gives him a small gift. For Kaz and his cohort, performing Yugi means performing in competition; persona, age, dress, and language are secondary to proficiency at the game. Yugi is a role model for a practices bounded by the parameters of a form of game play.

Kaz channels the narrative of *Yugioh* into the referents of our world, making them consequential and meaningful in the competitive negotiations between children and

between children and adults. Kaz, like Yugi, inverts the power dynamic between adult and child within the virtual world of *Yugioh* play. He is a figure of a child elevated to heroic proportions in a national cultural imaginary, backed by an immense media apparatus that provides the cultural resources for his performances. Kaz provides an example of engagement with *Yugioh* that demonstrates the agentive potential of children when given the resources to compete with adults, as well as evidence of the growing appeal of “child’s play” in the world of adult recreation. Although Kaz’s precocious performances challenge some of the power hierarchies between adult and child, his play also reinscribes the domain of play as authentically child-like, a domain bracketed from the “real” consequentiality of work and mainstream achievement.

Siting 2: Card Otaku and the Resignification of Value

Unlike Kaz, who is an uncommon but legitimate subject in the narratives of *Yugioh* and the competitive spectacles produced by game industries, many adult gamers are in an uneasy relationship to the dominant narratives of *Yugioh*. Adult game and anime fans are often described by the at-times pejorative term *otaku*, which roughly translates to “media geek” with hints of connoisseurship associated with the American term “cult media.”

Otaku are often objects of suspicion because of what are perceived as dangerous boundary crossings between reality and fantasy, adult and child. Unlike children, who are the “normal” audience for animated content, the cultural category of *otaku* has regressive, obsessive, erotic, and antisocial overtones for the cultural mainstream. Recently the term has migrated to Euro-American contexts as a way of celebrating forms of media and

techno-fetishism associated with Japanese popular culture and technology. Key to its popularization in the US, the premier issue of *Wired* described *otaku* as “a new generation of anti-social, nihilistic whiz-kids,’ or “socially inept but often brilliant technological shut-ins” (Greenfeld, 1993). In Japan, the terms gets used more broadly to refer to individuals or specific groups, as well as a certain cultural style; *otaku-kei* (*otaku*-like) events, fashions, magazines and technologies that may or may not be shunned by the mainstream.

Like most popular forms of *anime* content, *Yugioh* has an avid following of adult fans. Adult *otaku* communities are the illegitimate offspring of the *Yugioh* media empire, and 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. Card *otaku*, who buy and sell cards through alternative networks, even to the extent of creating counterfeit or original cards, are considered a threat to normalized capitalist relations. Let me give you one example of the tension between mainstream industry and *otaku*, how they intervene in the flow of symbolic and monetary capital between producers and consumers.

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. 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.

One kind of *otaku* 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. 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.

I find myself out at one am with a group of card collectors, pawing through three boxes of just released cards. The salesperson is amused but slightly annoyed, and it takes some negotiating to get him to open all three boxes. My companions pride themselves on their well-trained fingertips that enable them to identify the key card packs. They teach me a few tricks of the trade, but clearly this is a skill born of intensive practice. After identifying all the rare, super rare, and ultra rare cards in the store, they head out to clear the other neighborhood shops of rare cards before daybreak, when run of the mill consumers will start purchasing.

Single cards, often purchased in these ways, are sold at card shops and on the Internet. In city centers in Tokyo such as Shibuya, Ikebukuro, and Shinjuku, there are numerous hobby shops that specialize in the buying and selling of single cards, and which are frequented by adult collectors as well as children. These cards can fetch prices ranging from pennies to hundreds of dollars for special edition cards. Street vendors and booths at carnivals will also often have a display of single-sale *Yugioh* cards that children

flock to. The Internet, however, is probably the site that mediates the majority of these player-to-player exchanges. The total volume is extremely large. One collector I spoke to said he purchases about 600 packs of cards in each round of searches and could easily make his living buying and selling *Yugioh* cards.

Some of these adult traders are in it for that money, but all that I encountered in the card shops that I frequented proclaimed their love for *Yugioh*, and their commitment to the game. They would face off with Kaz and each other in high-tension competition, groaning in frustration at their losses. They organize themselves in regional teams that compete in official competitions that Kaz and other kids would participate in. They generally associate with each other with pseudonyms like “Yellowtail” or “White Moon” that they use only in the context of card game play, bracketing their more mundane identities in the moments when they sit at the duel table. The Internet sites for these *Yugioh* teams are the primary site for affiliating, with chat rooms, bulletin boards, card trade areas, and virtual duel spaces. Their real life meetings are called *offukai* or “offline meetings,” a term similar to what US virtual communities call “flesh meets”

Children share the same active and entrepreneurial stance, cultural fascinations, and interests as the adult gamers, but they lack the same freedom of motion and access to money and information. 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 create their own microeconomies among peer groups, trading, buying, and selling cards in ways that mimic the more professional adult networks. Despite adult crackdowns on trading and selling between children, it is ubiquitous among card game players.

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 adult gaming team from the official tournaments. Konami makes their business out of selling card packs to regular consumers in mainstream distribution channels. At the same time, Konami is plays to multiple markets by mobilizing mass oriented strategies as well as fodder for *otaku* and entrepreneurial kids. 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. The market for media mix content is becoming organized into a dual structure, where there are mainstream, mass distribution channels that market and sell to run of the mill consumers, and an *otaku* zone of exchange which blurs the distinction between production and consumption, children and adults.

This backchannel discourse of the card *otaku* is the mostly unsung but often performed story of *Yugioh* as a case of new economy commodity capitalism and an entrepreneurial and wired childhood. Unlike the spectacular narratives told at official tournaments and on the TV screen, the furtive rounds of collectors in the shadow of the night, and the flow of cards through Internet commerce and street-level exchange point to alternative material realities in the symbolic exchange of *Yugioh* cards. These are entrepreneurial narratives involving forms of virtuosity and negotiation that are morally complicated and subversive, in contrast to the heroic narrative of good versus evil and spectacular competition gracing the pages of the *manga* series and official tournaments. The symbolic capital of *Yugioh* refuses to be contained within the sanctioned networks

and contact points of mainstream industrialists marketing hegemonic narratives to supposedly passive masses of children.

Siting 3: Appropriating Yugi

In December of 2002, I made one of my yearly pilgrimages to Comic Market, the largest trade show in Japan and the epicenter for a certain brand of *manga-otaku*. The show occupies Tokyo Big Site twice a year, an immense convention hall located on new landfill in the plastic port entertainment town of Daiba at Tokyo Bay. As usual, I arrive in the late morning, and miss the crowds of fans that camp at the site at the crack of dawn to purchase *manga* fan zines, or *doujinshi*, the self-published *manga*, videos, and game software that reshape mainstream *anime* and *manga* narratives. The site is always packed, and millions of yen exchange hands as fans purchase magazines ranging from a few US dollars to thirty for the high-end glossy publications. The approximately 300,000 that attend this event are kept in line by an organizing team of militaristic precision, shooing throngs away from fire zones with megaphones, distributing flyers on how photos are or are not to be taken, issuing press badges, selling telephone-book sized catalogs for the equivalent of 20USD. Magazines by the most popular writers are always in short supply, and buyers line up for hours in the cold and heat to purchase copies, scarce commodities that are often resold at shops and on the Internet. Unlike events catering to video game or other forms of technology *otaku*, Comic Market is dominated by young women, though there is a respectable male contingent as well. Children are rarely present at this event dominated by teens and young adults.

Unlike prior years, where there were only a handful of booths devoted to *Yugioh* renditions, this year, *Yugioh* content dominated four long rows in the main convention room. The most popular theme is romance between Yugi and Kaiba, the two rivals, but some also depict liaisons between Yugi and his best friend Johnouchi, Kaiba and Johnouchi, or other less central characters. In a somewhat different vein, some artists render Yugi as a girl, with the enormous doe-like eyes typical of girl characters, in sexy but childlike poses. I wander through the aisles, purchasing a few magazines, some *Yugioh* letterhead, postcards. Like most content featuring *bishounen* (beautiful boys), *Yugioh doujinshi* are generally created and consumed by women and follow the “June” genre of erotic *manga* featuring male homosexual relationships (named for the magazine, *June*, which popularized this genre).¹ I don’t see any men on either the buying or selling end of the *Yugioh* booths. Some women avoid my gaze as I browse through their *manga*. Others I hear chatting openly and gaily about the liaisons between their characters in the latest works.

More striking than the orderly rows of booths selling *doujinshi* are the cosplay (costume play) participants, decked out with wigs, plastic space suits, and other trappings of their favorite *manga* and *anime* characters. *Doujinshi*, video game, and *anime* events are all occasions for cosplayers to strut their stuff, striking poses for conventioners

¹ In any interview in Frederik Schodt’s *Dreamland Japan*, *June* founder Toshihiko Sagawa explains the appeal of this genre for women. “The stories are about males, but the characters are really an imagined ideal that combines assumed or desired attributes of both males and females. Thus the heroes can be beautiful and gentle, like females, but without the jealousy and other negative qualities that women sometimes associate with themselves” (1996: 122). Although these works are similar to the “slash” genre of fan fiction in the US (Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1991), Japanese *doujinshi* take even greater creative license in repackaging established content, sometimes even changing characters’ gender and often ignoring the mainstream plot entirely.

toting professional camera equipment specifically for cosplay shots. The cosplayers are like Digimon and Pocket Monsters warping into our real world, colorful but routine additions to every *manga* and *anime* related event. I spot three different groups of *Yugioh* cosplayers in my meandering of the convention halls. All groups have the central figure of Yugi, a cosplay challenge with red, black, and blonde hair spiked out in all directions. Kaiba is the second favorite, generally in his signature floor-length leather jacket with dark hair swept over his eyes. Jounouchi rounds out the basic trio, though more dedicated groups will also feature peripheral characters such as Kaiba's brother Mokuba or Yugi's girlfriend, Anzu. These characters are performed by women, as is the case with most cosplay acts. Web sites of cosplayers often have front pages with a warning: "This site is devoted to *otaku* content and gay content for women. Don't enter if you don't like this kind of stuff." Or more simply: "Men keep out!" Favorite photos are posted of cosplayers at events like Comic Market or smaller *Yugioh*-only fan events.

Like the zine artists, cosplayers vary in their openness about their alternative identities. Most conceal their cosplay activities from classmates, family, and workplace colleagues, seeing their cosplay lives and friends in high tension with the normalcy of their everyday lives. On these cosplay web pages, and in the halls of the Comic Market, I encounter another incarnation of *Yugioh*, but one with strikingly different properties from Kaz and his cohort of card addicts. These are women *otaku* resignifying a series of imaginings coded as competitive, male, and child-oriented in the cultural mainstream, taking pleasure in claiming it for a women-dominated space of desire, camaraderie and play. With their bodies and their pens, these cosplayers and artist reinscribe *Yugioh* as a different form of play than the status economy of duels and card collecting. This is

fantasy made manifest in places devoted to alternative identities and practices resolutely differentiated from the mainstream cultural imagination.

The Symbolic Economy of Yugioh and Children's Media

In this paper, I have described some of the heterogeneous networks of narrative and materiality that produce the imaginary of *Yugioh* as a social fact. *Yugioh* achieves its status as other-worldly fantasy manifesting in everyday reality through the complicated interplay between competitive play, exchange, and media production and connoisseurship. The trajectories between representation, practice, meaning, and value are by no means direct; the dominant narrative of corporations marketing culture to receptive masses of child consumers is only the beginning of the webs of relationships built with the materials of popular culture enmeshing the everyday and fantastic.

Children's media provide repositories of value, signification, and exoticized imagining that morphs across multiple regimes of value (Appadurai, 1986). In the mainstream but ghettoized regime of sanctioned children's media, *Yugioh* becomes a vehicle for children to imagine and sometimes perform greater competence than adults at complex games. The penumbra to these mainstream spectacles is the grey market of trading card exchange that unites the ludic with real-life economies in a regime of value that threatens mainstream forms of capitalist exchange. In a radically different domain, female artists and cosplayers inhabit parallel lives that invert the dominant regimes of age as well as gender identity. These are plays between multiple marginalities, the marginal status of children, grey markets, and adult subcultures mobilizing mass culture in

particular ways.

One important aspect of the relation between our world and the other world of *Yugioh* is the role of children as the literal and symbolic mediums for translation. *Yugioh* and still the majority of anime content is *coded and marketed* as children's culture despite adults' role in its creation consumption, and resignification. Just as Yugi's immature frame harbors the spirit of a powerful adult pharaoh, *Yugioh* content is a celebration of triumphs of childhood over adult norms of responsibility, deferred gratification, discipline, work, and academic achievement. Yugi is representative of the depiction of children in *anime* as pure and uncorrupted, and as having unique powers, the ability to cross over between mundane and other-worldly realities. Children engage with this culture as a form of peer identification and empowered immersion in a world where "kids rule." Youth and young adults engage with this culture as a way of deferring their entry into adult subjectivity, or maintaining a parallel life of child-identified play even as they lead professional lives. I often saw salarymen at card shops pulling their neckties off as they sat down at the duel table. They would often self-deprecatingly talk about themselves in infantilized terms. As one adult gamer told me "You're probably wondering why an adult like me is wasting all his money on kid stuff like this." Attributes associated with childhood, their commitment to play and their fusion of fantasy and reality, become ideals for a disaffected countercultural of young adults.

The symbolic separation of childhood as a unique cultural and subjective space is a cultural obsession in Japan as elsewhere, even as it is being challenged by the practical intersections between adult and children's worlds. Only when the object of childhood is reified and idealized can we experience a sense of that object in violation and at risk.

Childhood is becoming a compelling transnational cultural export outside of the domain of actual children, precisely because of the value placed on an uncorrupted sphere of childhood. Otaku culture, associated with the Japanese media mix of children's media, has become a prominent adult subculture in other parts of Asia, Europe and the US. A media fan culture has existed in the US around certain types of adult-oriented content such as Star Trek. But the Japanese *otaku* culture has unique characteristics with children playing starring roles, as well as more mainstream appeal among children. The international spread of Japanese *otaku* culture is normalizing adult consumption of children's media even as it continues to depict childhood as a uniquely gifted life-stage.

Recent articulations of childhood studies have posited that the category of "child" is produced and consumed by people of all ages, within the power-laden hierarchies of child-adult relations (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; James & Prout, 1997). Following on this, I argue that adults are increasingly not only mobilizing tropes of childhood in political and personal arenas, but are also consuming childhood as an alternative identity formation. In his study of advertising images in the sixties and seventies, Thomas Frank (1997) 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. 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, as well as a site for alternative forms of symbolic value and economic exchange. It becomes a receptacle for our dissatisfactions about rationalized labor, educational achievement, stabilized economic value, and mainstream

status hierarchies. For adults, these images of childhood are a colorful escape from the dulling rhythms of salaried work and household labor.

I began this paper by positing similarities between the other-worldliness of outer space and media space, but differences are also worthy of note. As with the other papers in this volume, I have worked to describe the concrete locations and discourses through which alien worlds manifest in our everyday practices and identifications. In *Yugioh* we have a world of fantasy made manifest through the workings of people, practices, technologies and representations. I have described people in a variety of different social locations insisting on child's play as more authentic and valuable than everyday life, embodying certain truths and ideals corrupted by mainstream and adult society. Yet what distinguishes *Yugioh* is that it is more about the "fugitivity of reality" or the "fugitivity of value" rather than the "fugitivity of truth" that Dean describes as central to ufological discourse. Cosplayers, kids, and card addicts see themselves constructing and performing alternative realities rather than questing for a greater truth "out there." What unites these discourses, whether alien or fantastic, is a shared suspicion of the ordinary as a site of mystification, and a commitment to finding truth in an intimate but irreducibly exotic other.

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